

Don't You Dare Take My People!

by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson

"What did I say?" the church planter asked himself after the pastor of old First Church blasted him: "Don't you dare talk to any of my members."

The denomination had targeted a rapidly-growing suburb for a new church. A Steering Committee had been formed from representatives of the denomination's churches in the area. Everything seemed okay, until the church planter talked to the pastor at First Church. He uncovered hostility. Fear, really.

What fears do people in nearby churches have when a new church is proposed?

First, there's the fear of losing people to the new church. Sure, there are always a few fringe "church-hoppers" who'll skip to the new church, but the present members will stay at First Church because they've found a church that meets their needs. And no ethical church planter goes after active members of another church.

Fear of competition is another one. Behind this fear lies the assumption: "This is our turf. No other churches allowed." But churches aren't like a McDonald's franchise that guarantees exclusive rights. McDonald's co-exists just fine beside a Chinese restaurant. Or a Kentucky Fried Chicken. Or a Denny's. Why? Each of these restaurants serves a slightly different "slice" of the population. Few Taco Bell patrons will go to Denny's nor will you see the McDonald's crowd line up at the glitzy seafood restaurant.

Someone once said, "Churches may compete for Christians, but there's no competition for sinners." A new church which starts from scratch will usually find 85% of its members from the unchurched, most of them new believers.

So First Church will have to get on the ball to attract unchurched people in its community. And maybe this kind of competition will be good for them. Get them off their duff, so to speak. Finally there's an unstated fear leaders sometimes feel: that new church (or Sunday school class) may grow and succeed and get all the "glory" while mine just plods along. "What will people think of me?" you wonder. That's pride. Blocking new churches for fear we won't shine as brightly is sick.

We fight our fears with truth: Each of us is part of the great Kingdom of God, not the Kingdom of First Church. So, as we grow in Christ, we can and must rejoice at each other's successes.

By God's grace we determine to live by our faith, not our fears. Now where's that new church we can help?