

January 2018—Volume 26, Number 1

Copyright © 2018 by Cynthia Woolever

18 QUESTIONS FOR 2018

Tim Shapiro, from the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, believes that vibrant congregations exhibit a commitment to increasing congregational capacity. As demands on congregations grow, clergy and laity struggle to “maintain agency over their problems rather than the problems having hold on them.”¹ Through the learning process, congregations can discover how to solve a challenge that once outran them. Based on his congregational theory of development, he explains that the first step is defining the challenge. The following exercise helps members identify their goals: what they already know, what they still need to learn, and how their plan fits into the church’s overall mission.

Questions to Ignite Conversations

Ask members of the governing board or any leadership group in the congregation to review these eighteen questions.² Invite them to select three questions they believe are most crucial for the congregation to discuss. At the first meeting, take a tally of the questions that were chosen. This tally alone will indicate if leaders are focused on the same issues or are concerned about a quite diverse group of questions. Have a conversation about the three questions that received the most votes. Over the course of several meetings, help the group to identify their top questions or concerns. Next, assess the congregation’s level of capacity. Before taking any action steps, determine if the leaders need more information, training, education, or transformation.³

1. What is the distinctive theological message this church seeks to send? What words do we use to define our core values and identity? Do our pastor and lay leaders find agreement and unity around this message?

2. What will be the number one driving force for the allocation of scarce resources (such as time and energy of volunteers, staff time, money, building use) in the future planning of our church’s ministry? Local or world missions? Children’s ministry? Becoming a more diverse worshiping community? Maintaining

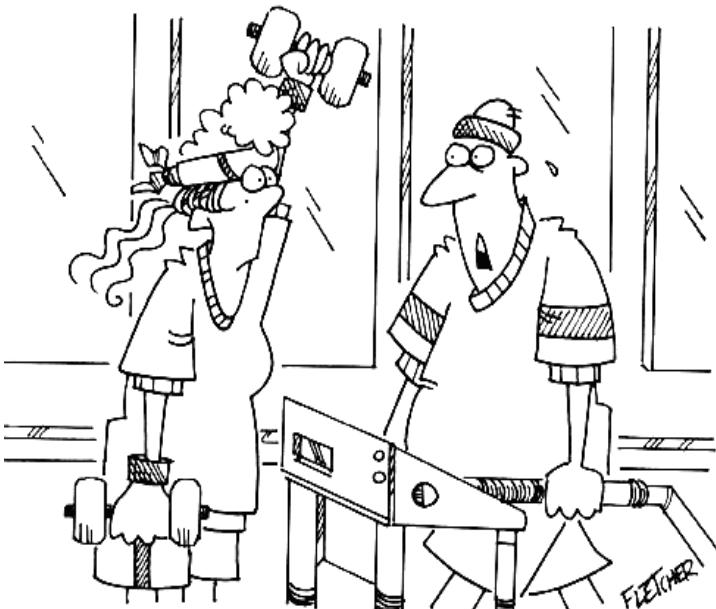
harmony? Satisfying the preferences of our current members?

3. What size is God calling this worshiping community to be? Does our current building and location limit or facilitate our size goals? Are there strategic decisions that we could make about buying or selling property or other assets that could benefit our long-range vision?

4. Are our programs, governance, and staffing consistent with our current size? Do we have a sense of how we compare to other churches of our size in terms of leveraging resources for ministry?

5. How strong is the desire for community among current members? How does this preference balance with those who feel more comfortable with anonymity? Do these contrasting preferences inhibit decision-making about church growth, outreach, or staffing priorities?

6. What approach is best for our congregation to design worship experiences that meet the spiritual needs of multiple generations? How does worship connect to the teaching ministries of the congregation?



“MY CHURCH IS BIG ON
 CONTINUED LEARNING FOR ADULTS...
 OUR SUNDAY SCHOOL JUST SPENT TWENTY-THREE WEEKS
 FINISHING AN 8 WEEK STUDY OF JONAH.”

7. How committed is our congregation to continued learning for adults? How many adult classes or groups do we want? When and where will they meet? Who will lead them? Do we have a mechanism for the creation of new groups or classes?

8. How many “congregations” make up this church? In a typical church, about one in three participants regularly attend, give generously, and volunteer many hours in church programs and ministries. Another “congregation” consists of less committed members who attend worship but who rarely serve as leaders or participants in church programs. They tend to give only when they attend. The third “congregation” consists of members who demonstrate minimal involvement and rarely attend. What percentage of your church membership falls into each of the categories? Has this changed over the past five years? What factors could explain these patterns?

9. What proportion of the operating budget should we allocate to increase the church’s visibility and to invite new people to participate in our church’s ministries?

10. Does our congregation reflect the racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of our neighborhood or region? If not, what barriers keep newcomers from becoming active participants in our church?

11. Are we a regional church, neighborhood church, or something else? What is our primary calling in this geographic location?

12. What assumptions underlie our current church-staffing model? Does our mission depend on staffing at least one full-time ordained clergy person? How might a bi-vocational, part-time, or second career pastoral leader enhance our effectiveness?

13. What do we anticipate the church’s challenges and opportunities to be ten years from now? What ministries are likely to become more important or less important because of those changes?

14. What is the greatest impediment to designing and implementing a new five-year plan? Is one of the obstacles a high level of contentment with the status quo? Another possibility is a long list of attractive alternative courses of action and the reluctance to choose out of fear of making the wrong choice.

15. Does fear play a role our decision-making? For example, in some church locations, fear arises from incidents of vandalism and crime in the neighborhood. In other instances, fear stems from a sense that the church lacks measures to address future potential

problems. Does our congregation allow members to express their fears and are there processes to acknowledge practical realities in our future planning?

16. How does our congregation respond to disappointment? Can we describe some setbacks and what we learned from the experience? Did we find an alternative path forward?⁴

17. Will the passage of time expand our range of attractive choices? In general, the best time to strengthen and reinforce ministry is the present. What immediate actions would allow us to take advantage of multiple options?

18. Are our congregation’s best days ahead of us or behind us? What evidence points to our “best days” as a congregation? Are our criteria consistent with our core religious commitments?

Could Something Be Better?

Our theological views and commitments color the ways we think about the past, present, and future of our congregation. And as American churches embrace broader narratives about our nation’s history, their own church story reflects those themes. For example, historians find two distinct American “jeremiads”—stories of decline, like the prophecies of Jeremiah.⁵ The traditionalist jeremiad sees the past as virtuous and the present as full of problems. On the other hand, the progressive jeremiad sees the past as the source of our best ideals or principles, upon which we can build a better future. Both jeremiads acknowledge our present problems. But the traditionalist jeremiad asserts that the best approach to overcoming present challenges is to return to past ways of believing and behaving. Whereas the progressive jeremiad finds heroic examples of people facing predicaments and overcoming injustice. Both views reflect a tension between despair in the present and a hope for the future. Disappointment in the present is central to the American narrative and central to what drives churches to take on their next challenge.

1. Tim Shapiro, *How Your Congregation Learns: The Learning Journey from Challenge to Achievement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield: 2017), 4-8, xv.

2. Many of these questions are similar to ones asked by church consultants Lyle Schaller and Herb Miller in their ministry with congregations.

3. Shapiro, 36.

4. Ibid., 77.

5. Andrew R. Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).