

**The Presbytery of Milwaukee's purchase of a subscription to The Parish Paper INCLUDES**

1. Permission to provide copies to our staff and to the congregations within our jurisdiction in any of the following ways: E-mail, Postal, newspaper, newsletter, meetings, training events, and our website.
2. Permission for each congregation within our jurisdiction to (a) photocopy or electronically distribute for local use as many copies as it needs, (b) post them on its website, and (c) quote sentences and paragraphs.

Congregations within our Presbytery's jurisdiction to which we distribute The Parish Paper do not have permission (a) to delete the copyright ownership notice, (b) to re-write, paraphrase, delete, or change the wording of sentences and paragraphs, or (c) to give any third party-other than our staff and constituents-permission to photocopy or reprint (in any quantity, no matter how small, whether for free distribution or for sale).

## WHAT PROMOTES HOPE?

Do we see a snake or a rope? In this metaphor, the snake is fear, disappointment, discouragement, despair, anxiety, distrust, bitterness, or dejection. What is the rope? It is hope. All churches have hope, but they may occasionally experience snake-vision: the illusion of no hope, only despair about the future.

### A Theory of Hope

A leading researcher in positive psychology, C. R. Snyder,<sup>1</sup> wanted to understand how hope and forgiveness might be beneficial to health, educational attainment, successful work experiences, and a sense of personal meaning in life. He believed that children could be taught a set of skills that shaped what they did naturally: think about the future. His theory of hope involves three main ideas related to hopeful thinking:

**Goals.** These targets or objectives serve as the foundation of the model. To approach life in a goal-oriented way suggests identifying the important things that create meaning.

**Pathways.** If people are to reach their goals, they must also be able to imagine one or more routes to those goals. Individuals need the mental capacity and flexibility to think of different approaches to achieve their goals. Obstacles and challenges always arise as we pursue our goals. The key is to find another route when the previous pathway did not achieve the desired result.

**Agency.** This third component of hope rests on the belief that one has the capacity to take independent action and make free choices. The knowledge that one can control his or her life and the confidence that one can influence personal thoughts and behavior generates agency.

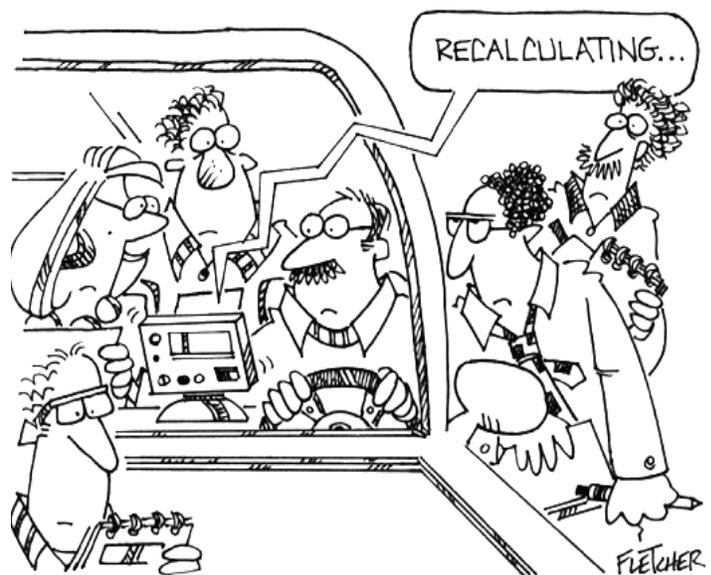
The research shows that hope is a psychological strength. Investigations reveal significant relationships between hope and problem solving, optimism, self-

esteem, self-efficacy, and future-oriented identity. Additionally, studies find that hopeful people heal faster when battling illnesses.<sup>2</sup>

### Faith-Based Hope

The Bible identifies hope as one of three key virtues of the Christian faith: faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). Hope is translated as “a strong and confident expectation” of future reward. Accordingly, hope changes how we see ourselves, what we value, and what we do with our lives.

Biblical stories provide multiple examples of how faithful leaders found alternative routes when they encountered obstacles. These leaders exhibited resiliency and resisted negative “self-talk.” Today’s church leaders can learn to transform negative goals (“we must stop fighting with each other”) to positive goals (“we want to find new ways to work together”). Unfortunately, “fear motivates faster than hope.”<sup>3</sup> Appeals to the snake of fear and distrust



WITH A LITTLE TECHNOLOGICAL HELP,  
THEY HOPED TO FIND ANOTHER ROUTE  
TO REACHING THE CHURCH'S GOALS.

should not drive decision making in communities of faith.

## Promoting Hope in Churches

Not all congregations are equally focused on the possibilities tomorrow might bring. A national study of worshipers found that one in four attendees were not aware of any vision, future goals, or direction for their church, or knew of some “ideas” but not clear goals.<sup>4</sup> Worshipers rely on their leaders to help them catch a glimpse of their congregation’s future. A clear vision that is relayed repeatedly to church members cements in worshipers’ minds what their congregation’s future can hold. This future portrait—one that is positive and optimistic—moves worshipers to support and invest in that future.

Here are several ways for a church to do a “Hope Checkup.”

*Involve the governing board.* First, ask the board members to write down as many words and phrases as they can to describe what the congregation will be like five years from now. Are these positive or negative images? Do these words and phrases match your existing church vision or mission statement?

Pick three or four of the most inspiring and hope-filled words or phrases. What is the congregation currently doing that moves it in the direction of fulfilling those aspirations? Do these current activities give us a sense of agency? What one or two additional actions (achievable sub-goals) could the congregation currently undertake to more fully live out those aspirations?

*Involve the worshipers.* Consider using this or a similar short survey during a worship service to get a sense of the hopefulness of current attendees about the congregation’s future. Ask them to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree to the following statements:<sup>5</sup>

1. I think our church is doing pretty well.
2. We can think of many ways to get things done that are most important for our church.
3. We’re doing just as well as most other churches.
4. When we encounter an obstacle or problem, we can come up with lots of ways to solve it.
5. The things we have done in the past will help us in the future.
6. Even when others want to give up, most members believe we can find ways to meet our challenges.

*Involve the youth group or other small group.* Ask participants to take pictures of people, places, or things that represent “hope” to them over the course of a week (or several weeks). When the group meets again, invite each participant to show one to three images that they found most powerful. What about the image denotes hope for them? What impact did the exercise have on them personally? What lesson does the image convey for a more hope-filled church? Are specific pathways suggested? The group could consider making a presentation based on their experience to the board or a whole church gathering.

## Friends of Hope

Certain actions and attitudes diminish hope and foster despair. Deception and habitual grumbling undermine the church’s sense of community. Sorting out what is going on is difficult work. However, spiritual practices—those actions people do together to address human needs—are central to the big picture of promoting hope.

Paying attention to keeping promises, telling the truth, offering hospitality, and expressing gratitude are key to Christian faith and they are the friends of hope.<sup>6</sup> As expressed by Martin Luther King Jr., “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”<sup>7</sup>

---

1. C. R. Snyder, ed., *Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures, and Applications* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2000).

2. J. T. Pedrotti, L. Edwards, and S. J. Lopez, “Promoting Hope: Suggestions for School Counselors,” *Professional School Counseling*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (December 2008).

3. Nato Thompson, *Culture As Weapon* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017), xi.

4. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 101–7.

5. This survey was modified from a Goals instrument used to assess school students; see Pedrotti, Edwards, and Lopez.

6. Christine D. Pohl, *Living Into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 2012).

7. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

## HOW CAN WE HELP IMMIGRANTS?

A new church member—a recent African immigrant—described what his Christian mother taught him: “When someone comes to you and needs food and shelter, you give it to them. The next day you can ask them: What is your story?” The immigrant story touches every community and congregations have always welcomed newcomers. Typically, one in ten people attending a worship service in the US are immigrants—they were born outside the US. Further, one in five worshipers are children of immigrants because one or both of their parents were born in another country.<sup>1</sup>

### Do Labels Matter?

Conflating the categories of immigrant, migrant, and refugee reaps serious consequences for the health and safety of these newcomers. When considering issues related to the movement of people between countries, disagreement and confusion abound around the correct label. For the purposes of this issue, “immigrant” is the umbrella term for persons who moved from their country of birth to a new country. Migrants and refugees are terms for particular types of immigrants.

*What is an immigrant?* In the broadest terms, an immigrant is a person, born in one country, who chooses to make a home in another country. In most instances, they seek a better life with more opportunities—education or work—for themselves and their children. Because this is a planned choice, the individual or family is more likely to have saved funds, explored locations and jobs, and brought some necessary personal possessions. They may even have a network of family and friends who previously immigrated who are ready to assist them as they settle in a new country.

*What is a refugee?* Forced to leave their birth country, these individuals and families fear for their safety. In some cases, they risk their lives to escape a horrific situation such as torture, war, starvation, or violation of their human rights. Often they flee without much notice and leave behind almost all their possessions. Before arriving in a new country, they may spend time in an intermediary

country or a refugee camp, waiting for legal clearance to resettle in a host country. Refugees typically cannot return to their home country unless political and economic circumstances change dramatically. Recent crises provide a window into conflicts worldwide that have forced people to leave for a safe haven. The United States admitted 85,000 refugees in 2016 with the largest numbers coming from six countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma (Myanmar), Iraq, Somalia, and Bhutan.<sup>2</sup>

*What is a migrant?* People who seek work or educational opportunities for a limited amount of time are free to come and go between their home country and host country. Migrants include agricultural workers, students, educators, health care professionals, and a variety of other occupational groups.

For each category of immigrant, specific legal requirements and protections are in place. Confusing the groups takes attention away from the needs of these individuals and families. For example, international law defines “refugee” and spells out how they are to be protected. One



“DON'T FEEL BAD, LOU...  
YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO THOUGHT EATING  
LASAGNA AT THE CHURCH LUNCHEON  
MADE US MULTICULTURAL.”

of the most crucial principles of international law is that refugees cannot be removed from the country providing asylum or returned to situations that might threaten their life. The appropriate legal response always depends on the individual's immigration status.<sup>3</sup> Obtaining and processing the proper documents for legal status within the US is complicated, prolonged, and often expensive.

### Will We Choose Welcome?

Whether an individual or group of church members wants to reach out to immigrants, they must do so with plenty of background information. Do we know the country of origin for immigrants currently in our community?<sup>4</sup> Do we see ourselves as allies rather than the ones in charge? Are we paying attention to who is asking for what? Can we listen to newcomers' stories about their background and journey without pre-judgment? Can we learn about their dreams?

*First, learn about local immigrant groups and existing non-profit organizations.* Use "immigrant and refugee ministries" as search terms to discover services and agencies already assisting in your area (see <http://www.americanacc.org>). Search your judicatory and denominational websites for information and updates (e.g., <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/immigration/>). Check out these additional resources:

- For worship resources: Church World Service founded by 17 denominations (<https://cwsglobal.org/our-work/refugees-and-immigrants/>)
- For ideas about how churches can help immigrant neighbors and fellow churchgoers: The Matthew 25 Movement (<http://matthew25pledge.com/toolkit/immigration>)
- For information about defending immigrant rights: American Friends Service Committee (<https://www.afsc.org/key-issues/issue/defending-immigrant-rights>)
- For laws, forms, and steps toward citizenship: US Citizenship and Immigration Services (<https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian>)
- For access to finding assistance organizations near you: Catholic Charities USA (<https://catholiccharitiesusa.org/find-help>)
- For locating local legal assistance: Immigration Law Help (<https://www.immigrationlawhelp.org/>)

*Second, let what you learn lead you to discern the next steps for yourself or the congregation.* Most communities

already have organizations with decades of experience assisting immigrants. Consider volunteering with or donating to a reputable local or national group. Local agencies often need help with job networking, tutoring children or adults, or basic items (shelter, food, and clothing) in the early months of resettlement. Legislative advocacy and local organizing efforts are additional options for supporting immigrant rights. Recognize that some assistance comes with zero risk for the volunteer or organization. However, the degree of risk falls along a continuum from no legal risks to possible violation of US law (such as providing sanctuary to undocumented immigrants, refugees, and unskilled workers with temporary visas).<sup>5</sup> Whatever actions you or others might take, should be done with eyes wide open.

*Third, assess the opportunities or barriers for your congregation to be more multicultural.* Many churches are already worshiping communities composed of multiple cultural groups. Unfortunately, the tendency is for the largest or dominant cultural group to believe that the minority cultures should give up their unique cultural identities and practices once they become part of the congregation. Finding points of commonality, such as children's education, support for families, or shared experiences in ministry with Christians in a sister church in another country, increases the chances of a congregation becoming more multicultural over time.<sup>6</sup>

### From Africa to America

An African proverb says: "If you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk together." Responding to the complexity of immigrants' needs requires many, many caring partners and a long-term commitment.

---

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 19.

2. "Most refugees who enter the U.S. as religious minorities are Christians," Pew Research Center, (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/07/most-refugees-who-enter-the-u-s-as-religious-minorities-are-christians/>).

3. See the Refugee Council USA, a coalition of twenty-four US-based, non-governmental organizations (<http://www.rcusa.org>).

4. Explore biblical texts and theological interpretations, such as Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, *Our God is Undocumented: Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012).

5. "The roots and branches of the sanctuary movement," *The Christian Century*, February 15, 2017 (<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/roots-and-branches-sanctuary-movement>).

6. See "Multiple Roads to a Multicultural Congregation," *The Parish Paper*, Volume 24, Number 8 (August 2016).

## MINISTRY IN THE MIDST OF TRAGEDY

On Friday, August 7, 2015, Vermont state employees left work and made their way to the parking lot together. There, a former client confronted and killed Lara Sobel, a social worker in the Department for Children and Families. Jody Herring shot her because Lara played a part in a custody battle involving Jody's nine-year-old daughter. One of the witnesses, the Washington County State's Attorney General, struggled with Ms. Herring to retrieve the gun and police apprehended her at the scene.

The killing shocked the residents of Barre, Vermont. Religious leaders and social work professionals began to coordinate a response and planned a vigil in memory of Lara. However, the community was unprepared for what came next. On the following morning, a relative of Jody Herring discovered three slain family members in their home—Jody's aunt and two cousins. Authorities allege that Jody believed these family members reported information to social workers that was used to remove her daughter from her home.<sup>1</sup>

Four slayings in less than twenty-four hours seemed impossible in their small town. One of the religious leaders who found himself in the midst of this unfolding tragedy, was Carl Hilton-VanOsdall. He is the pastor at First Presbyterian Church, a congregation whose parking lot adjoins the parking lot where the shooting occurred. How do pastors and churches deal with the unimaginable when it occurs just outside their doors or in their community?

### Dealing with Violence and Trauma

Pastors routinely lead funerals and comfort families who have lost a loved one. And church members mobilize to provide comfort and support to the family members that remain. But when death comes as a result of violence—shootings, bombings, arson, suicides, or other physical violence—people react in more amplified ways. Typically, death caused by intentional human action, increases the level of trauma associated with the loss of life.<sup>2</sup>

Where the violence occurred can also increase the level of trauma: the closer the physical proximity of the deaths, the greater the traumatic response. In addition, loss from violence is highly traumatic for a community when it occurs in a church building (for example, the Charleston church shooting of a pastor and eight others who gathered for Bible study in 2015) or in any space deemed to be "safe" (the twenty-six deaths at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012). Additionally, when violence affects the whole community, a second layer of mourning begins that runs parallel to the event's impact on individuals. "Collective trauma" results from wounds to an entire community. When violence damages our sense of "we," our bonds of attachment to the community weaken. Community members experience fear and their feelings of well being deteriorate. This collective trauma can last longer than any single individual's trauma and requires specific rituals and strategies to help the community process the events.<sup>3</sup>



I'LL TAKE THE "OLD NORMAL" OVER THE "NEW NORMAL" ANY DAY.

## Stages of Community Grieving

A new guide, *Recovering from Un-Natural Disasters*, argues that the trajectory used by natural disaster relief organizations is not completely applicable to human-caused disasters. The authors modified the well-known disaster recovery model to more accurately depict the movement of communities through the one to three years (or more) after a heartbreaking event.

*Phase 1: Devastation and Heroism.* In the first stage, people swing into action, hoping to fix things as quickly as possible. Vigils are held, community-wide services planned, and donation sites are organized. Frenetic activity betrays the underlying sense of loss, helplessness, and shock.

*Phase 2: Disillusionment.* After a few days or weeks, the new reality becomes hard to ignore or deny. The authors illustrate this using the phrase: “It is as bad as it feels.” People settle into the truth that no amount of human effort can change the outcome. At this low point, people resist the pain associated with such a great loss. The language of Psalm 23—the valley of the shadow of death—captures this stage. The Scripture refers to “the personal or communal state of being caught in the abyss that follows traumatic loss.”<sup>4</sup>

*Phase 3: Reforming.* The slow shift toward resolving and integrating the tragedy begins later. A non-linear change process happens because trigger events (one-year anniversaries, trials, or sentencing hearings) resurface strong emotions of loss and anger. This complicated phase intensifies when some individuals want to “move on” while others continue to struggle with the loss. As a result, conflict is often present.

*Phase 4: Wisdom.* Experts describe it as acceptance of “the new normal.” Through support and reflection, individuals and leaders rebuild a sense of community. Reimagining community purpose and priorities requires intentionality and hard work by many residents. Reaching this level of integration and restoration takes far longer than anyone expects. For excellent resources, see the Institute for Congregational Trauma and Growth (<http://www.ictg.org>).

## Community-Wide Care

A few weeks after the deaths of Lara Sobel and the family members of Judy Herring, a working group of clergy, nonprofit leaders, and state/local employees formed to map out actions to help the community. Pastor Hilton-VanOsdall<sup>5</sup> and several other religious leaders

led a vigil for Lara, and he attended a small remembrance gathering at the home of the other three victims. He observed that existing social networks and relationships determined how he and others formed partnerships to minister with the community. The group also applied for and received a grant to do “resiliency work” in the community. He said that offering support for social workers and other professionals proved to be relatively easy compared to imagining ways to engage other populations and groups. They found that sites offering community meals provided a venue to reach additional people who might not have had the chance to share their concerns, experiences, and lament.

Together, these groups designed events that supported community members in their grief process. On the one-year anniversary of the tragedy, community and ministerial leaders organized a remembrance service. Additionally, in December 2015, the group created a “Community Remembrance Spiral,” which invited people to walk the spiral, light candles, sing, and pray. The area’s ministerial alliance annually stage a “Way of the Cross” event on Good Friday. The community’s Stations of the Cross in 2016, the first Easter after the tragedy, incorporated the site of Lara Sobel’s death from gun violence. In 2017, the Stations of the Cross included the site of Lara’s death and places in the community where drug use and opiate addiction have led to death and violence.

## New Mission in a Rooted Identity

After tragedy, some congregations experience “missional” trauma. They may need to discern a new mission, vision, and ways of being the church.<sup>6</sup> Congregations in the midst of tragedy remain assured that their individual and collective life belongs to God. As the psalmist sings in Psalm 30:11-12: “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.”

1. <http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/2015/08/16/timeline-tragedy-unraveling-vermont-slayings/31796559/>

2. Laurie Kraus, David Holyan, and Bruce Wismer, *Recovering From Un-Natural Disasters: A Guide for Pastors and Congregations After Violence and Trauma* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), x.

3. Kai T. Erickson, *Everything In Its Path* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976).

4. Kraus, et al, x.

5. Carl Hilton-VanOsdall, phone interview, March 17, 2017.

6. Kraus, et al, 106.

## FINANCING THE LOCAL CHURCH: WHAT DOES IT COST?

Even though they are not members, Bill and Dorothy go to a church in their neighborhood once or twice per month. They are fond of the pastor and proud of the congregation's ministry. They also take pride in contributing a small amount when they attend services feeling satisfied that they have contributed their fair share toward the church's expenditures. Is their assessment realistic?

### What Does It Cost to Run a Church?

The annual budget for Protestant congregations averages between \$200,000 and \$250,000 per year.<sup>1</sup> Because of the broad range in budget sizes, it is helpful to compare total expenditures to the average worship attendance for the same year. Most Protestant congregations receive an average of \$2,500 a year per each worshiper. Typically, smaller churches report higher per-worshiper contributions. And, some worshipers consistently give more than others. Experts believe that about one-third of individual contributors in a local church make up three-fourths of the total received in contributions.

While all congregations report that individual contributions (in the form of offerings, pledges, donations, or dues) are their biggest source of income, based on recent surveys, 80 to 90 percent of total income comes from these individual worshipers. The percentage varies little across congregations, but conservative Protestant churches are slightly more dependent on individual donations.

*Income and operating expenses.* Most congregations (85 percent) own their place of worship or meeting space. Thus, their budget line items include utility expenses, maintenance and landscaping costs, facility insurance, and in some cases, debt retirement on capital improvements or expansion. Even those churches without a building incur expenses associated with rental space, electronic equipment, and furniture.

Another budget item relates to church staff. The majority of congregations employ just one full-time clergy person. Churches take their financial commitments to their pastors and staff seriously. Congregations compensate pastors with salary, housing or housing allowance, health

insurance, retirement contributions, and reimbursements. Inflation, rising health insurance rates, and other factors mean many congregations struggle to adequately meet their financial obligations to pastors and other staff.<sup>3</sup>

In total, operating expenses and staff account for about 80 percent of the typical church budget.

*What else makes up a church budget?* Congregations affiliated with a denomination make annual contributions to their judicatories or national agencies. Funds help the denomination carry out tasks that are beyond the scope of a local church and promote mission efforts nationally and internationally. The percentage that local churches give to denominational agencies varies, but the median is about 8 percent of the church's total budget.

Some congregations set a percentage of the church budget for local mission and ministry. These budget items include all types of church programming (choir, youth group) as well as local mission work (food pantry, community outreach). Because churches define the "mission" category portion of their budget differently, the typical percentage ranges from 15 to 30 percent or more.



"PERCENTAGE GIVING IS WHEN 20% OF YOU  
GIVE A LOT MORE THAN 80% OF US."

## Where Does the Money Come From?

Although congregations rely on individual contributions as their biggest source of income, the second largest source of revenue comes from trust funds, investments, or bequests. Around 60 percent of congregations report this type of annual revenue, indicating \$33,000 as the median yearly amount.

After individual contributions and endowments, the third largest source of congregational income reported is charges for use of the church's facilities or buildings. About one in four churches receive some rental and usage income. These congregations report an annual median amount of \$5,000 in income.<sup>4</sup> For both endowments and use of church facilities, more mainline Protestant churches report generating revenue in this way compared to conservative Protestant churches.

## Why Do People Give?

About half of U.S. worshipers regularly give 5 percent or more of their net income to their congregation. Greater numbers of conservative Protestants practice percentage giving compared to mainline Protestant worshipers. When worshipers are asked to identify the factors that influence their decision to make financial gifts to their church, the most important reason is that they feel a sense of gratitude for God's love and goodness.<sup>5</sup> Other major influences on worshiper giving include:

- wanting to contribute to God's work
- a sense of religious duty to give
- the Bible's teaching on giving
- a sense of obligation to support the church's work
- hearing about specific needs
- a sense of gratitude for help my family or I have received from the church

Beyond these personal reasons for giving, research shows two organizational strategies yield higher giving levels in churches of all sizes.

*An annual financial stewardship campaign.* First, churches with a well-designed and executed annual campaign generate more revenue per worshiper than churches that attempt to raise funds without such a strategy. A campaign should invite worshipers to go on record with a financial pledge or commitment for the coming year. Such an approach yields about 30 percent more revenue than no such effort.

*Ask every worshiper to practice percentage giving.* In the typical congregation, one in four worshipers give

10 percent or more of their income to the church. What about the other worshipers? Encourage them to give a percentage of their income and make it easy for them to calculate their current giving level. Then, ask them to grow their current gift by 1 percent in the coming year.<sup>6</sup>

## Questions for a Financial Tune-up

Discussing a few key questions can move the governing board and lay leadership in a positive decision-making direction.

- Does the board have a general sense of the percentage of budget allocated to each broad expense category? Does that allocation reflect the values and beliefs of members? Have the percentages changed in significant ways in the past ten years?
- Has the board or relevant committee reviewed the building usage guidelines or policies in the past year or two? Do the fees adequately compensate the church for the expenses associated with that use (including utilities, set-up and clean up, insurance)? If not, are these expenses covered by the church's mission budget?
- Does the congregation conduct an effective annual stewardship campaign? What criteria are used to assess its effectiveness?

## Advice for Worshipers

How much should Bill and Dorothy put in the offering plate when they attend services? While the answer depends on the size of the church and its budget, the statistical averages indicate that around \$48 per week per worshiper helps most congregations reach their budget goals. Thus, if Bill and Dorothy drop \$100 in the plate, they would be well on their way to more fully sharing in the costs of the congregation's ministries.

---

1. Median congregational incomes reported in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (2008) and the National Congregations Study (2012) were adjusted for inflation.

2. Cynthia Woolever, "Keeping Up with the Pastor's Pay: Trends Behind Clergy Wages," *The Parish Paper*, October 2016 (Vol. 24, No. 10).

3. National Congregations Study (2012).

4. Cynthia Woolever, "Ten Reasons Why We Give," blog post (2010), <http://presbyterian.typepad.com/beyondordinary/2010/03/ten-reasons-why-we-give.html>

5. See the Lewis Center for Church Leadership resource, "50 Ways to Improve Your Annual Stewardship Campaign," <https://www.churchleadership.com/50-ways/50-ways-to-improve-your-annual-stewardship-campaign/>.

## SMALL IS BIG AGAIN: RECLAIMING SMALL CHURCH MINISTRY

Although megachurches garner a great deal of attention, these supersized congregations comprise only a small fraction of all worshipping communities in the U.S. The current estimate is that only about 1,650 megachurches (worship attendance exceeds 2,000) dot the landscape out of a total 330,000 congregations across America. In fact, most churches are small: two out of three Protestant churches attract less than 100 worshipers in a typical week. Some scholars predicted that megachurches would essentially put small churches out of business. But the percentage of large churches as part of all churches is growing slowly while the number of small churches has remained stable. While the church's larger mission continues to be carried out by many small worshipping communities, small churches may get locked into self-criticism. However, more congregations are embracing the strengths associated with their small size. As one congregation proclaims: "We're not just any small church. We're the small church that's here!"<sup>1</sup>

### What Do Small Churches Need?

Lewis Parks, a champion of small congregations, claims that they can do big things with "a little cooperation with the Spirit on the part of those gathered, a little striving for excellence, a little freedom to express local religious creativity, and all things sprinkled with lots of hospitality"<sup>2</sup> A few other suggestions include the following:

*A compelling story about their history, purpose, and mission.* Members often possess a common narrative about when and why the church was established and some specifics of that particular historical period. But fewer members know the chapters in the church's history. For example, which pastors or lay leaders exerted a major influence in embracing new mission or overcoming risks? What community events (such as rapid population growth, departure of a major employer) affected the church in a major way? How do mem-

bers describe the current chapter in the church's narrative? Too often, the church's story that clearly reveals the congregation's ongoing ministry remains implicit. When members share greater awareness of the church's mission and history (how did we get here?), they gain greater clarity about the congregation's unique identity. Consider engaging members in an exercise that surfaces the church's history, experiences, traditions, and untested assumptions.<sup>3</sup> Then, create a vision statement that captures these insights and use it on your website, with social media, and other church communications.

*Intentional efforts to increase visibility.* Effective approaches are size-specific. Every small church can creatively send the message to newcomers and the community—"we are here, we care about you, and we welcome you!" An electronic presence (website, Facebook, Instagram) establishes a virtual welcome mat. A well-maintained and lighted church building signals a physical "home" that anticipates visitors.



OUR OLDER DEMOGRAPHIC INTERPRETED  
"AN ELECTRONIC PRESENCE TO INCREASE VISIBILITY"  
AS STRINGING TWINKLE LIGHTS AROUND THE STEEPLE.

Participation by members and leaders in community events suggests commitment to the well-being of neighbors. Hosting community events, speakers, workshops, and the arts indicates that the church is a willing partner in promoting their neighbors' quality of life.<sup>4</sup> Form a team of six members to test the congregation's visibility by instructing them to approach five people they do not know. Next, have these members inquire: "Have you ever heard of (the name of your church)? What do you know about it (for example, location, programs, etc.)?" Reconvene these volunteers and share the results. Based on what you learn, devise one or two new action steps to increase the congregation's community profile.

*Customized methods for outreach.* Context is everything when developing strategies to welcome newcomers. Would your community be described as active or sedentary, family- or career-focused, a stable or mobile population? A family-focused and stable community is more likely to respond to family and friend networks. If a population is career-focused and mobile, investments in electronic and social media will likely pay dividends. Have leaders discuss the key characteristics of the church's community five years ago, currently, five years from now, and ten years in the future.<sup>5</sup> Refine the church's strategies based on these observed changes.

*Purposeful efforts to pass along the faith to future generations.* Following the words of Robert Schuller, congregations should view faith development as planting seeds: "Anyone can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the number of apples in a seed." Research shows that when congregations value nurturing faith in children and young adults, that emphasis and their hard work bears fruit. How does the church measure success in this ministry area?

Seed-planting congregations in this way also make ministry with millennials a priority. Parks makes a convincing argument that small churches are best suited for reaching out to this age group—adults born between 1981 and 1996.<sup>6</sup> Millennials' life experiences differ greatly from previous generations and one in three are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>7</sup> They were more likely to be raised in a nontraditional family and are more culturally diverse than past cohorts. Despite growing up in an online world, they place a high value on friendships and relationships. Small

churches offer them the unique opportunity for intimacy and caring relationships. They are looking for safe spaces for themselves and their children. Review the demographics within a fifteen-mile radius of the congregation to determine the age profiles of residents and to create updated strategies to reach unrepresented groups.

*Accept reality and build on strengths.* Garrison Keillor famously said: "I believe in looking reality straight in the eye and denying it." Small churches cannot afford to deny reality. Leaders can accept the things that cannot be changed while identifying the advantages that small size affords. Sometimes, cherished programs or even the church building have to be sacrificed in order for the congregation's future mission to thrive. Consider a four-session group study to discover new insights for small-church ministry.<sup>8</sup>

## Making Small Big Again

Margaret Mead's statement inspired many in earlier generations: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." A parallel truth applies to congregations. Never doubt that small churches have changed the world and they will continue to do so.

---

1. Lewis A. Parks, "A New Way to View Small Church Vitality," Lewis Center for Church Leadership, October 14, 2015 (<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/a-new-way-to-view-vitality-in-smaller-congregations/>).

2. Ibid.

3. Trey Hammond, "Timeline of Place," *Leader Guide for Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location*, 2008 (<http://www.uscongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/leaderguide.pdf>).

4. Cynthia Woolever, "Keys to Growing a Small Church," *The Parish Paper*, August 2012 (Vol. 20, No. 8).

5. Statistics available by county, city, town, or zip code at U.S. Census (<http://factfinder.census.gov>).

6. Parks.

7. Michael Lipka, "Millennials increasingly are driving growth of 'nones'" Pew Research Center, (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>).

8. Use the free online resource from The Parish Paper, "Coaching Small Congregations toward Positive Change," <https://www.theparishpaper.com/sites/default/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%202027.pdf>.

## GUIDE TO GOOD GOVERNANCE

After months of meetings, the long-range planning committee of Epiphany Church submitted a report to the congregation's board. The report highlighted three important conclusions: (1) the average age of regular worship attendees is going up while worship attendance overall continues to decline; (2) action steps must be taken immediately; and (3) major changes are needed in ministry priorities. After careful review, the board laid out five possible courses of action. How did Epiphany Church board members respond? They chose sides, with each action plan attracting supporters and opponents. How are they going to move forward and make decisions?

### Governance or Ministry?

Governance is how we make decisions as a congregation. Typically, the board takes responsibility for big-picture issues and works to help the congregation achieve its mission. The board accepts responsibility for keeping the church's resources—people, money, and property—safe. The board also pursues ways to creatively leverage resources to more effectively serve the congregation's mission.

Ministry is different from governance, even if the same people do both. We know many people in the congregation who wear two hats, serving on the board *and* working in the church's food pantry. Ministry is all the other things a congregation does: offering meaningful worship, educational and spiritual development groups, community service, and outreach. Dan Hotchkiss suggests a simple way to understand the difference: governance produces words on paper while ministry produces action.<sup>1</sup>

Why is the distinction important? Churches often feel great about their ministries and concentrate on their programs. However, they tend to spend less time ensuring that the way they govern does not impede the growth and vitality of those same ministries. Dysfunctional governance structures can create an inward focus, a resistance to change, complacency, arrogance, and diffuse accountability.

### Signs of Healthy Governance

Congregations may try to borrow organizational models from businesses or nonprofits. However, congregations are different from these organizations and they must work to customize an appropriate decision-making structure. Further, there is no one right way for churches to make decisions. Rather, the structure must be a good fit for the values, beliefs, faith tradition, and size of the church. Regardless of these differences, Hotchkiss outlines several principles of good governance.<sup>2</sup>

- *Unified structure for making governance decisions.* Typically, an elected board clarifies the church's mission, vision, and strategic issues. In most cases, the board delegates to others the authority to achieve these goals and monitors that those members with authority use their gifts responsibly.
- *Unified structure for making operational decisions.* In most congregations, full- or part-time staff assumes responsibility for programs, assisted by lay leaders. Supervision can come from staff,



"IT'S DIFFICULT FOR SOME OF THE OTHER BOARD MEMBERS TO BE FULLY ENGAGED WHEN THE WEATHER IS SO NICE AT THEIR END OF THE TABLE."

committee chairs, or team leaders. The board delegates authority to these staff and members to carry out the church's ministries.

Congregations adopt a structure that generally arises from the church's size. Size, as measured by church attendance and participation, affects all aspects of organizational behavior. Hotchkiss identifies three common forms, clearly associated with church size, and each with pros and cons.<sup>3</sup> No single structure is perfect.

*The board-centered congregation.* This type is common in small churches. Committee chairs, a secretary and/or treasurer, clergy person, and maybe one or more at-large members fill board seats. Although the board is responsible for the overall mission, committee chairs are tempted to "represent" their program, creating a mild conflict of interest. Program administration and issues take center stage at meetings. The smaller the congregation, the more time is required to make decisions that move the church toward ministry effectiveness.

*The committee-centered congregation.* This structure appears most often in churches with 100 to 400 attendees. Hotchkiss describes its essential trait: both the planning (governance) and actions (ministry) are delegated to appropriate committees by the board. The board rarely grasps the reins of their governance role. Instead, the board listens to reports and leaves strong leadership to others. In some instances when conflict arises, the staff and other leaders become triangulated.

*The staff-centered congregation.* In large churches, full-time staff takes on more organizational and governance work. This structure's effectiveness depends on the quality and gifts of a small number of leaders, making it unstable in the long run. On the plus side, this model can also maximize the opportunities for members to be involved in ministry.

Because no advice fits all, congregations must discern the governance form that best reflects their values and purposes. If the congregation feels called to spread the Gospel through outreach, then their governance would be organized for evangelism. If the congregation emphasizes advocacy and social justice efforts, then their governance structure would be organized to achieve those purposes.

### Common Mistakes

There are some patterns that rarely work in any church. The mistakes listed below point to some of the biggest offenses.

*Large boards.* The governing board should be comprised of 6 to 8 members and rarely should the board seat more than 12 people. Larger boards find it difficult to keep all members fully engaged, attendance is spotty, participation is low, and many attend unprepared.<sup>4</sup>

*Too many committees.* Most churches benefit from mobilizing ministry teams to accomplish their mission (see "How Ministry Teams Get Things Done," *The Parish Paper*, January 2016). Rarely does a congregation need more than four standing committees: Finance, Personnel, Governance, and Nominating.<sup>5</sup>

*Weak agendas.* The central agenda item should be big questions that require discussion. Some churches divide the agenda into two sections: (1) items requiring little or no discussion (minutes, approval of treasurer reports) that can be dealt with quickly as a set; and (2) discussion-only items. Discussion on new proposals should occur over several months before board members are asked to vote. They should never be asked to vote during the meeting in which the possible change is first presented.

*Ministry separated from money.* The governance structure should not facilitate separating members into financial-only and ministry-only teams. All ministry efforts require resources and good stewardship. Likewise, financial decisions should reflect the church's values and priorities. Failure to integrate money and ministry can create power-needy leaders who exercise veto power in congregational decisions.

### From Good to Great

Governance is always difficult in congregations. The Gospel compels churches to be part of transforming individuals, communities, and the world. Yet to carry out that commandment requires some level of institutional stability. Hotchkiss summarizes this tension between stability and instability: "The stability of a religious institution is a necessary precondition to the instability religious transformation brings."<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, ask yourself: How does our governance structure allow us to focus on our church's mission? How does it facilitate or impede our ministry efforts?

---

1. Dan Hotchkiss, *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 50.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

3. *Ibid.*, 30-40.

4. *Ibid.*, 81.

5. *Ibid.*, 56.

6. *Ibid.*, 1.

## CAN WE WAIT FOR GOD'S SPARK?

God sparks innovations, but only on God's terms, and those terms usually involve disruption. From burning bushes to wood that burns even when soaked, God's sparks manifest themselves in unusual ways. We can choose to ignore the spark or even squelch the spark. But, if we take notice of it, the spark soon becomes a roaring fire. What are the conditions for God's spark? And, does the spark look different if people rather than God initiate the encounter?

### How Business Views Disruption

The average life of a shopping mall or center built today is fifteen years. And if the shopping venue does not make a radical change at least half-way through their expected fifteen-year tenure, it may not even last that long! Geoff Colvin recently wrote that the most innovative companies today, "see their business as disrupters would see it." They never stop self-disrupting their own companies.<sup>1</sup> For example, Amazon disrupted bookstores twenty years ago with their online selling model. Then disrupted itself with Kindle e-readers, replacing its own books-by-mail model.<sup>2</sup> They have continued this disruption by opening and successfully operating brick-and-mortar bookstores, even while the traditional bookstore model continues to fail.<sup>3</sup>

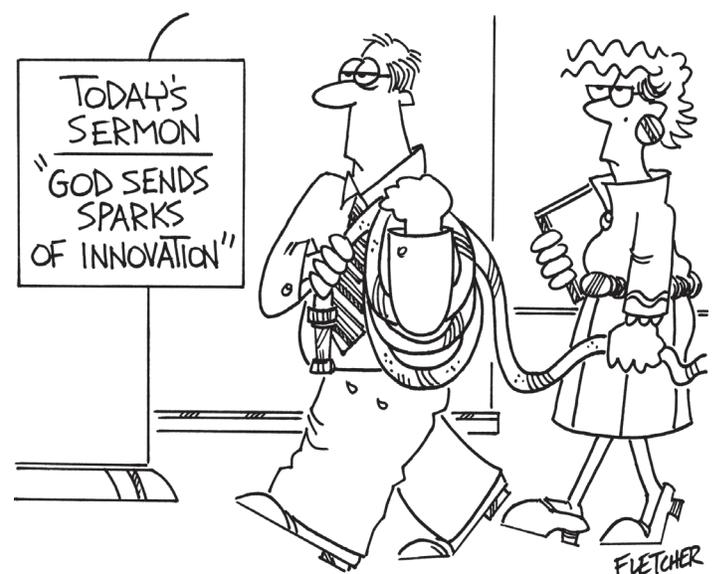
Fortunately, congregations do not have to self-disrupt. God is here to do that for us! Sometimes congregations forget how often they have had to respond to disruptions in order to faithfully minister in their present location. A church that has existed for one hundred years has probably had six or seven make-overs resulting from neighborhood swivels and societal swings. Congregations are indeed resilient. But, God must sponsor their transformations.

For instance, through a discernment process, a Milwaukee congregation challenges its members to draw from three equal sources whenever the church

launches a new ministry. Equal shares of the start-up cost must come from: (1) those launching the ministry; (2) other congregational members; and (3) nonmembers or community partners. Asking nonmembers to support new ministry ideas can be disruptive and involving community stakeholders can make the ministry launch much more messy and problematic. However, this church believes the community's involvement confirms that this is the direction in which God has encouraged them to go and have accepted the disruption proposed by God.

### God's Disruptive Spark in the Bible

Sparks from God are indications that God has heard us or wants to reveal something to us. What happens when God initiates the contact? The book of Matthew reminds us that God's initiative contact is usually disruptive. God's encounter with the mother of Jesus was certainly disruptive. When God visited the shepherds and asked them to go to King Herod to inquire about a new king, that news was not received warmly by



the current king. Jesus rocks John the Baptist's world by asking John to baptize Jesus and presenting standards for an utterly new lifestyle in the Sermon on the Mount. The disruptions continue and become more personal as Jesus eats at a sinner's home and shatters Sabbath protocols. Walking with Jesus means living a constantly unsettled life.

### Can We Seek God's Spark?

The book of Matthew also reveals instances in which humans initiate contact with God, and we quickly discover the importance of faith in such encounters. When Jesus calmed the storm, he asked his disciples, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" (Matthew 8:26). However, when a man brought his daughter to Jesus for healing, the man openly expressed his faith, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live" (Matthew 9:18). Likewise, when two blind men came to Jesus, he asked, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" (Matthew 9:28).

No matter who initiates the contact, it is clear that God must sponsor the change in order for the spark to grow into a fire. We see this communication breakdown with God in a community where the owner of a local diner purposely hires and trains former prison inmates and other persons who have difficulty finding work. When the owner was asked if he had contacted local clergy to invite them to be part of his community ministry, his response was surprising. "Yes," he said, "And it was a disaster. The clergy kept asking the employees uncomfortable questions about their background. They made it clear that they would want them to attend their congregations if they helped." The clergy wanted to be a part of the spark, but could not handle the flame.

What if today's burning bushes are far away from the Sunday morning crowds? What if God is sending us sparks of innovation on a regular basis, but they are more dangerous and disruptive than they are comforting and successful by our standards? A congregation in Nebraska recently witnessed God's spark by walking their neighborhood. Some nearby apartment dwellers became concerned about these strangers who were regularly walking their neighborhood and asked what they were doing. The neighborhood inquirers were quite surprised to

learn that church members were simply trying to better understand their neighborhood and the people in it.

As it turned out, the apartment residents welcomed their intruders, as they had spiritual questions that they were too intimidated to ask anyone else. The entire group explored these spiritual questions together. The people in the apartments have not come to the church but the church members have learned as much about God as the apartment residents. God's spark is being fanned, but not in ways that we could predict.

Perhaps many of our requests for sparks from God are seemingly ignored because we are seeking a specific outcome, such as congregational growth, our own comfort and safety, or retaining our leadership status. Congregational change does not happen unless God sparks it, and not only must we have enough faith to oxygenate the spark once it appears, but we must also be prepared to accept God's end result.

### Are You Ready for Congregational Change?

"A small green apple cannot ripen one night by tightening all its muscles, squinting its eyes and tightening its jaw in order to find itself the next morning miraculously large, red, ripe, and juicy beside its small green counterparts. . . . We must wait for God."<sup>4</sup>

Look for God's pre-emptive spark and once you find it, block it from distractions, and fan it with flames of trust.

---

1. *Fortune*, August 1, 2016, 22.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Ryan Bort, "Amazon Is Opening More Brick-and-Mortar Bookstores," [www.newsweek.com/amazon-opening-brick-and-mortar-bookstores-494216](http://www.newsweek.com/amazon-opening-brick-and-mortar-bookstores-494216).

4. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003), 114.

## DOES YOUR CONGREGATION SUFFER FROM ANXIETY?

The church governing board gathered with a consultant for their much-publicized first meeting. They knew the consultant's reputation and were eager to hear his advice. However, the consultant did not begin with recommendations. Rather he introduced a planning method known as SWOT analysis—acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Several church members were familiar with the approach but could not imagine how it applied to their church problems. No one had given much thought to how the congregation's internal dynamics and their external context related to their current crisis.

He first asked: "What are some of the church's strengths?" The room went silent. Finally, one member offered: "Well, we know we need help." After the nervous laughter subsided, the consultant tried again. "What are some of the church's weaknesses?" Many hands went up and he struggled to capture all their answers in his notes. The same response problem came with the next set of questions. The church leaders offered few insights about the congregation's opportunities but a full set of complaints about the threats they faced as a church. Knowing that the SWOT method only worked if members could give meaningful answers, he knew he was dealing with deeper issues. The consultant suspected a collective anxiety that caused the leaders to focus on preventing bad things from happening instead of a "promotion focus"—the tendency to reach for new opportunities and rewards.<sup>1</sup>

### What Does Church Anxiety Look Like?

We think of anxiety as an emotional state that individuals experience—like feelings of worry and unease. But non-anxious individuals participating in a church organization can produce a collective nervousness—an unhealthy group emotion entirely different from their own. An anxious church tends to:

- Over think any decision before taking action
- Imagine and expect negative outcomes
- Worry about the very worst that could happen

- Respond poorly to any negative feedback from nonmembers
- Be extremely self-critical

### Church Anxiety Risk Factors

Anxiety levels can never be reduced to zero but alarms can fire too frequently, disabling a church with paralysis. High anxiety gets churches stuck in unproductive loops that, over time, actually increase anxiety. For both individuals and organizations, this anxiety manifests itself in a variety of symptoms: it shows up in how we *act* (the behavioral component), how we *feel* (the emotional component), and how we *think* (the cognitive component). And when a church gets caught in an anxiety trap, leaders fail to see the big picture and do not take advantage of opportunities for more effective ministries. When faced with these anxiety bottlenecks, leaders must address all three dimensions where anxiety surfaces.

**Behavioral traps.** The default mode of operation for anxiety-prone congregations is postponing decisions, conducting more research and gathering more information



"...AND YET...  
 IT SORT OF MAKES ME WANT TO TAKE A LOOK."

than necessary, and waiting for attitudes or opinions to change. This approach often means that congregations are working harder using outdated or failed strategies. The old proverb, “If all you ever do is all you’ve ever done, than all you’ll get is all you ever got” summarizes this truth. This blend of postponing action mixed with all-or-nothing approaches are warning signs that indicate congregations have persisted too long in certain behaviors.

One of the fastest ways to reduce anxiety is to change behavioral patterns first, without waiting for thoughts and attitudes to shift. To get out of no action mode, set deadlines for action and make those deadlines public. Research shows that deciding when and where actions are to be taken increases the odds of follow through. Hold leaders accountable by delivering decisions and actions on time, no matter how difficult. Consistently review plans and keep moving forward on implementation. Do not let the behavior of a few hijack the congregation’s ability to boldly act on core mission goals.

Our church goals are like a mirror that should reflect who we are. If a church fails to act on its mission goals, the church is not who it says it is. Rediscovering our goals and committing to them increases our resilience to anxiety.

**Cognitive traps.** While behavior in churches reveals *unconscious* intent—we do what we are motivated to do—our *conscious* intent reflects what we *think* we want to do and that intent clearly lines up with our goals. Still, our thinking can be bogged down in cognitive traps. For instance, information and knowledge are essential ingredients for making decisions, but these two alone are insufficient in an imperfect world. To move forward in mission requires faith, the willingness to focus on both the positive and negative, and some ability to tolerate ambiguities.

As noted in the story with the consultant, anxiety-prone congregations, and leaders in particular, are wired to consider any potential negative outcomes. However, with practice, church leaders can routinely put on the table for discussion all the potential positive outcomes and give them an equal hearing. In addition, leaders can recognize the potential harm arising from inaction. Even when the congregation recognizes that a negative outcome is possible, leaders can still believe taking action is worth the risk and that there is value in acting with uncertainty.

**Emotional traps.** The overall emotional temperature of the congregation determines the likelihood of tsunami-level anxiety. Alice Boyes describes an anxiety-prone individual as someone whose answers start as no and might move to yes. A congregation whose default response is “no” to any proposed action is a church

that uses a lot of emotional energy to process change or even the idea of change. When reducing anxiety becomes the goal, rather than the goals themselves, leaders have taken the bait for an emotional trap. Apprehension and pessimism suggest the congregation does not believe it has the capacity to cope with things that do not go according to plan. Similar to navigating the cognitive traps, members and leaders must make a concerted effort to dig out of the emotional traps. Try starting with a “yes” on a mission goal, setting behavior deadlines for decisions, and making sure to consider as many positive implications as negative ones.

## Tackling Anxiety with Better Habits

Church anxiety can cost you in terms of missed opportunities. Fortunately, church anxiety is not genetic. When congregations tackle anxiety with self-knowledge and a conscious intent to change habits, they often achieve dramatically different results.

The ways a church thinks, feels, and acts grow into deep-seated habits. In some congregations, these behavioral, emotional, and cognitive patterns solidify into obsessions. Two acres of undeveloped land went on the market next to a suburban church. Leaders began discussing whether the congregation should purchase the additional acreage. Differences of opinion became arguments and arguments led to warring camps—about whether funds could be used more wisely elsewhere, uncertainty about whether the church would grow enough to ever need the extra space, and others who wanted control over the types of development likely to be adjacent to church property. After six months of debate and delay, they realized that their anxiety and uncertainties had generated familiar bad habits. With renewed commitment to their goals, the church sought out several community partners—a preschool and a local Habitat for Humanity chapter. After purchasing the property, the congregation helped these two nonprofits obtain grants to build a school and new family housing. By consciously moving past their negative thinking, they played a critical role in shaping community resources that fostered their neighbors’ quality of life.

What opportunities has your congregation missed? When has inaction interfered with meeting the church’s mission goals?

---

1. Material drawn from the analysis of individual anxiety by Alice Boyes, *The Anxiety Toolkit: Strategies for Fine-Tuning Your Mind and Moving Past You Stuck Points* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

## KEEPING UP WITH THE PASTOR'S PAY: TRENDS BEHIND CLERGY WAGES

Forces large and small affect how best to answer the question: "What should we pay the pastor?" Failure to keep track of inflation and replacement costs associated with current staff could make a church's clergy compensation package uncompetitive. Sadly, the pastor feels no choice but to seek to move.

### What Makes up a Pastor's Pay?

Governing boards and personnel committee members must think about the pastor's *total compensation*, not just salary.

*Manse or housing allowance.* Many churches provide housing in the form of a parsonage, or what some denominations call a manse. The pastor's total compensation includes that house's fair market rental value. In churches that do not own a parsonage, many offer instead a monthly housing allowance so that the pastor can own or rent a home of his or her choosing.

*Employee or self-employed.* The Internal Revenue Service considers clergy *employees* for Federal Income Tax calculations but treats clergy as *self-employed* for Social Security Tax purposes. Thus, church boards must designate how many compensation dollars are for salary and how many dollars are for housing expenses. Each church determines when and how often it sets or changes these amounts. The law requires that they do so in writing and in advance, with documentation in official church minutes. Tax laws prohibit churches from retroactively determining the salary-housing proportional split.

Some churches believe that designating a larger percentage of the pastor's salary for housing allowance will let the pastor avoid paying Federal Income Taxes on those housing dollars. In order for this strategy to work, the pastor has to use *all* of that housing allowance to pay for expenses like rent, mortgage payments, property taxes, utilities, repairs, renovations, furnishings, etc. If any funds are left over, those dollars must be added back, in full, to the pastor's taxable compensation. And, for Social Security Taxes, all the salary dol-

lars *and* the full amount of the housing allowance are used in computing the amount due.

Self-employed workers pay about double the amount of Social Security Taxes paid by other workers who are classified as employees. Some churches give their clergy person additional pay to cover this self-employment expense.

*Non-taxable compensation.* Most full-time (and some part-time) pastors receive health insurance, which is often purchased through the denomination. A second form of compensation comes in the form of retirement benefits, which again is typically offered through the denomination. Both types of benefits essentially extend a clergy's monthly paycheck, without adding taxable income.

Another clergy financial benefit comes in the form of reimbursements. For example, most churches include a budget item for pastoral transportation expenses. This is a per-mile figure established by the IRS that covers only ministry-related travel, but not travel between the pastor's



WE NEED TO REVISIT MY "HOUSING ALLOWANCE."

home and the church. The majority of churches establish line items in their budgets for other work-related expenses such as continuing education, book purchases or magazine subscriptions, and the costs associated with workshops or conferences. These types of reimbursements are not treated as personal income for tax purposes.

### **Church Size and Denomination Still Matter**

As in other occupations and work settings, clergy compensation is not equal among all those called to ministry. For clergy in parish ministry, the size of the congregation determines, in part, the size of the compensation package. Denominational affiliation plays a role too. For mainline Protestant pastors, those serving in small churches (with fewer than 100 in worship) receive about 75% of the total compensation of what pastors serving in large churches receive (churches with more than 300 in worship).

This clergy pay discrepancy grows larger for conservative Protestant pastors. Clergy in small conservative Protestant congregations (those with fewer than 100 in worship) receive a total compensation package about 58% of what pastors in large Conservative Protestant churches receive (those with more than 300 in worship).<sup>1</sup>

### **Significant Trends in Clergy Compensation**

A new study takes into account housing provisions among Protestant clergy to look more closely at compensation over time. Their five findings pose important considerations for congregations.<sup>2</sup>

*A shift away from church-owned housing.* Analysis of this national data set confirmed what many denominational leaders and others already knew. In 1976, about six in ten pastors lived in free housing—that is a manse or parsonage—and did not own or rent their home. By 2013, the percentage of pastors living in church-owned property dropped to only fourteen percent. Does this shift contribute to a real overall rise in clergy compensation? How do these changing housing provisions relate to clergy satisfaction with compensation?

*A narrowing income gap between clergy and their professional peers.* Because earlier studies omitted housing provisions or allowances, those comparisons probably overestimated the gap between clergy pay and that of other professionals.<sup>3</sup> However, this new positive finding of a smaller pay gap still comes with a cautionary note. Clergy income seems to be keeping pace only when the thirty-five highest income occupations are excluded. Growing income inequality affects all work-

ers, including the clergy. And while the income gap between clergy and like professionals is closing, they are still earning 26 percent less than others at a similar education level.<sup>4</sup> What compensation comparisons make sense for our church—the salaries provided by other congregations like ours, our denomination, the cost-of-living in our area, or other factors?

*Working fewer hours a week contributes to rise in hourly wages.* Clergy report working fewer hours, on average, in recent years compared to three decades ago. Those clergy who report working fewer hours per week also experience better physical and emotional health.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, although the total compensation may not change, the shorter workweek of many clergy has enhanced their quality of life. Does our congregation rely on clergy's nonmonetary values—such as having a job that helps people, believing one is fulfilling a vocation, and self-supervision—to fill in the wage gap?<sup>6</sup> Does our church use salary compensation as an unfair way to communicate dissatisfaction with a clergy-person's job performance?

*Higher pay for nonparish clergy.* Clergy serving in non-church ministry positions (such as military or hospital chaplain, director of a nonprofit agency) earn more, on average, than clergy serving in churches. Further, when clergy leave churches to serve in a nonchurch setting, their compensation increases. Both trends decrease the attractiveness of serving in a local church.

*Becoming a pastor decreases wages.* Individuals who enter pastoral ministry, on average, see an immediate drop in wages. This pattern poses problems for new pastors struggling with seminary student debt.

### **The Bottom Line**

Every church needs a periodic reality check around salary and benefits to show respect and act with fairness toward their pastor. Clergy compensation issues warrant a frank, annual discussion with the pastor.

---

1. Total compensation calculations include housing and salary. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church: What Kind of Pastor for What Kind of Congregation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012), 17.

2. Cyrus Schleifer and Mark Chaves, "The Price of the Calling: Exploring Clergy Compensation Using Current Population Survey Data," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2016 (55:130-52).

3. Schleifer and Chaves, 131.

4. Note: All analyses by Schleifer and Chaves include the housing provisions in total compensation calculations.

5. Woolever and Bruce, 43.

6. Schleifer and Chaves, 150.

## WHAT KEEPS CONGREGATIONS FROM IMPLEMENTING NEW IDEAS?

All individuals and organizations struggle with change. Implementing new ideas always means accepting that change comes as part of the package. Congregations hear about dozens of new ideas and gain new knowledge from denominational leaders, books, and workshops. Yet that news too rarely becomes part of a practical, local-church strategy. Why? There is often a big gap between what we know and what we do.<sup>1</sup>

### Beware of the Gap

Which of these create the gap between knowing and doing in your church?

*Fear of change.* When congregations shrink in size or begin to lose vitality, their leaders fear that any change they might introduce will only make matters worse. Often, members and pastors view the past with an undeserved glow and resist the very changes that could bring new life and strength to the church. To “confront our past and see it for what it is” is a necessary first step for understanding our fears.<sup>2</sup>

*Past success.* Ironically, churches that have experienced success—such as a large membership, recognition as a community anchor, or significant ministries—believe that because their efforts worked in the past, their way of doing things will continue to bear fruit. A reinventing-yesterday strategy drowns more congregations than it saves.

*Tradition.* Someone called the phrase “We never did it that way before” the last seven words of the church. Anyone who has ever tried to introduce an action plan that goes against church tradition knows the sanctions deal a blow to even the most enthusiastic and committed leader.

*Congregational identity.* The statement: “That is just who we are” sums up a church’s sense of self. The church’s sense of self includes many things that express a unique identity—such as what people wear to church, what music is appreciated, and the actual arrangement of furniture in the worship space. Any new idea that

seems to undercut the congregation’s core identity rarely gets off the ground.

*Denominational identity.* In addition to their congregational identity, congregations incorporate the parent denomination’s theology and themes to form a sense of self. In declining-membership denominations, leaders see few successful models to emulate. Because leaders take pride in their denominational theology and ministry methods, they are willing to learn new ideas only from churches similar to their own—even when there is evidence of ineffectiveness. That same pride keeps leaders from seeking out new approaches from churches outside their tribe.

*Judgmental attitudes.* One member said she would never attend *that* church because “they put rubber ducks in the baptistery for children’s worship.” Judging an action without sympathy for the motive prevents us from thinking in creative ways. For example, criticizing megachurches, churches more theologically conservative or liberal than our own, or nontraditional forms



“YOUR NEW IDEA IS SO URGENT, WE VOTED TO DISCUSS IT AT OUR NEXT 7 COMMITTEE MEETINGS.”

of church reveal an unconscious prejudice toward congregations that do things differently. Cynicism and pessimism inhibit openness to new ideas and action.

*Confusing discussion with real action.* Many people feel more comfortable talking about new ideas than trying out new strategies, which arise from those ideas. Just discussing an issue does not count as addressing the issue. Lengthy hearings without concrete plans, task assignments, and serious deadlines for implementation do not count as meaningful change.<sup>3</sup>

*The gift of rationalization.* For those leaders prone to procrastination or inaction, rationalizing lack of action comes naturally. Many congregations possess this gift and exercise its full potential. “We can’t do that because . . .” is the church motto.

*Addressing attitudes before behavior.* Congregational leaders put the cart before the horse when they buy into the myth that changing attitudes precedes changing behavior. Research indicates that people often change their attitudes *after* they try out something new, rather than *before* they do something new.

*Underestimating the task of transferring ideas.* Every church in every community reflects unique opportunities as well as barriers to change. What works in one place typically needs major modifications and adjustments to work well somewhere else.

*Perfectionism.* We all wish for every plan to work out smoothly, if not perfectly. Working out the glitches and snags along the way can be frustrating, discouraging, and time-consuming. Successful leaders and their congregations accept that only through implementation of an idea do we see what needs to be smoothed out.

*Failure to evaluate.* Decisions and actions eventually require evaluation. What went well? What needs improvement? If we tried this tactic again, what would we do differently? Reluctance to ask these hard questions keeps some churches from continuing to implement new ideas.

## Moving from Knowing to Doing

Once leaders and members commit to crossing the divide between what they know and what they can accomplish together, several principles prove valuable.

*Tell stories.* Every church creates a narrative about their creation, the best times, challenging episodes, and their changing community context. These stories reveal something about their core values as reflected in the actions of church heroes, sacrifices, failures, and persistence. Telling stories about the past helps people

see how the next chapter for the church represents continuity with the larger story that they have been a part of all along.

*Identify a need, challenge, or passion.* Effective idea implementation stems from what people are already talking about and focused on. Assign responsibility for the tasks involved with the new idea and set realistic deadlines for getting things done.

*Practical experience and skills count.* Effective new idea implementation involves people with track records in getting things done. Leaders and members with practical experience in other settings can offer insights. Field trips to other effective congregations or organizations generate fresh perspectives. What people observe for themselves creates additional motivation and inspiration for local efforts.

*Look beneath the “what” to understand the “why.”* Leading congregational change is not like following a “some assembly required” set of instructions. Knowing or learning the technical skills is seldom enough. What are the underlying philosophy and core values behind effective efforts?

*Stop looking for the perfect plan.* If what your congregation wants to try were easy, many churches would already be doing it. “Do it and fix it” is a better plan than waiting for the perfect plan.<sup>4</sup>

## What Is the Best Idea?

Alan Roxburgh says churches daring to write their next chapter should ask the best question: “What are the challenges we currently face for which we presently have no answer but must address if we’re to live into God’s future for us?”<sup>5</sup>

Unless you ask the best question, the best answer has not been discovered yet for your church. Have the courage to take this advice: “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”<sup>6</sup>

---

1. Ideas drawn from Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton, *The Knowing-Doing Gap* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

2. John Hope Franklin in Drew Gilpin Faust, “John Hope Franklin: Race & the Meaning of America,” *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/12/17/john-hope-franklin-race-meaning-america/>.

3. Pfeffer and Sutton, 29.

4. Statements made by Herb Miller in many conversations.

5. Alan Roxburgh, <http://themissionalnetwork.com/>.

6. Attributed to Muriel Strode.

## MULTIPLE ROADS TO A MULTICULTURAL CONGREGATION

“We’re not sure how to do it but we believe we should become a multicultural congregation,” the pastor said. “How can we move from our dreams to a plan that achieves results?”<sup>1</sup>

### Multiculturalism in the United States

Here are the realities that any effective multicultural-congregation strategy must take into account.

- Assume that the U.S. will continue to attract about one million foreign-born adults each year, an annual increase of about 2.5 percent. Immigrants and their U.S.-born children now make up about 26 percent of the U.S. population—about 81 million people.<sup>2</sup>
- The leading country for new immigrants is India, followed by China, Mexico, Canada, and the Philippines.<sup>3</sup>
- Approximately 51 percent of immigrants are female.
- For the vast majority of new residents, English is not their first language. Further, half of the 42.1 million U.S. immigrants reported limited English proficiency (LEP).
- The overall percentage of foreign-born adults who are college-educated is about the same as native-born adults (29 percent vs. 30 percent).
- Some states draw a larger number of immigrants. The top five states in terms of absolute numbers are California, Texas, New York, Florida, and New Jersey. But between 2000 and 2014, the largest percentage growth was in Tennessee, Kentucky, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Carolina.
- Currently almost half of all immigrants chose to become naturalized U.S. citizens.
- Typically, participation in the labor force is the clearest path to assimilation. Immigrants account for 17 percent of the civilian labor force—a percentage that more than tripled since 1970. In

contrast, worshiping in an established congregation ranks far behind an immigrant’s desire for education, health care, and other benefits of living in the U.S.

- The broad categories of “Hispanic” and “Latino” serve as umbrella terms for distinct subgroups of immigrants, who identify themselves in term of the country of their birth (for example, Mexico, Cuba, Honduras, or Haiti).
- Organizing one congregation that is both multiracial (for example, members are African American and American-born Caucasians) and multicultural (the church intentionally engages people from multiple cultures) is extremely challenging.

### Multiple Roadmaps

Congregations pursue different models depending on their specific community and available leadership. Here are proven steps a congregation can take to actively pursue a multicultural congregation.



FLETCHER

“TO BECOME A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH,  
WE’LL NEED SOMEONE EXPERIENCED IN DEALING  
WITH PEOPLE TOTALLY DIFFERENT FROM US...  
THE YOUTH PASTOR SEEMS LIKE THE PERFECT CHOICE.”

*Bicultural leadership.* The congregational leader is an immigrant or in a bicultural marriage. Potential members believe the pastor will understand the issues that arise as a family navigates life across cultures. Other worshippers, who are not immigrants or in a bicultural family, value diversity and appreciate the experiences and perspectives of different people.

*Multiple sites and multiple cultures.* An existing, predominantly Anglo, church launches a second site served by an immigrant associate pastor. The organizational structure is similar to a multi-campus congregation with one name, one budget, and unified staff. The church launches additional sites as interest and groups are identified. Leaders coordinate some shared activities to build relationships across groups.

*One site, multiple cultures.* A common model implemented by a predominantly Anglo congregation is a “nested” worshiping community. For example, the first hour of the worship schedule is three different worship experiences in three separate rooms: one in English, one in Spanish, and one in Korean. Following these separate services, the second hour is integrated church school classes. Again, leaders plan many shared activities to build relationships across groups.

Another one site, multiple cultures model that is less common happens over a long period of time. One immigrant family joins an Anglo congregation. Then, they invite another family in their circle and over time more people connected through culture or immigrant experiences become part of the worshiping community. Usually in these cases, success stems from the strong support of a long-tenured pastor and other church leaders invested in deepening relationships across cultures.

*Nested educational offerings.* An Anglo congregation offers a Christian Day School (preschool through elementary or beyond) and intentionally extends invitations to families with immigrant and ethnic minority children from the community. The operational assumption is that the parents will follow their children and eventually become part of the worshiping community.

*Affinity judicatories.* Denominations define regional boundaries primarily on geography. However, another approach is to define a judicatory based on cultural or racial affinity—one judicatory for recent Korean immigrants; another separate judicatory structure for Mexican Americans or African-Americans. This strategy recognizes the high value groups place on indigenous leadership development and self-governance.

*Merged congregations.* Another approach is when an immigrant congregation, now largely made up of American-born adults who are the children of earlier immigrants, decides to unite with a predominantly Anglo congregation. Both recognize that by sharing resources they can grow their ministries and together write a new chapter in their collective history.

*New missions.* The road least traveled is the decision to launch a new congregation, designed from the beginning to reflect demographic and cultural diversity.

## **Build on Shared Commonalities**

A multicultural church is not a melting pot—a worshiping community where the unique beliefs and behaviors of different cultural groups disappear. The tendency is for the dominant indigenous group in the church to feel that the minority cultures should give up their cultural identity once they become part of the congregation. To transform a collection of people into a unified congregation requires respect for cultural identities and constructive communication that builds trust.

While respecting differences, find points of commonality, such as: (a) commitment to children’s education; (b) support for bicultural families; (c) the same first language; (d) similar age or marital status; (e) same stage in their faith development or shared theology; (f) shared preference for the type of worship style; (g) shared experiences in ministry with Christians in a sister church in another country; and (h) active engagement with a community social issue or advocacy efforts. The larger the number of points of commonality and/or the choices a congregation offers, the better its chances of becoming multicultural over time.

## **A Journey—Not a Destination**

Like all other congregations, the multicultural church never achieves perfection or absolute harmony. They too are a work in progress, ever evolving to become closer to being the body of Christ.

---

1. Material updated from Lyle Schaller, “Seven Roads to a Multicultural Congregation,” *The Parish Paper*, November 2009, Vol. 17, No. 11.

2. Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States,” April 14, 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>.

3. To explore immigrant populations by state and county see <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county>.

## WHEN CHARITY BRINGS ANYTHING BUT RELIEF

Is it possible that our best intentions can do more harm than good? Sadly, relief organizations tell us that well-meaning people don't think before they give. Some involved in humanitarian work after a natural disaster call the deluge of unwanted donations "the second disaster."

Juanita Rillig, director of the Center for International Disaster Information, described what happened after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004: So many donated clothes were piled on an Indonesia beach that workers had no time to sort and distribute them. The clothing pile became toxic and local officials had to destroy it all. They poured gasoline on it and sent it out to sea.<sup>1</sup> She related another example of unfortunate waste when contributors sent 100,000 liters of water to West Africa at a cost of \$300,000. Relief organizations with portable water purification units could have provided that same amount of water for \$300.

Following the December 2012 shooting tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, more than 60,000 teddy bears arrived from around the country, along with toys, bicycles, and clothes. Already overwhelmed, residents had to get a warehouse to hold it all.

### Crisis Relief or Chronic Needs?

Because Americans are compassionate, they tend to respond initially with their hearts rather than their minds. Even Warren Buffett admitted that it is much easier to make money than it is to give it away wisely. The first step is assessing whether an event is a crisis or a reflection of ongoing chronic needs.

*Crisis relief.* Churches and people of faith offer the best immediate crisis relief when they make smart cash donations to trusted organizations. In most cases, sending supplies is simply not practical. Responding to a crisis with immediate relief is likely a month-long effort.

*Chronic needs* call for complex solutions, hard work, and long-term commitments. The commitment required when tackling these situations is likely an effort of years or decades.

When well-meaning people behave as if they are addressing a crisis rather than a chronic need, the long-term results are dependency, deception, and disempowerment.<sup>2</sup> Churches need to engage strategically in both types of charity efforts.

### Making Meaningful Change through Mercy and Justice

Many congregations involve members in mission trips and volunteer opportunities in local service projects. Unfortunately, too many mission trips or local service projects are not a wise investment, do not significantly improve quality of life, and do not relieve poverty for the intended community. For example, the funds spent for one Central American ministry mission trip to repaint an orphanage would be enough money to hire two local painters, pay the salaries of two full-time teachers, and purchase new uniforms for every school student.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible contains the basic template for guiding us to holistic charity because it places equal emphasis on



THE RESPONSE HAS BEEN AMAZING!  
WE'VE ALREADY EXCEEDED LAST YEAR'S  
"AIR CONDITIONERS FOR THE ARCTIC" MISSIONS PROJECT.

mercy and justice. Micah 6:8 instructs us: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” To act justly means that we treat others fairly, with reason, and *involve them in all decision making*. These acts engage our minds. On the other hand, merciful acts reflect heartfelt responses. To act with mercy in our work with others means that we show compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. Combining mercy and justice suggests that immediate relief comes with a future plan in mind and avoids long-term dependency.<sup>4</sup> Showcasing these principles, one church closed their successful used clothes closet run by volunteers and reopened it as a clothes store (with modest prices) that employed people in the neighborhood, thus reducing dependency and providing agency to community members.

### **An Oath for Wise Compassion**

Too often our intent contrasts sharply with the actual impact. Because every change has consequences, we must carefully examine outcomes. Robert Lupton draws on his forty years of urban ministry experience to suggest an oath for compassionate *and* wise partnerships similar to the medical profession’s Hippocratic Oath.<sup>5</sup> Here are key guidelines for empowering those we assist.

- Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.
- Be an encourager or partner rather than a caretaker.
- Use one-way giving in crises. Try partnership approaches when addressing chronic needs.
- Establish empowering partnerships through employment, lending, and investing. The micro-loans of Opportunity International ([www.opportunity.org](http://www.opportunity.org)) and the community development approach of World Vision ([www.worldvision.org](http://www.worldvision.org)) are two excellent examples.
- Always put the needs of those being served first, even if it makes your efforts less efficient and more frustrating.
- Listen closely to what is said and unsaid by those you are serving. The unequal power dynamic of the interaction can lead to harmful assumptions.
- Above all, do no harm.

### **Diversified or Focused Investment?**

Attention to outcomes leads to a strategy shift. The size of the budget or the number of volunteer hours is irrele-

vant to making a difference. To effect significant change requires centered concentration on specific places and issues. When we define our service mission too broadly, we scatter our church’s energy and resources. Lupton recommends that congregations ditch the diversified, “balanced portfolio” and commit to measurable and lasting change by focusing investment in one person, one family, and one neighborhood at a time.<sup>6</sup>

Consistent with an asset-based community development model (<http://www.abcdinstitute.org/>), focused investors search for local residents’ skills and existing resources. When church partners flip their binocular lens to see community positives, like seeing the glass half-full, they catch sight of basic strengths that become building blocks for healthier communities. There is a universal desire to live in a healthy community. And the criteria for a healthy community is also universal: safety for everyone, good schools, economic viability, opportunities for employment, residential stability, community connections, and spiritual vitality.<sup>7</sup>

Located in a low-income community, the Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, exemplifies this type of a long-term, focused investment strategy. As a church, they strive to lift up the “diverse gifts of our neighbors and members, not their deficiencies.” They say, “We see abundance.”<sup>8</sup> By having conversations and listening for opportunities, they find ways to connect and invest in their neighbors.

### **Final Questions**

A community ministry worth doing is a ministry worth examining. Here are the key questions: Is your church engaged in community development ministry? If so, can you name your target neighborhood and the church’s transformation goals? Are your church’s efforts focused on efficiency or effectiveness? Are you focused on the rewards you receive from service or the measurable benefits received by your community partners?

---

1. Scott Simon (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/when-disaster-relief-brings-anything-but-relief/>). See donation guidelines (<http://www.cidi.org/wp-content/uploads/CIDI-Donation-Guidelines.pdf>).

2. Material drawn from Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2011), 56.

3. *Ibid.*, 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

5. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

6. *Ibid.*, 76.

7. *Ibid.*, 135.

8. <http://www.broadwayumc.org/pages/who.html>.

## MAKING CONGREGATIONS GREENER

The celebration of Earth Day began in 1970 and has now spread to 192 countries. The early organizers could not imagine that almost fifty years later environmental issues would remain challenging, emotional, and controversial. However, for faith communities, the concept of caring for all creation fits with the Gospel message of assuming responsibility for what God has given us. How much have congregations embraced the practices of refuse, reduce, reuse, and recycle?

### Beginning Steps

Making the decision to become a greener congregation can seem overwhelming. However, there are several small and cost-effective ways to shape church practices and policies to honor the stewardship of creation.

*Start a conversation.* If the congregation has never discussed ecological issues as a community, consider a study or discernment process devoted to the topic.<sup>1</sup> Ask: How do our theological and biblical commitments translate into spiritual practices of caring for the earth? Perhaps a church group could read and discuss the seven different biblical perspectives on creation and reflect on the connections between these traditions and the natural sciences.<sup>2</sup>

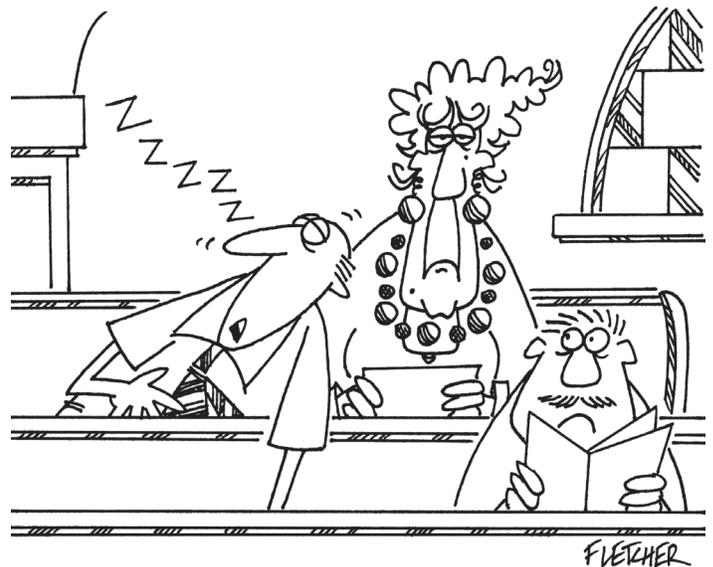
Another strategy would be to ask a group to review the congregation's vision or mission statement, website content, and other important documents. Does your congregation's vision reflect the care of creation? If it does not, how might some aspect of caring for creation that is authentic to your church be made more explicit?

*Learn more about local environmental issues.* Often members lack up-to-date information about local energy and food sources, water and wastewater treatment, forms of environmental damage, or potential hazards. Consider inviting guest speakers from community organizations involved in environmental health to inform church groups. Begin a study or discussion series on local environmental topics.

*Identify people with passion and gifts to lead the church in stewardship practices.* Almost every church has members involved in local efforts to address environmental concerns. But they may have never been asked to use their knowledge to help other church members move toward greater awareness and stewardship.

*Reassess current consumption and waste patterns.* An easy starting point is to use only recycled paper and other products for church materials. Most congregations could do a better job of providing more visible recycling receptacles for paper, glass, plastic, cans, and cardboard. Some churches even serve as recycling drop-off locations for their members and communities. Install bike racks to encourage worshipers to cycle to services and activities. Another overlooked area relates to the cleaning chemicals used around the building. Are these products safe for the people using them and for the environment? Are cleaning products stored safely?<sup>3</sup>

*Laying Down Burdens.* The author of *Less Clutter, More Life* says, "clutter represents postponed decisions."<sup>4</sup>



A STRONG PROponent OF EFFICIENT ENERGY USE IN THE CHURCH, EUGENE GOES INTO "SLEEP MODE" ON A REGULAR BASIS.

Experts estimate we never use 80 percent of what we keep. Does the same statistic apply to congregations? How much space is devoted to storing outdated props, equipment, curriculum, and seasonal material? One church cleared out two storage rooms, including old records and paperwork, to gain Sunday school rooms in return. Perhaps hanging on to objects reminds us of great periods in the church's past. However, giving away and recycling items from the past frees the congregation to move forward in ministry.

### **Bigger Steps**

A congregation that is striving to manage church resources as caretakers of God's creation can take on even more ambitious projects.

*Conduct an energy audit.* A facilities committee should evaluate energy uses in its facilities every two years, including checking the heating and cooling equipment for efficiency. The committee can establish a baseline of heating, cooling, and lighting costs. About forty states have affiliates of Interfaith Power & Light ([www.interfaithpowerandlight.org](http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org)), a nonprofit that aids congregations with energy conservation and efforts to shrink their carbon footprint. Their website provides valuable information about agencies who conduct energy usage for specific states. The U.S. Department of Energy ([www.energy.gov](http://www.energy.gov)) suggests some do-it-yourself versions of an energy audit.

*Address underutilized buildings.* The Garden Church in San Pedro, California, permanently solved this problem—they have no church building. The congregation meets at an outdoor central table surrounded by gardens—"a living sanctuary." Few congregations would find this a workable approach, yet other strategies could make a significant difference. For instance, too many church buildings remain empty for many hours during the week even though their facilities could be an important anchor for the wider community. Do the policies and fees that apply to outside groups encourage or discourage potential users? Seek out new partnerships and remove the barriers that prevent greater use of church facilities. One nonprofit organization, Partners for Sacred Places ([www.sacredplaces.org](http://www.sacredplaces.org)), assists congregations in sustaining and actively using their structures. Leaders could learn about and consider some of their suggestions for maximizing buildings.

*Replace equipment.* Photocopiers, computers, and printers should have power saving features. If not, then consider replacing older equipment. Refrigerators and

freezers use large amounts of energy. If these units are older, the church might save money and energy by replacing them with equipment that is more efficient. A water heater should get special scrutiny if the unit keeps large amounts of water hot all the time. On-demand, tankless, or instant water heaters could be a good investment in a church where daily demand is not common. Light fixtures and bulbs should also be replaced with new technology that use less energy and cost less over the life of the bulb. Replacing poorly insulated windows and putting in more insulation also reduces energy use.<sup>5</sup>

*Consider other sources of energy.* Some churches install solar panels to generate renewable heat. Your region may offer the possibility of purchasing "green power" from wind and geothermal sources.

*Become advocates.* Most denominations offer opportunities for congregations to be a collective witness for environmental concerns. Other ecumenical efforts, such as Creation Justice Ministries ([www.creationjustice.org](http://www.creationjustice.org)), provide information on current legislation and policy initiatives to mobilize people around environmental justice issues.

### **When Abundance Leads to Resistance**

Americans can easily take the beauty and abundance of our country for granted. When we live in a land of plenty, we are often blind to the erosion of natural resources and that leads us to resist any limits to our choices. Serving God by protecting God's creation conveniences that we expect God's presence in all places.<sup>6</sup>

---

1. See the excellent Mennonite Creation Care Network curriculum (<http://www.mennocreationcare.org>).

2. William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

3. See Rebecca Barnes Davies, *50 Ways to Help Save the Earth, Revised Edition: How You and Your Church Can Make a Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016) for more ideas.

4. Barbara Hemphill, *Less Clutter, More Life* (Pasadena, CA: True Roses, 2014), 12.

5. See Creation Justice Ministries ([www.creationjustice.org](http://www.creationjustice.org)) for purchasing guides and Earth Day Sunday worship materials.

6. Mark Torgerson, *Greening Spaces for Worship and Ministry: Congregations, Their Building, and Creation Care* (New York: Rowland & Littlefield, 2012).

## HOW DO NEW PEOPLE HEAR ABOUT YOUR CHURCH?

When asked, “How did you first find out about this congregation?” visitors give surprisingly diverse answers. Because not all visitors are seeking the same thing, their path to your church door reflects their specific needs and interests. Thus, congregations need multiple strategies to publicize and promote their presence in the community.

### Types of Potential New Members

There are three major types of potential members in your community and they usually have a variety of methods for seeking you out.

*Transplants* are new community residents who tend to search for a congregation of the same denomination they were previously a part of. They generally use the narrowest search strategy, such as denominational lists or a recommendation by their previous pastor.

*Neighbors* are friends and relatives of people who already attend or who live close by. These visitors are more likely to respond to a personal invitation to attend.

*Seekers* are potential worshipers who have not attended church before, or at least not in a long time. They usually find a church in less direct ways and may be looking for an experience that addresses an emotional need.

### Building Bridges

Many congregations excel at building bonds—personal connections among members—but it takes something more to build bridges to new members. Congregations build bridges to potential new members when worshipers want to share something that they find meaningful with those outside the church. Unfortunately, without planning and intentional efforts, these bridges never get built.

Congregational leaders and members assume that new people first engage by attending a worship service. However, growing numbers of people, especially younger people, have no church affiliation or previous exposure to faith communities. More than ever, congregations need different mechanisms to engage new generations and populations.<sup>1</sup>

### Ways to Build Bridges

There are multiple bridging approaches, and the effectiveness of each strategy depends on the type of visitor a church is attempting to reach.

*Personal communication.* Word of mouth remains the most frequent way new people find out about a church. Decades of research support this finding: current estimates range from at least half to two-thirds of surveyed adults find a church through personal invitations. People are infinitely more likely to trust information if they hear it from a person they know.

*Virtual word of mouth.* If current members use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Yelp, Foursquare, Meetup, or other platforms, your church already engages in digital evangelism. When members post photos of church experiences and friends, their side-door evangelism spreads information about what your church has to offer to their friends *and the friends of their friends*. Online avenues allows people to feel like they belong before they ever step foot on church property.<sup>2</sup>

*Mass communication.* An effective church website gives new people the chance to do in-depth research about



a church before they visit or engage in activities there. A high-quality website connects people to the church's ministry goals, including opportunities for volunteerism, social advocacy, and meeting spiritual needs.

Other communications still make a difference. Congregations can produce attractive brochures, postcards, and mailings. Others use signs and banners on church property and in the community. Radio ads tend to be inexpensive and can reach a wide audience.

*Promoting and hosting events.* Fairburn United Methodist Church, with many members more than eighty years old, recognized that new actions could strengthen their congregation's role in the community. The church created an "Open Doors Day" for the community, a carnival-type event that offered free rides, games, food, and tours. When more than 300 people attended, the church felt more connected to new residents in their changing community.<sup>3</sup>

*Community service activities.* Meaningful service and advocacy efforts grow out of church ministries. These activities both minister to struggling or hurting people and give potential new members an avenue for social activism as well. For some, service volunteering can lead to deeper involvement in a faith community.

*Increasing visibility.* A national study of new members found that one in five first found out about the congregation because they noticed the building.<sup>4</sup> Thus, attractive grounds and facilities also advertise and can say, "Welcome." Notifications about preschools, after school programs, and service programs increase foot traffic as well as raise the visibility and use of church facilities.

## Designing Bridges That Work

Before launching plans for reaching out to new people, gather some information about what is working now. Find out what current church efforts yield the best results. Above all, make only one or two changes at a time and continue monitoring the results.

*Conduct a survey.* Ask your last twenty new members: "Through whom, or by what means, did you first visit our church? What got you on the property the first time?" Share the findings with the appropriate committee or governing board and plan new strategies.

*Assess the church's reputation.* Ask ten nonmembers in the community to tell you what they know about the church. Which of your programs or services are you effectively communicating to the public? Do these assessments match your congregation's goals and mission? If not, where is the communication faltering?

*Bolster your digital message.* Try googling your church and see what comes up. Does the church website come up first? What else can a potential church visitor learn from an internet search? Is the address displayed and are service times easy to find? Consider completing a review of church website basics and making the necessary changes to enhance your site.<sup>5</sup>

To enable current members to electronically communicate with their friends about the church, learn about their usage patterns. Expect church members to fall all along the social media spectrum—from non-users to experts. An excellent Church Internet Usage Survey is available to get this critical information.<sup>6</sup> Based on accurate information, a social ministry team can build a comprehensive plan for enhancing the church's ministry through this technology.

*Plan big worship days.* Churches see spikes in attendance at predictable times throughout each year—Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day—and even larger numbers can be expected if people in the neighborhood receive personal or print invitations. Other promoted service times might be a Back-to-School Sunday in the fall, a day in February when people are less busy, or a Visitor or Bring-a-Friend Sunday. Each of these promoted services attract different types of people, such as inactives, families with children, and relatives or friends of members. However, given the planning and effort involved, carrying out more than three or four of these special Sundays a year is counterproductive.

## The Bottom Line

What causes an increase in first-time worship visitors? Major causes are your congregation's meaningful ministry, visibility, and positive reputation in the community. When that is the case, members derive significant spiritual meaning from their church, more members spontaneously invite, and more people respond to those invitations.

---

1. F. Douglas Powe and Jasmine Smother, "Create New Entry Points," *Leading Ideas*, October 2014 ([www.churchleadership.com](http://www.churchleadership.com)).

2. Powe and Smother.

3. [www.sacredplaces.org/reimagine-your-sacred-place/training/graduate-success-stories/2015/02/23/fairburn-united-methodist-church](http://www.sacredplaces.org/reimagine-your-sacred-place/training/graduate-success-stories/2015/02/23/fairburn-united-methodist-church)

4. U.S. Congregational Life Survey ([www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)).

5. See Scott Thumma, "Review of Church Website," [www.theparishpaper.com/review-church-website-basics-scott-thumma](http://www.theparishpaper.com/review-church-website-basics-scott-thumma).

6. See Scott Thumma, "Church Internet Usage Survey" [www.theparishpaper.com/church-internet-usage-survey-scott-thumma](http://www.theparishpaper.com/church-internet-usage-survey-scott-thumma).

## HOW TO DEAL WITH CHURCH CONFLICT

The governing board met to make their final decision about hiring a new pastor. Having narrowed the field to two candidates after a long discussion, a board member moved for a vote. As expected, another board member objected to the motion. During the discussion, this member made clear that she strongly opposed hiring one of the candidates. Equally clear from the discussion was that the remaining board members favored the candidate that she vehemently opposed! She stated that she would leave the church if the board voted to hire the candidate she disliked. When a final vote was taken, the board unanimously (minus the opposing member, of course) voted to offer the position to the candidate she opposed. What the board did not know at the time was that she was leaving the church because of a job transfer. Was winning an argument more important to her than what was best for the congregation?

### Becoming Comfortable with Constructive Conflict

The first step is to accept that conflict is normal. Conflict and disagreements have been part of the church since the days of Paul, Peter, and Barnabas. Christians often disagree on strategies and goals. Whenever people work together on something important, they will see things differently. Research shows that growing congregations exhibit and deal with more conflict than declining churches. Thus, conflict can coexist with growth and lead to positive results.

### Discovering the Key Issues behind Conflict

At a regularly scheduled meeting, ask members of the governing board or other decision-making group to individually answer the short list of questions below. Ask people not to sign their names. At the next meeting, distribute the compiled answers and request each board member to silently read the document. Discuss the results together and begin to develop some posi-

tive next steps regarding how your group will approach future conflict.

- During the past two years, have we usually disagreed about the same issue or a different issue each time? If the same, what is that issue?
- If you had to name only one cause behind our disagreements, how would you describe that cause?
- If you had to make a list of secondary causes, what would you put on that list?
- Regarding how our congregation handles conflict, please state in one sentence what you specifically *want* to see happen.

### Creating a Healthy Church Culture

The more comfortable we become with discussing differences of opinion, the more we are able to find constructive ways to resolve differences. In a healthy church environment, those conversations are characterized by these traits:



1. Decisions are made by the input and involvement of most members. Damaging conflict brews in churches where too many decisions are made by only a few members and the rest are in the dark.
2. The pastor and other church staff are treated with respect and fairness. There is a process in place (such as a personnel committee) for dealing with complaints.
3. There is system in place for making decisions and assuring accountability. Effective polity—the operational and governance structure of any church—ensures that the system doesn't become an instrument for those willing to take advantage of ambiguity about the exercise of authority. Leaders refrain from making unilateral decisions and process decisions through the appropriate committees and governing board.
4. The church consistently uses a fair process to put the best-qualified persons in positions of leadership. Regular rotation of office holders is part of that process. This allows new people to become involved and prevents any individual from wielding too much influence over a long period.
5. The congregation is outwardly focused and genuinely welcomes new people.
6. The church has a clear mission focus and direction for ministry that is widely shared. Without such unity, destructive conflict flourishes in the vacuum.<sup>1</sup>

### Promoting Positive Member Behaviors

Every church member should share in the responsibility for more constructive church conversations and effective decision making. Leaders who follow these guidelines can help make that happen.

*Assert that every member's view is equally important.* Do not tolerate bullying behavior that is so overbearing or aggressive that it leaves no emotional room for other people to disagree.

*Keep disagreements public and on the table.* Sometimes people fear discussing difficult issues in a meeting because it might cause disunity or hurt feelings. But when conversations go underground, disagreements intensify and make matters worse. Unfortunately, leaders choosing this strategy later regret that they didn't do everything they could to resolve the conflict.

*Always talk directly with others.* Avoid the temptation to substitute this positive approach with talking *about* others. Speak only for yourself, not for others. For

example, do not tolerate the phrase “people are saying.” Insist on facts and the names of specific people if someone purports to be speaking for others.

*Do not rescue people who try to exert power and control through threats.* Common threats are “I will leave this church” or “I will withhold my financial contributions.” When a church yields to such threats, it is never a positive outcome.

*Beware of barking dogs.* Sometimes churches have one or two members who seek attention and want to win any church fight just for the sake of winning. They are like barking dogs behind the fence when you are walking down the sidewalk. The more you acknowledge their negative noise outside of meetings, the more you encourage it. Don't jump the fence and join them!<sup>2</sup>

*Don't be a rabbit or a skunk.*<sup>3</sup> Skunks stand their ground and fight in odorous ways. They use negative comments, label persons or groups with whom they disagree, or challenge personal motives and character. Most of us are rabbits that would rather run away from such personalities. We need to assert our right to express an opinion or viewpoint that is constructive. By speaking up for ourselves, we guarantee all opinions are part of the discussion.

### Hope for Positive Outcomes

The opening example illustrates several factors detrimental to preventing and resolving conflict. The church did not have a process in place to vet and select pastors. One individual had a long-established habit of using threats to get her way. Only when other members finally called her bluff did she realize she could no longer get away with such behavior. Her last vote was her parting shot.

When leaders and members faithfully fill their role as equal participants, set clear boundaries about acceptable church behavior, and create a culture where differences of opinion are expected, congregational life moves toward peaceful decision making.<sup>4</sup>

1. Thom Rainer, “Nine Traits of Mean Churches,” <http://thomrainer.com/2015/03/nine-traits-mean-churches/>.

2. This analogy was part of a comment left anonymously on a blog post.

3. Herb Miller, “Become Comfortable with Conflict: Step One to Moving Beyond It!” *The Parish Paper*, January 2010.

4. Congregations can create formal covenants (see examples at <http://www.covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2011/02/Behavioral-Covenant-Samples3.pdf>; or Gil Rendle, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

## WHAT NUMBERS MATTER FOR CONGREGATIONS? LESSONS FROM FIVE-YEAR TRENDS

Church growth, as measured by the average number of regular participants or worship attendees, has been the go-to statistic for many researchers and leaders tracking religion. Leaders less often consider other yardsticks of vitality—such as more meaningful worship, growth in ministry with youth, social advocacy, or engagement in foreign mission work. A new report based on information from over four thousand congregations gives us new insights about how congregations have responded to change over the past five years.<sup>1</sup> The study suggests that some churches are thriving and surviving, despite the discouraging overall attendance trends.

### Declining Attendance Overall

The change in worship attendance reported by congregational leaders between 2010 and 2015 is disheartening. For the first time since 2000, half of all congregations report 80 or fewer worshippers as their church size. In 2010, just five years ago, this median size was 110 worshippers. To put this drop in perspective, almost 30,000 additional churches nationally dropped below 110 in worship attendance in the past five years.<sup>2</sup> This leaves nearly 60 percent of all congregations with an attendance size lower than the median size of just six years ago.

The exceptions to this downward trend are congregations where the majority of members are racial/ethnic worshippers. However, even fewer of these churches are growing compared to five years ago.

### Some Churches Continue to Grow

The study examines the 45 percent of congregations that reported 2 percent or more growth over the past five years. This modest yardstick of growth means almost half of U.S. congregations are holding their own or adding new worshippers.

Some patterns emerged among those congregations reporting attendance growth. Growing congregations describe their worship as innovative. Their demograph-

ics include fewer senior adults and more young adults, eighteen to thirty-four years of age.

Dr. David Roozen, the report's author, comments on one broad cultural change, namely the "perception of one's life as a continual set of options and choices." Thus, even religious identity and participation are increasingly seen as choices. Today's worshippers feel comfortable deciding which congregation to attend as one choice among many options. Roozen goes on to argue that, to the extent religion has become part of a consumer-oriented marketplace, growing congregations must find ways to "stick out from the crowd." The data support his assertion. Six out of ten growing congregations claim to be very different from other congregations.

The research shows that distinguishing one's congregation from others in the community is linked to the willingness to change worship and a commitment to spiritual vitality. Thriving congregations are nearly ten times more likely to have changed themselves in



"SWITCH PLACES WITH ME, BILL...  
I'VE READ THAT GROWING CONGREGATIONS  
HAVE INNOVATIVE WORSHIP."

the past five years than are struggling congregations. For example, one strategy to achieve distinctiveness is a move toward more contemporary worship. Another tactic is to add one or more services with a different style that speaks to a specific group, such as young adults.

Adapting to changing conditions creates some conflict, and the data show that growing churches experience more conflict than those that are declining. Still, while conflict is a necessary by-product of change and growth, serious levels of conflict remain detrimental to church health.

### **Engaging Young Adults Is Key**

Currently about 20 percent of the U.S. population is in the eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old age group. In 2015, only one in ten congregations could claim to have reached this same level of regular participation by young adults in church activities. Only two in ten congregations said they put young adult ministry as a top priority. Growing congregations make the necessary changes to engage higher percentages of this critical age group as compared to stable or declining churches.

### **Easing Financial Stress**

An earlier analysis from the 2010 FACT survey revealed that the 2008 recession generated a mix of negative effects beyond the church budget.<sup>3</sup> Two out of three congregations reported some decline in income due to the recession. However, most congregations now are feeling an increased sense of financial security.

How did congregations adapt and cope with the economic downturn? Some used savings while others postponed capital projects and maintenance. Many congregations decided to reduce their mission and benevolence giving. The researchers estimate that only one in ten congregations chose the least attractive strategy—laying off staff or delaying the filling of positions.

In 2015, more congregations (62 percent) say that they are thriving rather than struggling financially. Even so, for the first time since 2000, more than one in three congregations were unable to employ a full-time, paid senior or sole clergy leader. The shrinking size of many congregations probably fuels this pattern. The declines in size and budget also likely accounts for some of the erosion of member-oriented programming, such as prayer and study groups, music programs, or young adult and youth programs.

## **Focusing on Mission**

Church leaders find it helpful to distinguish between those things over which the congregation has control, generally dynamics internal to the congregation, and those things over which it has little control, generally dynamics in the community or region. The good news is that the majority of congregations were able to recover from a difficult external event that affected the entire country—the 2008 recession—and continue to do vital ministry. The evidence also points to the commitment of most congregations to remain spiritually vibrant and welcoming to new worshipers. The key to doing so lies with their willingness to change, adapt worship so that it attracts newcomers, and innovative programming.

Congregations that grew stronger in spirit and ministry over the past five years were able to say that the following statements accurately described their worshiping community. How well do these describe your congregation?

- Our congregation has a clear mission and purpose.
- Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive.
- We are caring and supportive of members who have health, financial, or personal needs.
- We are good at incorporating newcomers into the congregation.
- Our congregation is working for social justice.
- Our congregation is intentional about maximizing the number and variety of small groups offered.
- We use the Internet and social media tools effectively.
- Our congregation is quite different from other congregations in our community.

---

1. The Faith Communities Today Project (FACT) is a series of national surveys, beginning in 2000, and conducted in 2005, 2008, 2010, and 2015. This issue is based on the most recent report written by David Roozen, *American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving*, <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/American-Congregations-2015.pdf>.

2. This figure is based on an estimate of 330,000 congregations in the U.S.

3. *Holy Toll: The Impact of the 2008 Recession on American Congregations*, <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/HolyTollReport.pdf>.

## THE PAYDAY LENDING CRISIS: WHAT CAN CONGREGATIONS DO?

Several years ago, the Rev. Dr. Freddy Hayes III, pastor of Friendship West Baptist Church in Dallas, noticed storefront payday lenders popping up like mushrooms, replacing banks. Getting organized, he and other clergy testified before the Texas legislature, saying: “If someone is drowning, instead of throwing them a life preserver . . . we have thrown them shackles. That is what the payday industry has done to too many people.”<sup>1</sup>

Congregations involved in community ministry confront a new challenge: the payday lending industry. Financially insecure persons live among us; attend our churches; and, especially in times of personal crisis, ask for assistance.

### What Are Payday Loans?

Millions of Americans without access to traditional financial services rely on check cashers, pawnshops, and storefront payday lenders to make ends meet. With more than 22,000 payday loan shops in the U.S., according to the Center for Responsible Lending, predatory lenders are almost as numerous as McDonald’s (14,350) and Burger King restaurants (roughly 12,000) combined. Since the 1990s, when such payday lenders numbered only two hundred, the growth has been explosive.

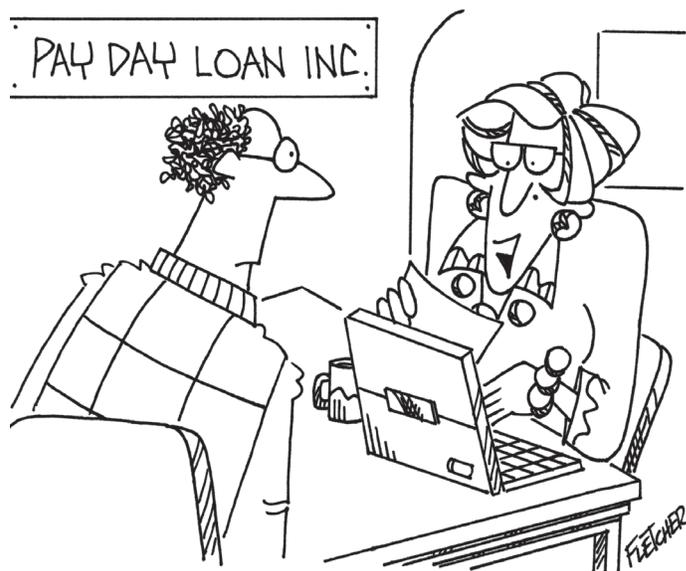
Specifically, payday loans are short-term, high interest rate loans that are designed to be repaid with the borrower’s next paycheck. The typical two-week payday loan has an annual percentage rate ranging from 391 to 521 percent. They appeal to those who are struggling because a credit check is not required. The process generally involves the borrower writing a post-dated check that the lender will cash, and the borrower incurs any bank fees from a bounced check. This can begin a cycle of multiple loans being issued to cover the growing debt.<sup>2</sup>

### How Can Congregations Help?

A broad-based coalition of Christian groups, Faith for Just Lending (<http://lendjustly.com>), called for an end to the practice of predatory lending. The signers include

the Center for Public Justice, the Ecumenical Poverty Initiative, the Southern Baptist Convention, National Association of Evangelicals, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The group’s principles assign equal responsibility to individuals, congregations, lenders, and lawmakers for eliminating practices that prey on the poor. The principles for just lending are:

- Individuals should manage their resources responsibly and conduct their affairs ethically, saving for emergencies and being willing to provide support to others in need.
- Churches should teach and model responsible stewardship, offering help to neighbors in times of crisis.
- Lenders should extend loans at reasonable interest rates based on ability to repay within the original loan period, taking into account the borrower’s income and expenses.
- Government should prohibit usury and predatory or deceptive lending practices.



LET’S SEE...THE CURRENT ANNUAL PERCENTAGE RATE RANGES FROM 391% TO, “YOU WORK FOR US NOW.”

These principles lend themselves to three avenues of assistance that can be provided by congregations.

*Charitable Giving.* Charitable giving is by far the most popular answer among congregations. A nationwide survey reported that each of the top three community outreach activities claimed by congregations involved direct assistance of some kind: cash (reported by 88 percent), food (85 percent), and clothing (60 percent).

*Advocacy.* Public policy advocacy, such as Rev. Dr. Haynes undertook, is another option. The federal government created the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in 2010 to protect citizens from abusive financial practices. The Center for Responsible Lending ([www.responsiblelending.org](http://www.responsiblelending.org)) offers a program called “Faith and Credit.” This effort encourages congregations to advocate Congress to replace a patchwork of state laws with national legislation that curbs predatory lending practices. Yet only 38 percent of congregations claimed advocacy as something they do.

*Empowerment.* Empowerment (or personal development) ministry that attempts to move beyond meeting immediate needs to undergird the whole person may be a less recognizable piece of the community ministry toolkit. Examples include programs of counseling, training, education, or support for persons struggling with significant life issues. In the national survey, fully one-third of congregations reported participating in personal development ministries.<sup>3</sup>

### A New Kind of Loan: A Case Study

The Rev. Rodney Hunter of Wesley United Methodist Church in Richmond, Virginia, leads a predominately black, middle-class congregation located in a low-income community. Feeling constantly bombarded by requests for emergency assistance, the pastor created a mission fund through the church, but found it to be inadequate for those who faced major expenses. The pervasiveness of predatory loans compounded the problem. In the face of massive debt, charitable giving seemed neither practical nor wise. What could be done?

Rev. Hunter, along with Rev. Charles Swadley of Lakeside United Methodist Church, approached the Virginia United Methodist Credit Union to create a partnership. The result: the Jubilee Assistance Fund (JAF). Here’s how it works: The congregation provides a small dollar loan (\$500 - \$1,000) to church members to use as collateral for obtaining a larger loan from the credit union. People typically use the loans for rent, mortgages, medicine, utilities, and food. JAF loans can

also be used to refinance a predatory loan. In return, the borrower must agree to participate in financial counseling, loan monitoring, and payroll deduction.

A JAF loan compares quite favorably to one type of predatory loan, a car title loan. A one-year Jubilee loan with \$500 in principal at a 6% annual percentage rate (APR) requires \$16 interest, while a one-year car title loan with \$500 principal has a 264% APR and requires payment of \$953 interest. In eight years, the JAF has helped parishioners secure fourteen loans—from \$500 to \$8,800.

Rev. Hunter writes, “We are doing something to alleviate the pain of debt as we continue to urge our legislators for fair and sensible laws for the common working society. Since we started the Jubilee Fund, our mission’s fund has doubled in income. It is just like the multiplication of the two fish and five loaves (Mark 6:30-44). We have done something.”<sup>4</sup>

### Questions for the Congregation

If your congregation offers cash, food, or clothing, do you know what particular financial challenges may have led your recipients to seek help in the first place? Do the financially stressed individuals assisted by your church rely on predatory loans? Do you know which institutions in your community provide free or low-cost financial education? Do you have church members with financial expertise who could be involved in empowerment ministry?<sup>5</sup>

**ABOUT THE WRITER:** The Rev. Dr. Dana Horrell, executive director of Faithful Citizen ([www.faithfulcitizen.net](http://www.faithfulcitizen.net)) and United Methodist pastor, works to engage congregations in social ministry.

---

1. Rachel Hope Anderson, “A Religious Movement to End Predatory Payday Lending,” *Tikkun*, Winter 2015, 37-38, 66-67.

2. Stacey Tisdale, “Congress and Church Take Aim at Payday Lending,” *Black Enterprise* Posted July 24, 2015. <http://www.blackenterprise.com/money/congress-church-take-aim-payday-lending/>

3. D. Roozen and C. Dudley, *Faith Communities Today* (2001), in Heidi Unruh, Ronald Sider, *Saving Souls, Serving Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29-32.

4. Rodney Hunter, “How Our Church Freed Its Members from Predatory Lending,” *Tikkun Daily*, March 16, 2015 ([www.tikkun.org](http://www.tikkun.org)).

5. For more about predatory lending, see the guide for churches, *Modern Day Usury: The Payday Loan Trap*, Center for Responsible Lending (<http://www.responsiblelending.org/allies/faith-and-credit/Modern-Day-Usury-The-Payday-Loan-Trap.pdf>).

## HOW MINISTRY TEAMS GET THINGS DONE

The pastor charged with recruiting teachers for the congregation's Sunday school classes expressed her frustration: "Every year it gets harder and I don't see that changing! I've tried every strategy and reached out to new people over and over again. At least I know one thing—what I'm doing isn't working." But one thing this leader and many others have not yet tried is a ministry team approach.

The biggest myth about mobilizing teams is that they can be created by gathering a few people together and naming them a team.<sup>1</sup> Leaders often wonder: Can a church add ministry teams without revising their present structure or bylaws? Yes! Churches that transition to a team-driven methodology add teams while reducing the number and size of their traditional committees. Although the church neither renames nor disbands all of its committees, those groups may meet less frequently.

### Unleashing the Power of Teams

Each ministry team is comprised of church members and worshipers who have not yet joined the church. Unlike committee appointments, ministry-team coordinators recruit for their teams throughout the year.<sup>2</sup> Anyone can be invited at any time to join a team. Being part of a ministry team offers in-service learning and a sense of belonging for congregational newcomers. Further, the governing board and committees do not assume micro-management control of ministry teams. Rather, they hold ministry teams accountable to their church's core values, beliefs, vision, and mission.

*Ministry-focused vs. constituency-focused.* Traditional, constituency-focused committees tend to be assigned tasks. Each member senses a responsibility to represent the constituency that appointed him or her. When churches establish committees (typically on an annual basis), members are elected or appointed to reflect the diverse views of the congregation. Thus, committee members relate to the leaders or group who gave them their charge and to those they represent. In contrast, ministry-focused teams seek

out individuals with the skills and talents needed to make the team work effectively. As a result, team members relate to each other and look for ways to best use their gifts to make a difference. In this way, the enthusiasm generated for ministry glues the team together.

*Shared leadership vs. designated chairperson.* In teams, the leadership function is shared by team members. In the most high-functioning teams, every member considers him- or herself to be a leader. A consensus model of decision making works well because members feel free to act on their own sense of things. Whereas in a committee, individuals may feel the pull to represent the interests of a constituent group. Because the committee chairperson receives authorization from the church's governing board, he or she assumes responsibility for communicating the committee's decisions back to the board. In effect, an expansion of team ministry decentralizes congregational control.

*Motivating people vs. maintaining control.* Teams unleash the three factors that motivate people—autonomy,



THE ONE DISADVANTAGE OF ADOPTING  
A MINISTRY TEAM APPROACH IN YOUR CHURCH.

mastery, and purpose. Delegating leaders, in the traditional committee model, give subordinates responsibility for decision making and problem solving. While delegation works in situations where people draw paychecks for their work rather than intrinsic rewards, Daniel Pink asserts in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* that workers gain autonomy when they own independence over “their task, their time, their technique, and their team.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, ministry teams help satisfy the innate human need to be needed, help others, make a difference, share their God-given gifts, master skills and learn new ones, enhance self-esteem, and gain a sense of belonging and acceptance.

### Setting up a Team to Succeed

Creating an effective team requires intentionality and accountability. First, the team’s purpose must be clearly defined by the group. For example, if a team achieves its purpose, what will be the result or impact? What will be different because of the team’s work? Teams can get distracted and over time expand their task list. Teams that state their purpose in writing and have continuing conversations about their focus tend to avoid wandering away from their original assignment.

Second, what type of team is needed? Understanding the distinct work of three types of teams enhances the probability that members with the right gifts will be recruited.

- *Decision-making teams* take on big-picture issues like making choices about a congregation’s vision, identifying the goals that move the church toward its next chapter in ministry, or outlining strategies for building financial stability. Strategic planning or visioning teams are good examples of this type of teamwork that eventually is taken under consideration by the entire congregation.
- *Task-accomplishing teams* undertake specific assignments important to the church’s mission. For example, a task team may take on the responsibility of providing a free breakfast to community residents each weekday in the church’s fellowship hall. Task teams are evaluated by how well they carry out their assignments.
- *Self-directed teams* assume a great deal of autonomy to accomplish their goals. For example, church leaders know they need to review their policies with regard to the use of church facilities by community groups. A team is formed to con-

duct the review, gather information, and make recommendations about rental policies and fees.

Third, how many people make up a good team? Research indicates that five to seven individuals is about the right size. For instance, Amazon.com, which operates with teams, suggests that team size is optimal when “two pizzas” can feed the team. Team size operates independently of the size of the congregation. Even large congregations need to exercise discipline to keep teams in the two-pizza range.

Fourth, effective teams pay attention to the small issues. The following specific behaviors undermine a team when members fail to

- show up or arrive on time for meetings
- respond to emails, texts, or other communications in a timely way
- demonstrate commitment to the work or complete assignments on time
- share resources and credit for work well done.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, few teams operate effectively in a congregation struggling with dysfunction. A dysfunctional congregation is characterized by an absence of trust. Congregational leaders must earn trust and work to create trust within the congregation as whole.

### “Every Member in Ministry”

One congregation that uses the ministry team model adopted “every member in ministry” as their motto. By involving a high percentage of members in team ministries, the church grew several hundred new ministries. Congregations and other nonprofits are America’s largest employers. Volunteers show up for work in churches that “pay well.” The “salary” they seek is challenge, personal growth, opportunity to make a difference, and meaningful experiences and relationships. How well does your church pay?

---

1. Material drawn from John W. Wimberly Jr., *Mobilizing Congregations: How Teams Can Motivate Members and Get Things Done* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). See also *Church Effectiveness Nuggets*, Vol. 23, “Fine Tuning the Organizational and Communication Engine,” <http://www.theparishpaper.com/sites/default/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%2023.pdf>

2. Depending on team type, coordinators arise from the team or are recruited by church leadership.

3. Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), p. 94.

4. William Dyer, et al., *Team Building*, 4th Edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

## THIS CONVERSATION—AGAIN? IMPROVING CHURCH COMMUNICATION

As congregations face change and new challenges, conflict is part of the process. Too often, under stress, church leaders and members fall into bad communication habits that prevent the airing of concerns and objections. Healthy conversations help people manage conflict and move them toward acceptance of new initiatives. Productive communication speeds up the process from planning to action and keeps members on track to accurately assess new realities.

### Communication Fashions to Avoid

Appropriate and effective actions by church leaders rest on good thinking. Do you recognize some of these communication and thinking mistakes?

1. *All or Nothing Thinking.* Painting reality as black and white is easy. Recognizing some shades of gray in any situation takes more time and thought. New ideas can be quickly judged as “terrible” or the “greatest ever.” Most new ideas fit in neither category. Nearly all ideas possess some merit and leaders can hone them into a better strategy. And even the best and greatest ideas need further development.<sup>1</sup>

Beware of any proposal that only offers two alternatives. For example, “we must cut our staff salaries immediately or stop paying our utility bills.” There is always a third way, or fourth avenue, or fifth alternative.

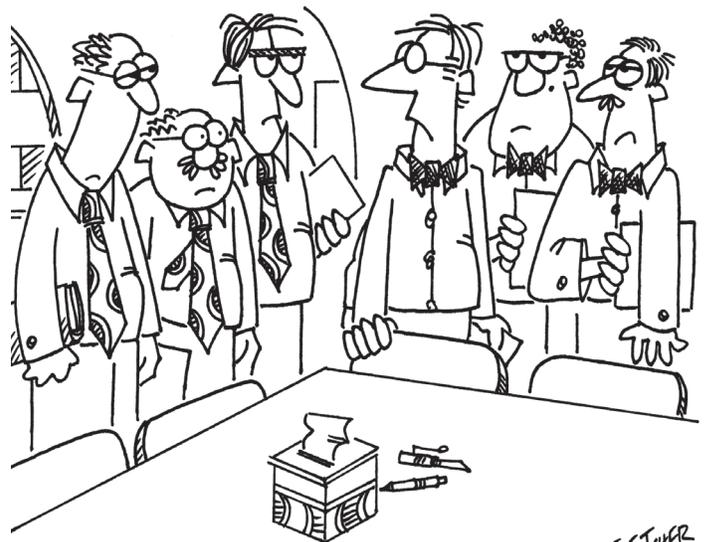
Polarized thinking can be used to describe members too (such as “we have good members and bad members”). Congregational efforts can be falsely judged as “successful” or “a complete failure.” Instead of putting all of reality into two baskets, creative people explore the positive and negative aspects of complex situations.

2. *Overgeneralizing.* After an unpleasant pastoral tenure with a recent seminary graduate, the congregation’s leaders vowed to never call another pastor without decades of pastoral experience. Unfortunately, those vows limit the number of gifted pastors

who could effectively serve with the church. And that view limits what the congregation could learn from the experience.

Taking one bad (or good) experience and using its specific outcome to make a general rule about how the universe works is more than a leap of faith. A specific situation is just that—unique to a particular event, time, and place. A healthy conversation recognizes the multitude of factors that produce any given outcome.

3. *Filtering Out the Positive.* After seventeen years of service, the pastor of First Church retired. He possessed many ministry strengths but some members expressed dissatisfaction with his administrative skills. As the search committee screened candidates, they made administrative experience a top priority. As a result, their next pastor was a phenomenal administrator with few other ministry gifts. His tenure was brief as the members realized they had focused too narrowly on the previous pastor’s weakness without appreciating all the leadership positives of their long-time pastor.



BY THE FIFTH COMMITTEE MEETING, IT WAS OBVIOUS  
IT WOULD ALWAYS BE “US” VERSUS “THEM.”

A narrow focus on just the negatives or just the positives prohibits leaders from forming a realistic and balanced outlook. Identifying the positives and negatives of a situation is part of healthy communication.

4. *Assigning Motive.* We observe behavior and make guesses about why people are acting in ways that we deem irrational or counterproductive. Our inferences can be completely wrong because we can never be certain what someone else is thinking. Because we are not mind readers, healthy conversations include questions about what people believe, what they value, and why they wish to pursue one strategy vs. another. It is okay to ask: Why is this approach important to you?

5. *Catastrophizing.* Imminent disaster is rarely just around the corner and usually events do not explode into a crisis. Nostalgia about the past fuels some members to be doom-and-gloom prophets. Because their worldview is really a long-standing belief that all things are in decline, they see every event as the last shoe to drop. Healthy church conversations include discussions of many plausible outcomes, including positive ones.

6. *Emotional Reasoning.* Fear can inhibit effective discussions and prevent new ideas from being implemented. Leaders prone to elaborate explanations for why actions cannot be taken are often masking their fear of change. People often change their attitudes and feelings after they try something new, not before they do something new.

7. *Labeling.* Naming people or experiences puts them into hard categories based on an isolated incident. Hard categories block the reception of new information and make healthy communication much more difficult. Labeling tends to highlight the negative rather than illuminate the whole situation or person.

8. *Fortune-Telling.* Most people like to try their hand at predicting the future or like speculating about the future. However, none of us knows what will happen tomorrow. None of us knows what God has in store for the congregation and its mission. Negative predictions ignore all the possible outcomes and can be self-fulfilling congregational prophecies.

9. *Personalization.* When the pastor or lay leaders support a different strategy than some members, the focus can quickly shift away from the facts of a specific situation to a polarizing of people. The “us” vs. “them” type of thinking does not help people see the facts clearly because the focus shifts away from *what* to *who*.

10. *Looking for the Perfect Plan.* Churches can operate with the unrecognized conviction that discussing a problem equals solving the problem. They are convinced that lengthy discussion will eventually lead them to the perfect course of action, even if those discussions take many months or years. In general, only implementing a new idea reveals the required modifications to a strategy for use in a specific context. Successful new strategies more often occur when leaders use a “do-it-and-fix-it” method than when they wait for the perfect plan.

## Clues to Improving Communication

Recognizing that our views are not always based on realistic thinking is hard to swallow. Sometimes our thinking is irrational or inaccurate. Acting on our faulty thinking leads to unnecessary conflict in a church setting. What steps can we take to improve our communication?

*Let go of the past.* Too much of the present conversation is actually attempts to rewrite history. Help yourself and others to make peace with the past.

*Exercise forgiveness and patience.* Everyone has made one or more thinking errors on the list. And the more important the decision, the more likely it is that our first response is not 100 percent rational. Managing our thoughts, taming our emotions, and behaving well is not easy.

*Value the practical experiences of leaders and other congregations.* Listen carefully to the observations of those who have tried and failed as well as those who tried and met success.

*Uncover the theology, philosophy, and heart-felt passions that lead to change.* When people marry their strategies with their deepest convictions, long-lasting change is more likely.

*Remain hopeful about the future.* A congregation’s script should be positive and energize members for what lies ahead in ministry.

---

1. Material drawn from Amy Morin, *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don’t Do* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014).

## NAVIGATING THE CURRENTS OF ENDOWMENTS AND RESERVE FUNDS

Donations to religious nonprofits climbed to historic levels, exceeding 115 billion dollars in the past year. Yet that rising tide hides small and turbulent undercurrents. Namely, charitable giving for religious institutions as a percentage of all nonprofit contributions continues on a thirty-year downward slide. Because people give to many worthwhile causes, including the church, leaders must make a case for how the congregation's mission advances God's will.

### Permanent Endowment Fund Principles

First Church observed the 75th birthday of its endowment and celebrated the wonderful ministries it funded. However, for the past two years, leaders began dipping into the principle to pay staff salaries and subsidize the operating budget. The decision to go beyond an "interest-only" funding strategy generated conflict among members. Although some members preferred funding staff salaries through endowment principle monies rather than reducing staff, others felt it violated the trust of the endowment's donors. What is the best approach?

Start by obtaining the current guidelines for endowment funds from your denomination's regional or national offices. Most guidelines stipulate the appropriate uses of the endowment's interest income and principle funds. Further, endowment plans offer procedures for what happens if the congregation ceases to exist.<sup>1</sup>

*Every congregation should establish an endowment fund.* Even if the beginning balance is modest, an endowment fund attracts contributions that people would not have given otherwise to the congregation. People give generously to an endowment if (a) church leaders publicize the endowment and its accomplishments twice a year, and (b) the endowment funds ministries that church members passionately support. Also, the process for making bequests should be accessible. A church that printed, "Remember the church in your will," in every worship service bulletin received bequests for decades. Additional information can be included on the church website.

*Create two endowment funds—one for facilities and one for missions.* Some members love to contribute to buildings and facilities because they receive joy from seeing holy spaces created for new generations. Sometimes people are motivated to give out of a sense of pride or attachment to a church that played a significant role in their family life or in the community's history. In contrast to these bricks-and-mortar types, another group of members love to make significant gifts to mission outreach—local, regional, and world. They know that their gifts will make a difference in these efforts and will continue to fund the causes they care deeply about far into the future.

### Reserve Fund Principles

In addition to a facilities endowment, every congregation should create a maintenance reserve fund. Each year, church leaders place in an escrow fund a predetermined percentage of their total annual facilities-maintenance budget. A general rule is 10 to 15 percent of the total



"...AND TO THINK, DAD'S FINAL GIFT TO THE CHURCH CREATED THIS HOLY SPACE FOR GENERATIONS TO COME!"

facilities-maintenance budget. Other congregational leaders place a predetermined percentage of their total annual operations budget, about 1 percent or 2 percent, in a facilities-maintenance escrow fund. In both instances, these escrow funds provide for unexpected, expensive repairs—such as a new roof, a new heating or air conditioning system, or new technology upgrades.

One universal law is that the unexpected will happen sooner or later. A reserve fund prevents an event from becoming a crisis and protects church leaders from depleting the facility endowment's principle for ongoing maintenance.

### Methods to Grow the Endowment

Several strategies boost endowment funds beyond just collecting the interest.

*Make a case for the mission.* After discussions and information meetings with church members, identify three or four mission priorities that speak to the congregation's core identity and commitments. For example, the congregation may take pride in its excellent music or arts ministry, community mission programs, or global mission partnerships. Committed current members are likely to feel strongly about these church strengths and want to insure their financial support during occasions when regular congregational income fluctuates. However, always communicate that the endowments provide for expanded ministry opportunities beyond the reach of the ongoing annual budget.

*Know your congregation's giving patterns.* Track pledges and giving habits from church records by age (members younger than 20, members in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and above). Determine what portion of the annual budget is funded by each ten-year age group, and pay special attention to members over age 60. Members older than sixty are the most likely to see the church's endowments as good investments. One idea is to challenge older members to endow their pledges by making a gift that equals twice their annual pledge with a zero added. For example, a \$1,500 annual pledge by two equals \$3,000. When a zero is added, the suggested endowment gift is \$30,000.<sup>2</sup>

*Rejuvenate or expand your current endowment programs.* Some churches focus on the investment returns of current endowment funds and make few efforts to solicit new gifts. Churches that offer Wills and Estate Planning Seminars every few years provide a valuable service for their members because an estimated 51% of Americans age 55 to 64 do not have wills.<sup>3</sup> The reason

is denial. Although the seminars are not designed to influence people to put the congregation in their wills, estate planning often leads people of faith to make bequests that strengthen their church's ministries. With renewed focus, congregations can increase the number of people who have included the church in their estate planning by 20 percent each year.<sup>4</sup>

### How to Minimize Risks

Two common problems arise when congregations develop an endowment or reserve fund dependency.

*The accumulation of money makes leaders lose sight of ministry.* For example, in a congregation that declined by more than 50 percent, the endowment funded a staff twice as large as appropriate for a church of its size. The endowment generated enough interest to pay salaries and operating expenses indefinitely. With that trajectory, the congregation could continue to exist without any members! Their challenge is learning how to connect with the spiritual needs of people currently in the community.

*The talk of money is always tied to the church's need to balance the budget.* Reserve funds or endowments provide a convenient excuse for members that their financial gifts are not needed. Church leaders must connect every mention of giving to its spiritual foundation. Financial giving is essential in helping believers form, retain, and grow in their relationship with God. The spiritual need to give is far greater than the church's need to receive.

### Looking for a Great Investment?

People yearn to make a difference and search for ways to fulfill that desire. Thirty-five years after his assassination, the prayer for Archbishop Oscar Romero speaks to this truth: "The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us."<sup>5</sup>

---

1. See *Creating an Endowment Fund Guide*, <http://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/Resources/Ministry-Resources/Church-Tool-Box.aspx>

2. "50 Ways to Improve Your Annual Stewardship Campaign," Lewis Center for Church Leadership ([www.churchleadership.com](http://www.churchleadership.com)).

3. Richard Eisenberg, "Americans' Ostrich Approach To Estate Planning," <http://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2014/04/09/americans-ostrich-approach-to-estate-planning/>

4. *Creating an Endowment Fund Guide*, 6.

5. Bishop Ken Untener, "A Future Not Our Own," ([http://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Ken\\_Untener\\_A\\_Future\\_Not\\_Our\\_Own.shtml](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Ken_Untener_A_Future_Not_Our_Own.shtml)).

## NEW MODELS FOR NEW CHURCHES: WHAT WORKS?

Anyone with an internet connection can access Wikipedia and view the site's content—35 million articles in 288 languages as of this writing. The site's diverse content appeals to a huge audience and exemplifies what is called broadcasting, which targets one giant market. Another model, narrowcasting, seeks to reach a small niche market where the audience is, by nature, limited (i.e., by geography, demographics, or interests). These broad and narrow distinctions relate to the evolving history of church planting as well. Old planting models tended to use a broadcasting frame, whose leaders created a church for all comers, whereas newer models stem from a narrowcasting approach, where leaders design for a targeted group. Even the language used to describe what a church is reflects shifting strategies. Sometimes new churches begin as a worshiping community, a new ministry, or as a small-group initiative instead of broader designations such as congregation or church.

### Types of New Ministries

A study of new ministries in six mainline denominations uncovered factors related to successful church planting efforts over the past ten years. Despite the wide variety of efforts, researchers grouped the new ministries into three major types.<sup>1</sup>

*Replication of traditional congregations.* Planters modeled new churches after established ones but added modern music and informal practices. Located in new or growing areas, these congregations are mostly comprised of white worshipers. Representing about 30 percent of all new congregations in the study, about half were meeting in a sanctuary. In some cases, existing congregations sponsored a highly similar church in an alternate site. New church plants of traditional African-American congregations make up another subtype.

*Immigrant congregations.* One in four new church starts are comprised of recent immigrant worshipers. Many are mission projects of existing congregations

and some meet in another church's building on Sunday afternoons.

*Alternative congregations.* This third group is the largest (about 45 percent) and most diverse. Some design worship experiences to be seeker-oriented, others offer emerging styles,<sup>2</sup> and still others build relationships through small groups. Only about one in five alternative churches meet in a sanctuary, with most seeking a more informal space, such as a home, restaurant, storefront, school, or community room. In most cases, the target population is young adults who are not attracted to traditional churches and worship.

### Who Starts New Churches?

New church starts usually begin in one of four ways.

*Denominations.* Generally begun as part of a national or regional plan, denominations (primarily the Presbyterian Church, Reformed Church, and United Church of Canada) started about one-third of new worshiping communities in the study. Denominations also provide



"THIRTY-SOMETHING, TECH-SAVVY PROFESSIONALS WHO ENJOY JAZZ, MOCHA LATTES, AND WALKS ON THE BEACH AT SUNSET MAY BE TOO NARROW A NICHE MARKET."

financial support for approximately 75 percent of new churches, though the amount of support differs based on the type:

- Immigrant congregations receive the most support: typically about 60 percent of their budget, with additional financial support from a sponsoring church.
- Traditional churches receive some denominational support, though most (44 percent of their total budget) comes from their core members.
- Alternative churches receive the least support from their respective denominations, with only about one-third receiving financial assistance.

*Group of laypersons.* A committed group of laypersons begins another one-third of new church starts. This approach is favored by the Christian Church and is the most frequent model for starting traditional churches.

*Pastor.* One in five new churches is begun by a pastor who felt called to start a new church. The pastor model is most associated with alternative congregations.

*Sponsoring congregation.* This approach is most commonly associated with new immigrant churches.

### Assessing the New Models

Most factors that predicted growth for new congregations in the past no longer do so. A few aspects are weakly associated with successful church plants or relate only to more traditional congregations. What do successful new ministries have in common?

*Greater potential for growth over time.* New ministries are small and slow growing. Weekly attendance at services averages about fifty-five people. Generally, eight to ten years pass before the congregation establishes a healthy financial and lay leadership base. As time goes by, the range of congregational sizes in new ministries increases because some new plants grow and others remain stable. Yet new ministries exhibit stronger overall growth patterns than all existing congregations (about 67 percent of new plants show growth compared to growth in 40 percent of existing churches).

*Greater success attracting young adults.* New congregations draw twice the percentage of young adults—ages eighteen to thirty-four—as do established churches. The study found that nearly a quarter of the new ministries have no members over age sixty-five.

*Greater racial and ethnic diversity.* Nine out of ten existing congregations in the study attract primarily white

worshippers. In new ministries, only half of the congregations could be characterized as predominately white. The remaining half draws worshippers from many different groups and substantial numbers of new immigrants from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia.

### What Doesn't Matter

Many features considered essential in the past are no longer related to a congregation's impact as a new worshiping community. None of the following aspects showed up as significant predictors for long-term viability: more resources and money initially, better facilities, more advertising, more programs, more follow-up of guests, a location in a growing community, a full-time pastor, or a more experienced pastor. However, a workable plan for starting a new ministry does include: knowledge of the core values and key behaviors of the community, a specific plan for engaging people and making disciples, a strategy for financial sustainability, and some benchmarks for assessing the ministry's impact.<sup>3</sup>

### Are We Church Planters Too?

The Gospel has always been contextual—reaching individuals, then their families and friends, and then their local communities. Developing new ministries requires localized, specialized, and customized strategies. The concept of narrowcasting builds on a specific calling to be a witness in a particular context.<sup>4</sup>

Before you or your congregation begin thinking about whether a new church start is for you, consider the following questions. Is it part of our congregation's vision to start new churches or worshiping communities? Are we local, regional, national, or international partners in efforts to develop new congregations? What kinds of people or groups are unlikely to be reached by our church but could be connected to a new church ministry?

---

1. All material drawn from the research of Dr. Marjorie H. Royle, "New Congregational Development in an Age of Narrow-Casting," Center for Progressive Renewal, 2014 ( [http://progressiverenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/New-Congregations-Narrow-casting\\_Final.pdf](http://progressiverenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/New-Congregations-Narrow-casting_Final.pdf) ). The six study denominations: Christian Church (DOC), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Canada, and the United Church of Christ.

2. See Cynthia Woolever, "What Can We Learn from the Emerging Church Movement?" *The Parish Paper* (April, 2010).

3. "Starting New Worshiping Communities: A Process of Discernment," Guide produced by the Presbyterian Mission Agency, 1001 Worshiping Communities, 65.

4. *Ibid.*, 23.

## CAN CONGREGATIONS REACH YOUNG ADULTS?

A recent national study of more than eleven thousand congregations identified worshipping communities that are successfully engaging young adults.<sup>1</sup> When 20 percent or more of a congregation's active participants are between eighteen and thirty-four years old, the researchers designated the church as having significant young adult participation. They found that only 16 percent of all U.S. congregations met this threshold criterion. Thus, the study concludes that high young adult participation rates are *not* typical for American congregations.

Most young adults are not hostile to organized religion, but the majority of them are unaffiliated and many describe church as irrelevant to their lives. Still, a broad range of faith groups found ways to minister to this important demographic.

### Understanding Proximity and Demographics

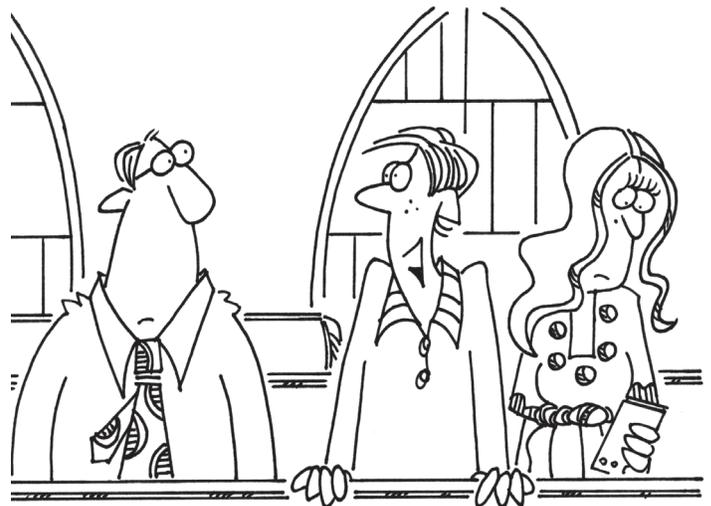
Why aren't congregations reaching more young adults? Unfortunately, some reasons fall outside the local church's control.

*Reason #1: Proximity to young adult populations.* The congregations with the highest rates of young adult participation are located in areas with higher concentrations of young adults. For example, congregations in newer suburbs, urban areas, and older suburbs drew more young adults than the national average for all congregations. Yet congregations in rural areas and small towns had lower than average percentages of young adult participants (only 12 percent reached the criterion threshold). The region of the country also plays a part, with the highest percentages of young adult-populated congregations in the West and the lowest percentages in the Northeast.

*Reason # 2: Age of the congregation.* Newer congregations—those organized in the past ten years—were three times more likely to reach the threshold of significant numbers of young adults. This association suggests that planting new congregations designed to draw young adults is a one strategy for reaching this population.

*Reason # 3: Racial and ethnic diversity.* Congregations where most members are from one or more ethnic minority groups attract more young adult participation (22.5 percent have a significant young adult presence). However, congregations comprised of all white members have lower young adult participation rates than the national average (less than 13 percent of these congregations meet the threshold criterion of one in five young adult participants).

*Reason # 4: Delayed marriage and childbearing among young adults.* Demographic shifts in the age of first-marriage (the average age is increasing) and the number of children (to fewer or none) are powerful factors for predicting church attendance. If church programming aims at meeting the needs of married adults with children, growing numbers of people do not share those interests. Innovative congregations can offer social and institutional support for single and childless younger adults.<sup>2</sup>



FLETCHER

"WE'RE EAGER TO PRACTICE OUR FAITH...  
PREFERABLY IN A HYMN-FREE, NON-CHURCH VENUE  
WITH GREAT COFFEE!"

## Understanding Young Adult Preferences

Regardless of age, people prefer to join and participate in a healthy and thriving congregation. Nevertheless, some practices appear to be especially central for attracting young adults. In her summary of literature and research, Dr. LiErin Probasco summarizes four practices that speak to young adults.<sup>3</sup>

*A compelling core identity.* Congregations with higher young adult participation clearly articulate their central mission, grounding it in a particular faith tradition. The congregation's vision speaks to who they are collectively, to personal identity, and is responsive to the local community context. Because young adults are experiencing an unstable stage of the lifecycle, congregations can assist in personal identity and faith formation.

*A mission of inclusion.* The sense of inclusion surfaces in at least three ways. First, young adults find the congregation to be accessible because it meets them where they are in terms of their religious knowledge and commitment. The congregation accepts their diverse religious experiences and backgrounds and offers multiple points of entry into church life. Practically, this means that the congregation offers various worship times and formats, study groups, social gatherings, and volunteer opportunities.

Second, research shows that young adults find congregations that include people with diverse religious and social backgrounds most engaging. These young adult church magnets exemplify some form of diversity that sends the message—we are a place that welcomes everybody.

Third, congregations successfully engage young adults by inviting and mentoring them into leadership positions. These roles should be visible and critical to the congregation's mission. All young adults need to feel that they have the opportunity to be part of the decision-making process about the future.

*A goal to inspire.* High quality worship experiences especially appeal to young adults. Liturgy and sermons that inspire, offer hope and insights about coping with everyday life, and motivate people to grow in their faith attract younger adults. The congregation can be a community of support and challenge for those trying to grasp who they are and what kind of adults they hope to be. Many congregations in the study offered worship that engaged both the “brain and body,” often emphasizing the arts and music.

*A drive to innovate.* While drawing on the continuity of historical ways of practicing faith, young adult-populated

congregations found that they could still change customs by not doing things the ways they have always been done. In the non-core aspects of church life, congregations creatively linked the social with the spiritual. Small groups meet in coffee shops and other non-church venues. In some churches, informality happens at a completely new level when “events” are not named. Finally, innovation and flexibility is displayed in extra-congregational ventures, such as college campus ministry or volunteer opportunities in faith-based agencies; for example, see the coffee-house operated by the National Community Church in Washington, D.C. (<http://ebenezerscoffeehouse.com/>).

## Answering Tough Questions

Congregations with a vision to do more effective ministry with young adults face a difficult self-evaluation. Reflecting on these questions could lead to positive next steps.

- How many colleges and universities are located within fifteen miles of our congregation? What is the total student population? Do we have any relationships with these institutions, faculty and staff, or students?
- Do we offer hospitality specifically created for young adults (including single, married, and with or without children) in our church facilities or off-site?
- Do young adults perceive our church as authentic and non-judgmental?
- What groups of young adults are marginalized in our community and/or lack the support of family networks? How are congregations failing these and other young adults?
- Does our social media use help us build relationships with young adults?<sup>4</sup>
- How will young adults hear about our congregation and what it has to offer?

---

1. Monte Sahlin and David Roozen, eds., *How Religious Congregations are Engaging Young Adults in America* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, 2015).

2. Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

3. LiErin Probasco, “A Review of Previous Research,” in Sahlin and Roozen, 25-51.

4. See Ed Stetzer, “Why Your Church Should Be On Social Media Right Now,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/february/why-your-church-should-be-on-social-media.html>.

## HOW TO ENHANCE THE MINISTRY OF ASSOCIATE PASTORS

As one of the best and brightest seminary students, Chris delighted in his first pastoral appointment—the associate pastor of First United Church. Chris reveled in all his ministry responsibilities, such as developing a thriving lay ministry program, helping to set up a much-needed homeless shelter, and growing a strong youth ministry. In addition to regular worship leadership, he looked forward to the opportunity to preach once a month and officiate at weddings and funerals. Chris felt that this ministry setting was the perfect place to initiate new ideas and broaden the range of his ministry gifts.

### What Does an Associate Pastor Do?

Many associates carry out the same ministry duties and responsibilities as the senior pastor or head of staff. In addition, they may hold a leadership role in two or three specific ministry areas. Other associate pastors serve as specialists and take on primary responsibility for a single program, such as music or education. Some large congregations call an associate to serve as the Administrative Pastor, who manages the day-to-day operations, supervises other staff members, and coordinates multiple programs.<sup>1</sup>

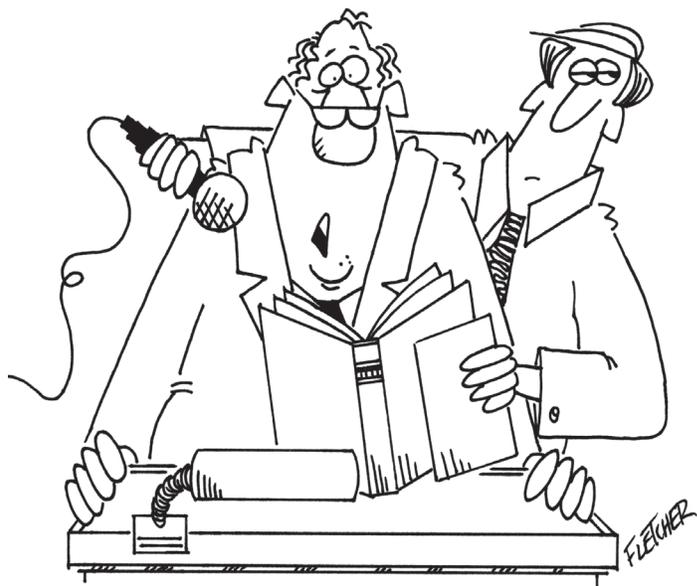
Church size determines, in large part, the associate pastor's work profile. Congregations with fewer than 100 in worship are unlikely to have a part- or full-time paid associate pastor. Thus, two out of three U.S. congregations (including Catholic parishes) do not employ an associate pastor.<sup>2</sup> As churches reach the 150 regular worshiper threshold, their leaders begin to consider calling a full-time associate pastor. Some churches call a part-time associate long before they reach this size in order to help the congregation grow its ministries. A program church—one that averages between 150 and 300 in worship services—typically employs one or more associates to lead the larger number of activities associated with their increased size. Because there are more worshipers at larger churches, about half of all churchgoers attend a church served by one or more associate pastors.

### What Are Our Expectations?

How do associate pastors differ from senior or solo pastors? Do they see their ministry role as a lifetime vocation or a required step toward advancement? Our expectations contribute to the effectiveness of associate ministry.

*Do we expect short tenures?* Too often, churches assume an associate will remain on staff for a short time—between eighteen months to three years. As a result, members do not invest in the associate's work or support his or her leadership. Yet associate staff turnover is only slightly higher than that of senior and solo pastors.

*Do we expect less experience or training?* The stereotypical associate profile is a recent seminary graduate, young, and assuming a first pastoral call. Yet the average age of associate pastors is forty-six, which is eleven years younger than the average for senior or solo pastors nationally.<sup>3</sup> Further, two out of three associate pastors worked in one or more occupations before entering ministry. At least half served in a previous pastoral position prior to their current call as an associate



...NOT HOW THE NEW ASSOCIATE PASTOR PICTURED,  
"SHARING THE PREACHING RESPONSIBILITIES."

pastor. Mainline Protestant associate pastors are more likely to be ordained with a seminary degree (79%) than conservative Protestant associate pastors (62% ordained; 48% with Bible College or seminary degree).

*De we see it as an internship position?* In many denominational traditions, recent theological school graduates find their first placement as an associate pastor. The idea is that the senior pastor assists in the continuing development of the new pastor's professional identity and skills. However, the majority of first-call pastors serve as a solo pastor rather than as an associate. Many pastors feel called as associates for their entire ministry and others find associate ministry as a calling after decades in solo pastorates.

*Do we expect specialized gifts?* Every congregation's ministries require a leader with a diverse skill set. But the essential traits for effective ministry—whether the leader is a senior, solo, or associate—always include hopefulness about the future, a sense of humor, the ability to laugh at oneself, humility, openness to new ideas, and deep respect for the ministry of others.

### **Can Associate Ministry Have Negative Side Effects?**

A ministry team works when it consists of emotionally healthy people. The quality of effective associate ministry is strongly related to the quality of the senior pastor-associate relationship. If this relationship is problematic, the toxicity eventually affects the whole church. Healthy relationship patterns involve seeing differences among staff as opportunities to learn rather than threats to authority. All pastors should strive to unify people and groups rather than divide them.

*Caution: age and gender dynamics.* Because associate pastors are disproportionately women while senior pastors remain disproportionately men, in many instances the senior pastor is an older man and the associate pastor a younger woman. Emotionally mature and older senior pastors of both genders refrain from authority struggles. And mature associates fully support the senior ministers' leadership. In the best teams, both pastors invest equally in making the relationship work.

*Caution: language dynamics.* Titles matter. The language used to describe each pastoral position speaks volumes about job status. For example, introducing the associate by first name only and the senior pastor as "Reverend Smith" doesn't accurately represent the associate position's value. Wise congregational leaders consider how positions are listed on the church website and in all publications. In a multi-pastor church setting, pastors should be introduced in a parallel fashion that reflects

they are ministry colleagues, such as "the associate or senior pastor," or as "one of the pastors of our church."

### **How Necessary Is Congregational Support?**

The congregation lays the foundation for successful associate ministry before any ministerial candidate arrives by constructing a clear job description. A clear contract outlines all responsibilities (such as preaching, worship leadership, and specific programs or initiatives), compensation, benefits, vacations, and regular meetings with the staff-personnel committee.<sup>4</sup> This groundwork protects both parties from future conflict and disappointment. To support the ongoing growth of an associate pastor, churches can provide book allowances, education reimbursement, conference budgets, and study/travel time. Part-time and unpaid associates benefit from these same considerations.

### **Do Associate Pastors Find Satisfaction in Ministry?**

Rachel began her associate pastor work after serving ten years as a solo pastor. She loved being part of a creative ministry team. For many years, she frequented small venues that featured live music but discovered that even some of the best musicians had difficulty finding places to perform. With the multiple responsibilities of a solo pastor, she wasn't able to think about how her love of music might create opportunities for others. As an associate, she proposed that the congregation start a coffeehouse in the church to host weekly acoustical performances. The church venue quickly gained a regional reputation as a great place to hear exceptional talent. Rachel found satisfaction in combining her passion for music with the congregation's expanding outreach ministry.

Pastoral leaders report high levels of job satisfaction. And associate pastors report even higher levels of satisfaction in ministry than senior or solo pastors.<sup>5</sup> In what ways does our congregation affirm the associate pastor's ministry? What additional steps could we take to support our pastoral leaders?

---

1. A comprehensive overview of this important ministry is found in Alan Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012). Kindle edition.

2. C. Woolever, et al., "Associate Pastors," U.S. Congregational Life Survey ([www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)), 2012.

3. Ibid.

4. See the appendix in Rudnick's book, which contains example job descriptions and where he makes a strong case for associates to preach at least once a month.

5. Woolever, 2012.

## CONGREGATIONAL STRENGTH IS ALWAYS PLURAL

What are the common denominators among churches that do effective ministry? Do they all have a thriving youth group? Or a large membership? Or great facilities? No! Strong, healthy, and effective congregations of all types thrive in many different kinds of circumstances. In all congregations, something already works well. The getting-stronger congregations focus on those strengths.

### A Language of Strengths

The words that people use to describe healthy or thriving congregations number in the hundreds. Often their language about effective ministry reflects who they are and their theological orientation. Through research with thousands of congregations, we discovered ten areas of strength in American congregations.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, leaders and worshipers possess acute awareness of where they believe they are failing and often little recognition of where they are succeeding. Of course, not a single congregation showed strength in all ten areas. Rather, the typical congregation possesses three to five strengths. Further, the specific cluster of strengths makes a unique multiple-strength fingerprint.

### What Are the Qualities of a Strong Congregation?

More than half a million worshipers in over 5,000 congregations (randomly selected from throughout the United States) completed a survey during worship services. From their descriptions of how they experience their congregation, we identified ten areas of strength. The data revealed a strong church is one that

- fosters spiritual growth. Worshipers say that they are growing in their faith because of their participation in the church. They feel that their spiritual needs are being met in the congregation.
- provides meaningful worship. Worshipers describe how they often experience God's presence in worship services and they think that worship helps them with everyday life.

- promotes participation in congregational activities. Beyond worship services, many worshipers are involved in leadership, decision making, service, small groups, mission projects, and outreach.
- develops a sense of belonging. Worshipers sense that they are part of a community and enjoy many close friends in the congregation.
- cares for children and youth. Attractive offerings for young people bring satisfaction and support to families. Ministry for children or youth is a valued aspect of the congregation.
- focuses on the community. Many worshipers are involved in social service or advocacy work either through the congregation or with community groups.
- helps worshipers share their faith. Worshipers take part in evangelism activities, share their faith, and invite friends or family to worship.
- welcomes and assimilates new worshipers and participants.



"STATISTICALLY, WE'RE SUPPOSED TO HAVE  
3 TO 5 STRENGTHS...  
NAMING THEM IS OBVIOUSLY NOT ONE OF THEM."

- benefits from empowering leadership. Leaders inspire others to action and take into account worshipers' ideas.
- looks to the future. Many worshipers are committed to the congregation's goals and vision. They believe that the church is always ready to try new things.<sup>2</sup>

A strong congregation also values the best of the past and builds on that to create a vision for the future.

### Playing to Strengths

Congregational leaders often ask what is working well for another congregation. Such inquiries reflect limited awareness of and unproductive coping with their own congregation's uniqueness. Facing the reality of your church's one-of-a-kind mission requires courage. The perception of risk is accurate. The nature of congregations is to avoid failure, yet pursuing distinctive strategies move a church toward greater strength.

Religious leaders like the tempting idea that one key factor will insure church vitality. The notion that a single essential resource will give a congregation the decisive advantage is false. Examples of touted trump cards include congregational size, worship style, worship music, leadership style, or mission orientation. But there is no evidence that such a single winning factor exists.

Another variant of the peddled one-trick solution is the idea of naming the congregation's weakest area and then making efforts to improve it. Unfortunately, this version is based on the myth that weaknesses can be fixed and unintentionally disempowers a congregation by causing their leadership to focus on some aspect of its system that may never become one of its strengths.

Research demonstrates that all congregations have multiple strengths and require these building blocks to be effective. For example, a congregation that excels in serving the community but lacks any other strength is little more than a social service agency. Just as a congregation that excels in providing a sense of belonging where people care deeply for one another but lacks other strengths is little more than a social club. Congregational leaders must focus on multiple strengths to do all that is expected of people of faith.

If congregational leaders can move beyond their current mental maps, they can see the opportunities for their church by building on its strengths. Church strengths are always multiple, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. Thus, the strength-building process entails:

- Identifying and appreciating our congregation's present strengths
- Dreaming of how we can build on these strengths
- Examining and prioritizing action possibilities for building on our strengths
- Pursuing selected options to create a stronger future

### Are Congregations Really That Different?

The range and richness of congregational life is impressive. Yet there are some broad patterns that suggest congregations are more alike in some ways than in others. Three strengths pop up as the most common expressions of effective church life:

- Providing meaningful worship: current attendees tend to be satisfied with their worship experience
- Promoting participation in the congregation: the range between the highest and lowest percentage of worshipers engaged in activities across all congregations is fairly small
- Fostering spiritual growth: worshipers describe their growth in faith in highly similar ways

If congregations tend to be more alike in these three ways, they are most different when it comes to the percentage of new people (those who started attending in the past five years) in their midst. Obviously, the long-term effects of failing to attract and assimilate new people have huge consequences. However, churches draw newcomers only when they show signs of vitality in multiple areas.

### Avoiding Myth Traps

Myths lure us to beliefs we want to be true. Believing myths is its own reward because it allows us to avoid change. By using the same old methods, we get the same old results. Myths immobilize and trap us into dead ends, blocking us from fully living out our church's ultimate mission: What is God calling us to be and do?

Strong congregations exhibit imagination, intelligence, heart-felt enthusiasm, and courage. Their members ask, What gives us joy? What are we really about? What are we going to courageously seek?

---

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2004).

2. Congregations can discover their strengths with the U.S. Congregational Life Survey and resources ([www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)).

## COULD LACK OF CURIOSITY KILL THE CHURCH?

The proverbial expression that curiosity killed the cat highlights the danger of probing the unknown. However, the original phrase means something entirely different—that care or worry could wear out nine cat's lives.<sup>1</sup> Even early Christians gave caution about excessive inquiry, believing that curiosity was corrosive to the soul. Saint Augustine wrote, "God fashioned hell for the inquisitive." But can too little curiosity hurt the church?

### What Is Curiosity?

Lack of information motivates some people to ask questions in order to fill in their knowledge gaps. Curious people have a passion for knowing more, expanding learning, and solving problems. They are the ones who ask the most penetrating questions. Curious individuals possess a powerful drive to make sense of the world.

We think of children as curious about anything new. According to Ian Leslie, author of *Curious*, the attraction to anything novel is different from the kind of disciplined curiosity seen in creative adults.<sup>2</sup> Leslie calls this deeper, more effortful and mature type epistemic curiosity. These curious adults possess a strong desire for knowledge and understanding, which motivates them to learn new ideas. They relish problem solving. He also describes another linked form, empathic curiosity, where individuals exhibit great interest in the thoughts and feelings of other people.

Psychologists discovered that curiosity levels vary across individuals. A curiosity measure, the need for cognition (NFC), reveals that many people reach a comfortable level of knowledge and feel no push to learn more. Leslie believes that our access to easy answers led us to forget how to ask questions—what he terms the Wikipedia problem.

Is there an equivalent NFC measure for congregations and their leaders? And, if so, how would your congregation measure up? Ultimately, are churches that reject curiosity also rejecting viability?

### What Are the Traits of a Curious Congregation?

*A curious congregation is never satisfied with the status quo.* While some churches get stuck in their misconceptions, curious churches focus on what is unfolding before them. They are the first to recognize that God is at work and see their holy ministry partnership in the church and community. Unfortunately, success often makes church leaders less curious because if it's not broken, why fix it?

*Curious leaders are less concerned about rules and appearances than with what works.* Although these leaders take the long view, they do not find the present boring. Rather, the details of current ministry efforts generate more opportunities to expand learning and experimentation.

*Truly curious churches experience frustration at their information gaps and that fuels their desire to learn more.* Leslie writes that we have an unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance. Some congregations practice strategic ignorance because lack of knowledge requires no action. The first step toward cultivating curiosity is to become



PASTOR TED REALIZED HE HAD A CURIOUS CONGREGATION WHEN THE QUESTIONS BEGAN DURING THE ORGAN PRELUDE.

aware of how much is still unknown. And real curiosity requires considerable effort and time. Unfortunately, congregations are prone to social loafing—what Leslie defines as the widespread tendency of individuals to decrease their own effort when working collaboratively.

*Curious congregations demonstrate empathic curiosity.* They respect feelings and place a high value on being a caring community. Therefore, empathically curious churches project positive impressions to the community. They are opposite from those churches known as “fighting and firing churches.”<sup>3</sup> Non-empathic churches treat the pastor and staff poorly, ignore fair processes, and seem unwilling to stop a few members from accumulating inappropriate power. Too many of their members see the church in a possessive light—as a place to get *their* needs fulfilled.

*Curious congregations develop skills in turning puzzles into mysteries.* The internet creates an illusion that every question has a definitive answer. However, Leslie makes a distinction between puzzles and mysteries. Puzzles get clear answers and begin with questions like How many? and Where? Mysteries ask the more complex questions, which cannot be answered definitely. The curious church realizes that there are many things we cannot know. They work within these parameters to make continuous, and constantly changing, improvements instead of singular improvements for the short term.

*Finally, curious congregations are willing to make choices.* Fear and anxiety kill curiosity and keep churches locked in place. Curiosity can be more powerful than courage in the face of obstacles. Organizations that are fascinated by what they don't yet know are the least likely to be caught off guard by change.

### Ask the Big Why

Beginning in the 1930s, social scientists moved away from asking *why* people behaved in particular ways and instead studied what they could observe people doing. These behaviorists took pride in the accumulation of objective observations without the subjective taint of invisible motivations. A more recent phenomenon is the perceived power that Big Data made possible by the processing of massive amounts of information. Proponents of data believe that numbers can speak for themselves.

One example of Big Data usage, the Failed State Index, was designed to measure and predict the states around the world close to collapse. Despite drawing from 130,000 data sources, the index did not predict the Arab Spring in 2012. Only experts with in-depth

knowledge of the region's history, culture, and needs could provide insight into *why* the events unfolded.

A curious congregation is always composed of people with deep faith, relationships, traditions, and history. Their willingness to dig deeper and ask *why* questions yield the most profound insights. Most questions tend to be the type where answers fit neatly. However, if the right question isn't asked, an insightful answer has nowhere to go.

### Some Curious Questions

Even while many may still believe the current implication of the phrase curiosity killed the cat, the retort, and satisfaction brought him back, has also gained popularity. This reply takes back the original meaning and highlights the importance of asking curious questions. Below are just a few examples of questions that curious congregations can ask. How will your congregation respond?

- What congregational activities and programs are going well? Why is that the case? What activities and programs do we wish were more effective? Why are they less effective?
- Thinking about your current and previous pastors, what leadership approach seemed to fit your church best? Why do you think that approach was most effective at that time?
- What are the congregation's core values that help explain members' motivations and behaviors? What process is the church using to examine and transform desired values into core values?
- Is our congregation a neighborhood church where most worshipers live nearby or is it a non-geographical congregation, drawing worshipers from a wider area? Why do we believe we are called to serve in this location?
- If our church leaders could travel back in time to twenty years ago, what message would they deliver to those in our congregation? Would those earlier leaders listen and act on that message? Why not?
- Will the passage of time expand or contract our church's attractive options? Why?

---

1. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/curiosity-killed-the-cat.html>.

2. Material drawn from Ian Leslie, *Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends On It* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), whose work describes curious individuals.

3. Thom S. Rainer, “Nine Traits of Mean Churches,” <http://thomrainer.com/2015/03/23/nine-traits-mean-churches/>.

## SEEKING A BIVOCATIONAL CALLING FOR PASTORS AND CHURCHES

Jim tells his neighbor about their church's bivocational pastor: "He preaches at our church at 9:00 on Sunday mornings, works in the church office two days a week, and does some visiting with sick members. On Sundays, he also drives eight miles up the road to another church and preaches there at 11:00. He sets up in their church office two days a week too. Then, he is the hospital chaplain one or two days a week." Jim's neighbor is speechless. He wonders when the pastor finds time for anything else.

Many churches need different kinds of leaders and models of ministry to remain workable and effective. The example of the Apostle Paul, who made tents to fund his ministry, inspired multitudes. Now the current demand for bivocational pastors (modern tentmakers) far exceeds the supply.

### What Is a Bivocational Pastor?

The majority of pastors serve one congregation. The church fully funds the pastor's salary and other compensation benefits, such as health insurance, housing, and retirement. A growing percentage of pastors serve multiple parishes, meaning that several churches fully fund the pastor's salary. However, these multipoint ministry assignments are not the usual arrangement for Protestant pastors—only about 12 percent of mainline and 6 percent of conservative Protestant leaders serve more than one church.<sup>1</sup>

Bivocational ministry is different from serving multiple parishes. The pastor holds a dual role—he or she serves in a local church ministry position (or in multiple churches) *and* meets other significant non-church work obligations. Most often, these pastors receive salary and support from other employment—such as chaplaincy, teacher or professor at a religious school, or serving in a community services non-profit organization. More than half of bivocational ministers fit this description. However, many pastors would describe the "other" part of their vocation in unique ways—like farming, a legal professional, IT specialist, or sports coach. Most bivo-

ational pastors reject the label of "part-time pastor" because they see their pastoral calling as full-time.

Bivocational ministry is more common among conservative Protestant pastors—about one in four work as tentmakers. Only about 6 percent of mainline Protestant pastors are bivocational and rarely are Catholic priests bivocational (1 percent). On average, bivocational ministers spend 20 hours per week in their non-church role. Pastors of small congregations devote closer to 30 hours per week to other employment, compared to about 9 hours a week for large-church bivocational pastors.

**The benefits for the pastor.** Many bivocational pastors find opportunities for ministry that they would not be able to pursue otherwise. These pastors find places to serve where they feel a special calling (new church development, a small or urban church, a diverse multicultural community) but where fully funded ministry is not available. Their non-church employment puts these pastors squarely out in the community—outside of any holy huddle<sup>2</sup>—where cross-pollination is more likely



"WE'RE HOPING TO HIRE A BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR WHO IS ALSO A PLUMBER, ELECTRICIAN, OR PASTRY CHEF."

to happen. Tentmakers are often geographically bound because of their non-church employment, boosting the likelihood of commitment to the local community.

**The downside for the pastor.** The myth that bivocational ministry is a second-rate ministry persists. This myth may prevent some of the most creative and entrepreneurial leaders from seeking out what seems like a riskier path. Research confirms high levels of ministry satisfaction among tentmakers, but they are too often undercompensated and provided few or no job benefits, which keeps them and their families on the financial edge. Other issues include long commutes, exhaustion, few or no days off, and limited chances for continuing education.

### How Do Congregations Respond?

Only when the congregation embraces their bivocational pastor's dual roles and sees that dual calling as fundamental to their own ministry vision are they bivocational too. One definition, from "The Bivocational Congregation," states that when local churches welcome bivocational ministry they operate on two callings: "the calling of function and the calling of mission." The authors go on to describe how churches live out this calling in five distinct ways.<sup>3</sup>

**We've always been a bivocational church.** This type often occurs in small towns or rural areas where the congregation has never had a full-time pastor. Because members carry out most roles and part-time pastors come and go, they have limited pastoral expectations.

**We seek to be a missional, bivocational church.** This second type exhibits a greater degree of intentionality to serve their local community. They want a pastor to be an equal companion in their understanding of what it means to be the church. Their church health and viability depend on their ministry outreach.

**We are a transitional bivocational church.** In this model, typically one church invites another congregation to share its building (sometimes called a nested congregation). The long-term outcome of the arrangement is unplanned and uncertain. In the meantime, both congregations benefit from the dual mission of support for one another.

**We are an experimental bivocational church.** Two or more worshiping communities form a cluster to carry out their respective ministries. Together they call a full-time pastor, but each church experiences the leadership arrangement as a part-time clergy role for their site. Over time, they may develop collaborative Christian Education, music, or social activities.

**"We want out" bivocational church.** In this situation, church leaders unhappily accept a part-time pastor, but their real yearning is for a full-time pastoral leader as soon as possible. Organizationally, the congregation functions as a church with a part-time pastor, but never as a bivocational congregation with a unique mission. In the end, they draw from endowments or other funds to call a full-time pastor. Rarely does exhausting all resources in the full-time clergy pursuit lead to long-term viability.

### What Does This Mean for the Congregation?

Whether a congregation has always been bivocational or is just beginning to experiment with it, there are pros and cons for all involved.

**The benefits for the congregation.** The most obvious one is a decreased financial burden for staff expenses. Healthy congregations direct these budget savings toward other priorities and find joy in supporting ministry outside the congregation's walls. For financially struggling churches, they see a part-time pastor as their only alternative to no pastor at all.

**The downside for the congregation.** Most members experience transitioning away from full-time clergy leadership to a part-time pastor as a loss, triggering a loss of identity and self-esteem. Instead of highlighting the congregation's gifts and strengths, members may only describe to potential candidates what they have lost and what is not working. Their lack of church self-esteem may keep them from attracting creative and talented pastors. Instead, they may settle for whoever is willing and available immediately.

### The Bottom Line

What makes a congregation thrive today and into the future? Bivocational churches and pastors face the same temptations as other congregations—the strong pull back to old systems and habits. Yet bivocational churches and pastors possess positive qualities that give them the flexibility to experiment, adapt, and respond quickly to new opportunities. They have all that they need to respond to what God is calling them to do.

---

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice: 2012), 16.

2. Thom Rainer, "Eight Reasons Why Some Full-time Pastors and Staff Should Go Bivocational," <http://thomrainer.com/2015/01/19/eight-reasons-fulltime-pastors-staff-go-bivocational/>.

3. A. Pappas, N. Faramelli, and E. Pease, "The Bivocational Congregation: Tomorrow's Church?" *Congregations* (Alban Institute: 2009), Winter, Vol. 35, no. 1.

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Editor: Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

April 2015 - Volume 23, Number 4

Copyright © 2015 by Marcia Clark Myers

### Finding God's New Call in the Same Place

Bill is fifty-five and has been at Fairdale Church for fifteen years. Ministry there has lost its shine. He resists routine pastoral visits and even preaching has become a chore. However, in the current job market, finding a new call that can provide the salary he needs to support kids in college is tough. He has been looking for a while without success, so feels stuck. Church participation is down and the board is worried.

Ann has been at Oakdale for four years now and is happy in ministry with the congregation. She is feeling comfortable in the role of pastor and has some successes to celebrate. Ann's husband has a job that he enjoys and their children are thriving in school. However, her seminary friends ask "What next?" She is ready for new challenges, but wonders what is best for the family and congregation.

First Presbyterian Church in Crossroads has experienced a revolving door of leadership for the past two decades. Pastors right out of seminary developed their ministry skills for a few years before moving on. Membership declined and lay leaders are discouraged.

#### Why Do We Feel Stuck?

Both pastors and congregations get stuck. Pastors who are burned out, geographically bound, or financially squeezed get stuck, as do congregations who are waiting for stable leadership or a pastor to leave. Pastors usually discern God's call to a new ministry without involving the congregation until the decision is made and a new call has been finalized. However, those decisions change the course of ministry for all involved. Research shows that clergy mobility affects congregational vitality.<sup>1</sup> When congregations focus on getting a pastor, developing a relationship with a pastor, or the loss of a pastor, less congregational energy is available for externally focused action such as evangelism and mission. Congregations without pastors, exhibiting "holding pattern" behavior, generally are less attractive to newcomers.

In the past, it was more common for a pastor to come to a community from seminary and remain for an entire ministry. Pastorates for twenty years or more were positively regarded. Now, pastors confide that they feel pressure to move on in order to be successful in their ministerial career. Accepted patterns of clergy mobility have established expectations of short first calls. In fact, the most effective years of a pastor's ministry come after five years in a congregation when relationships have been built and tested and a true shared ministry has been established.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Feeling Stuck Fallout

Both congregations and pastors often feel that the best solution to conflict is to part company. When that happens, neither learn from the relationship and do not develop skills to deal with differences without breaking relationship. Opportunities are missing for living forgiveness, reconciliation, resilience, and developing skills as Christian leaders. Rather than seizing opportunities for new ministries in response to God's call, congregations resist change, hoping that the pastor and his or her unsettling ideas will soon move on. Such congregations



"I KNOW YOU'RE EXPECTING A SHORT PASTORATE....  
BUT, MUST WE LEAVE THE CAR RUNNING?"

become self-focused and stagnant while the pastor begins to feel the stress of being stuck.

A stressed pastor decides that the best solution is to seek a new call and move on. That brings added pressure to pastor and family with the activities of the search, decisions, and physical move. Furthermore, our culture teaches us to measure our value by salary and the size of the church we lead. This goal is likely unobtainable considering the current membership patterns of churches. In fact, researcher Patricia Chang found that a seminarian preparing for ministry today has a 1 percent chance of ever serving as Head-of-Staff of a large congregation.<sup>3</sup> The long-established pattern of pastoral steeplechase is dead.

Internalized measures of success and worrying about a new call contribute to heightened stress, low self-esteem, and depression. Pastors feel stuck and do not do their best work—congregations and ministry languish. Often they look for the solution for “stuckness” in the mechanics of ministry—a new program, new leadership, or a new strategy. Yet the root issue is the loss of a sense of God's call: the energy, passion, and focus that they experienced sometime in the past.

### Finding a New Call

The Apostle Paul wrote to young Timothy, “Rekindle the gift of God that is within you” (2 Timothy 1:6). This is the secret to keeping vitality in ministry. Frederick Buechner tells us that to discover our call, we must look for the place “where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”<sup>4</sup>

Experienced pastors who have stayed with the same congregation for fifteen or more years are often able to describe a series of distinct calls in the same long-term ministry. Tom settled into the challenges of congregational life with worship leadership, pastoral visits, and church programming. Five years into ministry, he recognized that he got many requests from the community for pastoral counseling, which he enjoyed and was gifted at. The church board encouraged him to expand this outreach and supported him in continuing education to enhance his skills. Some years later, divisive social issues in his community drew Tom into a new leadership role. He understood this work as a new call in his long-term ministry. Rather than becoming stale, both he and the congregation gained new energy by discovering a series of new calls as he led them for thirty years before retiring.

As small congregations face dwindling resources, it is becoming common that they cannot continue to fully support their pastor. Recognizing that her congregation was nearing this situation, Mary used her continuing education and some time with a spiritual director to discern a new call. She agonized over the fact that she loves her congregation and her community and did not want to uproot her family. The suggestion that she was gifted in spiritual direction surprised her. Excited by the idea of a retreat ministry, Mary developed a business plan and talked with her church board. The board embraced the possibility of transitioning from full-time church employment to a bivocational ministry that would allow her to continue in the pastoral role and develop her blossoming new ministry.

By considering the activities that bring us joy and meet the needs of the world God loves, and building a ministry at that intersection, it is possible to discover a new call in the same place. Pastors and congregations are healthier when they are able to move from *stuck* to being *re-called* by rediscovering passion for ministry. By reshaping ministry in partnership with their congregation, it is possible for pastors to find the “sweet spot” of vital ministry and care for family. Consider these questions whenever you begin to get that stuck feeling in your current call.

- Think about times in your ministry work that bring you “deep gladness.” What were you doing and what gifts were you using?
- What deep needs of the world have come to your attention?
- How might you reshape your ministry to find deep gladness as you meet the needs of the world God loves?

**About the Writer:** The Rev. Dr. Marcia Clark Myers formerly directed the PC(USA)'s Office of Vocation and currently serves as a faculty member in the CREDO program, which focuses on pastoral renewal.

1. Cynthia Woolever, “When Less Is More; The Consequences of Clergy Turnover,” *The Parish Paper*, March 2014.

2. Roy M. Oswald, “The Pastor as Newcomer,” Alban Institute, 1998.

3. Patricia M. Y. Chang, *Factors Shaping Clergy Careers: A Wakeup Call for Protestant Denominations and Pastors*, Pulpit and Pew Research on Pastoral Leadership, 19.

4. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking; A Theological ABC* (New York: HarperOne, 1993).

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Editor: Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

March 2015 - Volume 23, Number 3

Copyright © 2015 by Martin Davis

### What Churches Can Do to Increase Social Media Security

As email gained popularity in the mid-1990s, company leaders feared their employees would spend too much time with it and tried to limit employees' email use. Then spam came along, making people even more nervous.

Today even the most anti-technology person knows that email is how information moves. Most also know that several commonsense safeguards go a long way to reduce risks—do not open emails or download attachments from people you don't know, nor should you trust that a Nigerian prince will give you \$100,000 for allowing him to use your bank account to transfer his fortune to the United States.

Social media and online payment technology is in that "big deal" stage. Those in faith communities remain wary. Because they still do not quite know what to make of it, they would just as soon abandon social media as try to use it. However, social media and online payment systems make staying in touch and supporting the organizations we believe in far easier. But what about all those hacking horror stories recounted in the news? Could your congregation really be at risk for hackers stealing bank account numbers? Personal information? Photos? Yes. Fortunately, a few commonsense strategies help to keep you and your congregation safe.

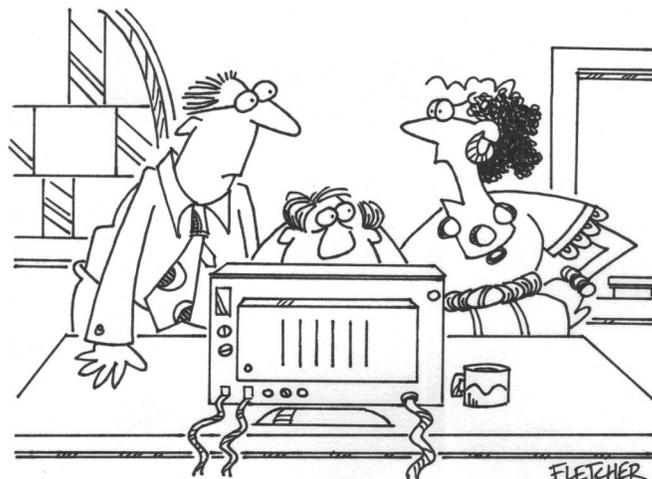
#### Social Media Security Basics

No matter how you manage your social media and online payment tools, following four basic rules substantially reduce the risk of someone breaking into church accounts and stealing your congregations' personal information.

- *Create safe passwords.* This is hardly new advice but many people still ignore it. If your church's security passwords use names, common number combinations, addresses, email addresses, or common words, you are making it easy for someone to get into your account. Use a site like [passwordsgenerator.net](http://passwordsgenerator.net) to create secure passwords that cannot be easily stolen. Write it down with pen on paper, and store it away. To make life even easier,

join a single sign-on site such as [lastpass.com](http://lastpass.com) to simplify login and vastly improve security.

- *Use the most up-to-date browser.* When you turn on your computer, a message often appears telling you a browser update is available. Because most browser updates involve closing security breaches that have been exposed, you avoid security risks by installing the update. Take five minutes and keep your browser updated. Your chances of being hacked go way, way down.
- *Do not open links from unknown sources.* Spend five minutes on social media and you are bound to see something like this—"Hi, I just saw your pictures here [link]." Do not be fooled. Hackers use these tricks to install viruses and spyware on your computer. If anything looks suspicious, trust your gut and do not click on the link or open the file. If the note comes from a friend but looks funny, contact them and ask if they recently sent you an email. Chances are, their security has been breached and their site is being used to send bogus information.
- *Limit and protect your access information.* No one wants to believe that someone would take advantage of a church, but it happens. Therefore, limit



"I THOUGHT IT WAS A SECURE PASSWORD...  
WHO WOULD HAVE CONNECTED, 'LONG\_SERMON\_LOVERS'  
WITH OUR CONGREGATION?!"

the number of people who have access to your church's social media passwords. If your church has a professional technology person on staff, entrust that sensitive information with this person. Otherwise, the pastor and one key leader should be the keepers of passwords and account information. Although there are always people in your congregation willing to volunteer with social media, granting them access to church passwords and security information is a bad idea. Treat your passwords as you would treat your bank account. Be smart.

### **Added Security for Facebook and Twitter**

Social media options are numerous and more are rolled out daily. Since Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used, below are additional security guidelines.

*Facebook.* Churches love Facebook because it allows them to share photos, invite people to events, promote the congregation with targeted paid ads, create pages for groups within the church, and offers controls for who does and does not see posts.

But Facebook is not without its security problems. To begin, Facebook's security settings are notoriously difficult to understand. Take heart—there is help. CNET, an online tech magazine written with non-tech people in mind, offers seven keys to securing your Facebook page that should be required reading. Rather than replicate their advice, read it here: <http://www.cnet.com/how-to/secure-your-facebook-account-in-six-easy-steps/>. The advice includes how-to directions and will get you and your congregation in a safe space.

Several non-technical concerns arise with Facebook, such as the use of photos. There are many reasons people do not wish to have photos of themselves or, more likely, their children to appear on Facebook. People may work at jobs that require confidentiality or they may need to keep their identity secret. Parents worry, rightly, that posting photos and information about children can lead to identity theft. And some people are simply not comfortable posting their photos everywhere. When attendees join your congregation or begin to regularly participate, explain to them the social media tools currently in congregational use. Seek and secure their permission to use their photos.

*Twitter.* Churches are increasingly finding Twitter a useful tool for everything from connecting with the pastor to promoting events quickly among their constituency to sharing interesting information and discovering new friends. As with any other social media tool, Twitter can be hacked. Fortunately, if you follow the basic guidelines above, the congregations' security risks are minimal.

An additional step, however, will not only make your Twitter account more secure, but will make Twitter easier to use. HootSuite and TweetDeck were originally designed to help people manage their Twitter accounts and find the information they are searching for more easily. Increasingly, however, these sites are being touted for the extra level of security they bring to Twitter accounts. Both are critically reviewed, well tested, and highly reputable. Register with one of these and worry less about safety.

### **Securing Online Payments**

Online payments are revolutionizing everything, including the way people give to their church. Multiple ways for handling online payments exist (see *The Parish Paper* issue for April 2014). In terms of security, there is obviously a lot at stake. Here are some simple tips:

- *Resist the temptation to create and manage an online payment system yourself.* Online payment systems are tricky, hard to navigate, and expensive. Instead, choose a solid third-party vendor to do this for your church. A number of organizations provide online payment options for churches. These can be a good bet, but review and watch for changes in the fees charged.
- *Consider PayPal.* This vendor is often criticized, but the truth is, PayPal is an incredibly secure way for people to send your congregation money.
- *Follow the basic security guidelines.* If your congregation's staff are handling online payments, following the basic advice given above is even more important. Those four simple rules will go a long way toward protecting church leaders and the congregation.

### **Final Thoughts**

With good reasons, many people remain jittery about social media and online payments. But fear without smart action only heightens security risks. Fear not. Basic, commonsense tactics remove the majority of your church's security concerns.

**About the Writer:** Martin Davis owns Sacred Language Communications, formerly directed Alban's online Congregational Resource Guide, and has twenty years of experience working with congregations ([www.sacredlanguagescommunications.com](http://www.sacredlanguagescommunications.com)).

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Editor: Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

February 2015 - Volume 23, Number 2

Copyright © 2015 by Cynthia Woolever

### How to Avoid the Potholes on the Road to Retirement

Gordon, a pastor in his late sixties, ignored all the warning signs. Despite his waning energy, he believed he was the exception to every retirement rule. The congregation's anxiety grew with each passing year and concerned leaders braced for the brewing crisis. Would the pastor have a medical emergency that suddenly suspended or ended his ministry? Would the church's financial and mission vitality outlast the pastor's "treading water" years? Would the congregation eventually confront Pastor Gordon and force him to exit?<sup>1</sup>

#### Big Potholes for Pastors to Avoid

If the pastor, along with the congregation, prepares for the next chapter, they likely will encounter only a few minor bumps. However, six issues repeatedly pose problems along the way.

# 1—*The hasty or unplanned exit.* One of the biggest errors is starting retirement planning too late. Pastor Mark took his first step toward retirement planning at age 50. He participated in a denominational workshop that assessed four aspects of his life linked to a healthy retirement: financial concerns, health issues, spiritual life, and call or vocation. Before addressing the latter three aspects, Pastor Mark reviewed his financial retirement package to identify an age when he could realistically retire without undue hardship. His wife took part in the planning—would she retire before, after, or about the same time? Which options would be financially possible for their family?

Once a timeline for the ideal retirement age is in place, a second assessment process begins about five years before retirement. At this point, pastors should be thinking about a number of things:

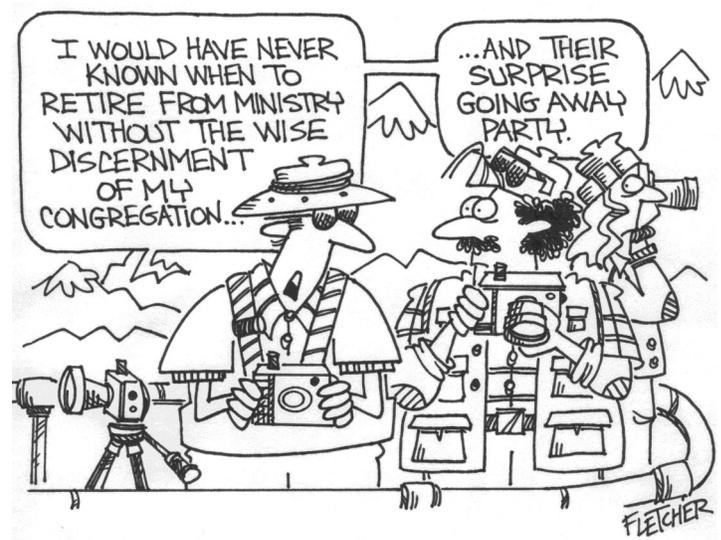
- What is the status of available retirement funds? Are we as a family still on track with our financial planning?
- Are there indications of future medical problems if some lifestyle issues are not addressed?
- What spiritual practices currently nurture my ministry that I want to carry over into retirement?

What kinds of non-church activities, interests, and friendships are being developed?

- What is my sense of call or vocational discernment now? Where do I feel my energies should be focused in the remaining years of my ministry? Where do my gifts and the church's greatest needs intersect?

Answering these questions and having an understanding of what life after work looks like is important to ease the anxiety that comes with retirement. Pastor Mark took his mentor's advice to think of retirement not as quitting but as "answering a new call, with a different income source."<sup>2</sup> He investigated volunteer opportunities for the causes he deeply cared about. Always avid travelers, he and his wife discussed the long list of places they still wanted to see. He also looked forward to spending more time with family and friends and supporting them in ways he was unable while he was in full-time ministry.

# 2—*The "I'm indispensable" syndrome.* One year before retirement a pastor should start thinking of a date when he or she will lead worship for the last time. Pastor Gordon kept postponing making this determination, even to himself, because of his concern for the church's future. He didn't think the



church could afford a full-time pastor after his retirement and worse—the church might close. But his inaction increased those probabilities.

**# 3—*A spouse on the sideline.*** Too often a spouse doesn't get to be a part of retirement planning (such as participating in workshops). If the pastor's moves dictated where the family lived, perhaps retirement is a chance for the spouse to set the agenda. Many denominations stipulate that the pastor and spouse join another church immediately upon retirement. This rule can be difficult for the spouse who loses long-term friendships and meaningful church leadership roles. Experience shows that a spouse that remains in the church suffers many awkward moments—hearing all the deserved and undeserved criticism of the new pastor—without being able to respond. In some cases, the family sells their home and relocates to a new community. If the spouse wants to keep working, that option complicates the timing of separation from the church and community.

**# 4—*The lame duck problem.*** Generally, lay leaders know the pastor's retirement is coming. In a healthy church, retirement conversations come up in the pastor's annual performance review. Every church situation is different and opinions about "best practices" vary. But the guideline for how far in advance to announce a retirement date is somewhere between three to six months. If the pastor announces earlier than six months, the church stalls because the pastor's ability to lead the flock is compromised.

**# 5—*Unclear communication and boundary issues with the congregation.*** The pastor sets the tone for this major transition and his or her attitude is what matters. The pastor should communicate hope and enthusiasm for the church's next chapter. An optimistic message of faith that the congregation will continue to live out their mission in significant ways should come from the pastor. The pastor's retirement gives everyone a time to express thanks for their ministry together and to seek forgiveness for any past conflicts.

One way to insure that everyone gets the retirement news at the same time is a pastoral letter to the congregation (see the NW Synod of Wisconsin Resource Center for an excellent example).<sup>3</sup> The pastor is responsible for making clear that the pastoral relationship will end and after the retirement date, he or she can no longer conduct funerals, weddings, and baptisms for former church members.

**# 6—*The grief tsunami.*** Despite doing all the right things, Pastor Don was not prepared for the tidal pain that washed over him. Before retirement, his answering machine blinked with multiple mes-

sages each day. But in retirement, the machine light read "zero" day after day. He confessed, "That's how I felt."

A pastor forms deep attachments in ministry and officiates at long-time members' funerals. Retirement then opens up a space for "carried grief"—unacknowledged and unmourned loss.<sup>4</sup> Another part of the emotional response stems from identity loss. Pastors hold the privilege of being an important part of people's lives. One pastor wrote, "My collar says our conversation could be very important. You can trust me to know that now could be the time for the moment of truth."<sup>5</sup> Those sacred moments and conversations cease to be central to the pastor's daily life.

### **How the Congregation Can Help**

The pastor and governing board meet to discuss concerns and issues related to the transition. In most cases, the governing board appoints a transition team (this is not the same group as the search committee) shortly after a retirement date is announced. The transition team takes charge of reviewing denominational policies, planning a celebration event and appropriate gifts for the retiring pastor (for example, cash in the form of a love offering helps defray moving expenses), assisting the pastor with housing, and updating members about the process. The church benefits if the governing board chair or key lay leader conducts an exit interview with the pastor.

Every family believes that they are the exception to the policy that prohibits the retired pastor from officiating at weddings and funerals. When the retiring pastor has baptized their daughter, led her confirmation class, and known the parents for decades, the family naturally wants that pastor to officiate at their daughter's wedding too. Nevertheless, an exception request is always awkward for the retired and current pastor. Simply don't ask.

1. Many thanks to the anonymous pastors and leaders who shared their insights and experiences.

2. Marcia Clark Myers, former director of the Office of Vocation, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

3. [http://synodresourcecenter.org/admin/personnel/retirement/0001/transition\\_and\\_retirement.html](http://synodresourcecenter.org/admin/personnel/retirement/0001/transition_and_retirement.html)

4. Alan Wolfelt, *Living in the Shadow of the Ghosts of Your Grief* (Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 2007), 7.

5. Samuel Wells, "Dressed for the Moment," *Christian Century*, November 26, 2014, 33.

# THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Editor: Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

January 2015 - Volume 23, Number 1

Copyright © 2015 by Cynthia Woolever

## Our Future Pastors: Assessing the State of the Pipeline

Significant trends suggest that attracting and preparing people for pastoral leadership is becoming more difficult. What obstacles stand in the way of supplying congregations with the kind of leadership required in the future?

### Their Preparation for Ministry

Those who wish to be congregational leaders typically obtain the Masters of Divinity (M.Div.) degree. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) lists a membership of 275 schools, with enrollment of around 30,000 M.Div. students. Currently, two out of three M.Div. graduates seek to serve in parish ministry.<sup>1</sup>

Seminary enrollments peaked in 2006, but have declined about one percent annually since. Student enrollments reflect the changing religious environment—declining attendance, weakening denominational support, and financial challenges. Those tracking seminary enrollments do not predict substantial growth of the student population over the next ten years.<sup>2</sup>

*Question:* Two trends stand out in theological education—a declining number of people attending seminary and a decreasing number of current ministry students planning to seek a pastoral position. Will there be an adequate supply of seminary-trained pastors to meet the demand in the future? It is not clear because two other trends stand out in the context of the local congregation. Currently, the average age of pastors is 55; therefore, the number of retirements will rise, creating vacancies. With the shrinking size of many congregations, fewer churches will be able to employ a full-time pastor after the retirement of their current one. How will these trends affect congregational needs for pastoral leadership?

### The Demographics of Current Students

The profile of those seeking theological education shifted in terms of average age, gender, race, ethnicity, and marital status over the past decade. The enrollment decline in recent years is almost entirely linked to a falloff in white student enrollments.<sup>3</sup>

Over the same period, the percentage of Hispanics enrolled increased by 50 percent; the African-American percentage grew by 13 percent.

Seminary enrollments show a decline for students in their twenties, thirties, and forties. However, enrollments for students fifty to sixty-five years of age grew modestly and stabilized. The cohort over sixty-five years of age continues to grow. Once overall enrollments began to fall, enrollments for women fell faster. The percentage of women currently enrolled in M.Div. programs has stabilized at about 30 percent. Further, the profile of women preparing for ministry confirms that they are more likely than men to be unmarried, older, or single parents.

*Question:* Today's seminary students are less likely to be mobile and able to relocate compared to students in the past. To overcome the barriers of location, seminaries opened extension centers or branch campuses, offered night and weekend classes, created "online" or "distance" education, and/or created hybrid courses using these new strategies. Will these new approaches meet the needs of underserved populations seeking to answer the call to pastoral ministry?

### Why Do They Go to Seminary

Most seminary students say that they are seeking a M.Div. degree because they are responding to a call



"I SEE YOU RECEIVED YOUR SEMINARY DEGREE THROUGH A DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM..."

from God. Other reasons are important as well—a desire to serve others, to find spiritual fulfillment, for personal growth, and for intellectual development.

Pastors and other leaders spend significant amounts of time mentoring and training people for ministry. A number of seminary students named the congregation in which they grew up as a significant influence in their sense of call to ministry. They spoke of the “tap on the shoulder” by the pastor or an admired member, who recognized their gifts for ministry.<sup>4</sup>

*Question:* Some congregations emphasize a theology of vocation, which expects that God calls everyone, every day, to ministry. Other churches that practice a culture of calling, a place where people hear God’s call, are relationally healthy and create many leadership-development opportunities for both young people and adults. Does our congregation identify and nurture future ministers?

### **Their Financial Lives**

Although the average cost of theological education is modest compared to other graduate degree programs, tuition rates prohibit many from enrolling. Students now pay an average of 88 to 139 percent more in tuition (in real, after inflation dollars) than enrolled students in 1991. Increasingly, students carry forward educational debt from their undergraduate degree, plus any amount of debt incurred during seminary. Almost two out of three students today incur some debt to complete their masters’ degree. Roughly one in four students graduate with more than \$40,000 of debt.<sup>5</sup>

Post-graduation debt profoundly affects the personal, family, and work lives of students. Faced with loan payments, most wish they had borrowed less. Half said that they face difficult financial circumstances. Debt-laden students report a reduction in their standard of living, postponing health care, or making the difficult choice to take a higher paying non-ministerial position (with the hope of making their loan payments).

*Question:* Churches of all sizes set aside annual funds, or establish endowments, for financial assistance to seminary students. Some churches also create scholarships for college students who plan to enter seminary. Many congregations develop supportive relationships with one or more of their denomination’s seminaries. What role does our church play in making seminary training more accessible and affordable?

### **Their Evaluation of Seminary and Preparation for Ministry**

Seminaries vary in the amount and quality of vocational guidance they provide students. Some graduates feel they received little counseling about career oppor-

tunities and experienced poor placement services. As a result, they were more uncertain about seeking ordination and less knowledgeable about, and thus less interested in, congregational ministry.

M.Div. graduates said they were most satisfied with the teaching and overall academic experience, support, and accessibility of faculty, helpfulness of administration and staff, and their friendships with other students. They believe that the seminary prepared them for ministry by developing their trust in God, self-knowledge, ability to think theologically, and ability to use and interpret Scripture. They reported lower levels of satisfaction with their ability to administer a parish.<sup>6</sup>

*Question:* Some congregations offer internships—paid or unpaid—to help people practice their ministry gifts. Other churches frequently invite seminary students to preach in their pulpit or actively seek out students looking for a “first call.” Does our congregation build the kind of relationships that form bridges for individuals making the transition from theological student to pastor?

### **The Bottom Line**

Every congregation serves the wider church by strengthening the traits that attract people to ministry in the first place. For example, leader-generating churches take seriously the task of making disciples. They also align their resources with their vision for vital ministry rather than operating in maintenance mode. By their involvement in local mission and outreach, future ministers in their midst cannot miss ministry’s relevancy to the world.

Some churches identify, support, and send out one or more future pastors each year. Others cannot claim that a single member has entered preparation for ministry during the past twenty years. Which kind of leader-sending congregation describes our church?

1. Data based on 2010 Graduating Student Survey from ATS. Sharon Miller, Director of Research, Center for the Study of Theological Education (CSTE), conversation, November 2014.

2. B. Wheeler, A. Ruger, and S. Miller, *Theological Student Enrollment*, CSTE, August 2013.

3. A. Ruger and C. Meinzer, *Through Toil & Tribulation: Financial Theological Education 2001-2011*, July 2014.

4. B. Wheeler, et al., *On Our Way: A Study of Students’ Paths to Seminary*, CSTE, February 2014, 30.

5. S. Miller, “Where’s the Pipeline: Female Students in Theological Education,” presentation at the Religious Research Association, November 2014.

6. S. Miller, “Where’s the Pipeline.”

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Editor: Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

December 2014 - Volume 22, Number 12

Copyright © 2014 by Cynthia Woolever

### How to Make the Most of a Consulting Process

Church leaders face challenging questions without simple answers. Questions like, should we relocate to a new community, construct a new building, or renovate at our existing site? Hire a new staff person or reconfigure the job descriptions of our current staff? What kind of pastoral leadership will we need when our current pastor retires? Church-wide decisions like these reflect high-risk choices, which tempt members to maintain the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

#### Why Hire a Consultant?

Change is the underlying objective behind every effective consulting process. Leaders hire a consultant when choosing among multiple options seems impossible and perhaps controversial. But they know that doing nothing is no longer an option. Consultants can help the church because they are outsiders—they can see things that church leaders cannot see. Because of their broad experience, consultants know things that church leaders do not know. And consultants have the freedom to say things that local leaders cannot say. Finally, when the church pays for information and assistance, they more often act on it.

Churches often lag behind size shifts, cultural change, and community dynamics. Therefore, in many church situations, the basic problem rests in the organizational structure and how it functions—not in the church members. A consultation can help leaders update organizational decision-making processes.<sup>2</sup>

Finding the right consultant for your church takes time. Contact judicatory leaders, national denominational offices, seminaries, and other churches that have used a consultant or trained facilitator in the past. Form a small group, including the pastor, to review the list of names. Gather information on three to five consultants to learn about their background and experience with congregations similar in size to your own. Be prepared to share a brief summary of the issues facing your church. Then, draw up a list of questions to ask each possible candidate. Set up conference calls or Skype/Face Time sessions with the top three candidates. Once the committee comes to a

consensus about the best candidate, contact several churches that have used this consultant to hear about their experiences. If their reports are positive, contact the desired consultant and begin the process.

#### Hallmarks of a Good Consultant

Unfortunately, many believe they are or could be great consultants but few measure up. A good consultant should exhibit these attitudes and behaviors:

- curious, accepting, and empathetic
- a good listener who asks novel questions rather than telling others what to do
- able to establish a trusting and respectful relationship with the pastor and other leaders
- objective and more committed to the process than a specific outcome or change
- patient yet motivated to keep working through barriers to resolve central issues
- comes without an agenda or a “one-size-fits-all” recommendation template that treats your church as a clone of the consultant’s past experiences

#### Hallmarks of an Effective Consulting Process

Although consultants vary in the details of their approach, all effective consulting rests on several



TED IS OUR CHURCH CONSULTANT...  
HERE TO PROVIDE FRESH INSIGHT, WISE ADVICE, AND  
A SCAPEGOAT SHOULD OUR DECISION BE UNPOPULAR.

key principles. A consulting process is more likely to lead to desired changes if

- the pastor and lay leaders participate in all aspects of the process, including the decision making about possible recommendations;
- the person or group who holds the veto power to block any major change are essential participants;
- the consultation is directed toward the church's agreed-upon objectives;
- the consultant makes presentations that further invite participation in the process;
- the consultant provides concrete methods for the church's next action steps; and
- the consultant's written report after the consultation is widely shared among members.

Consultation methodology is systematic so that all viewpoints and concerns surface. Typically, the consultant asks leaders to gather detailed information about

- the reasons for the consultation, including a written summary statement from the pastor that outlines what he or she wants to accomplish;
- the community setting, including population trends and religious group patterns;<sup>3</sup> and
- the opinions and values of the governing board, committees or teams, and members through questionnaires.<sup>4</sup>

Even after the church prepares this information, the on-site interaction between the consultant and leaders yields new insights. In addition to personal observations, the consultant interviews individual members, who are selected by the pastor. During the visit, the consultant holds small-group meetings with key committees or teams and staff. The consultant should make at least one church-wide presentation where observations and recommendations are shared and discussed.

In the end, an effective consultant affirms the pastor's leadership and plays the role of facilitator. During the consultant's visit, the consultant shifts any remaining functions to the pastor and leaders, which discourages long-term dependency. Success comes from the efforts of the pastor and members.

### **The Power of Questions**

Positive change arises from an open discernment process where committed individuals wrestle with how to do ministry together. Resistance to change comes from fear and lack of involvement in the process. Change always involves loss and grief because it asks people to give up part of themselves—their present experiences and the treasured past.

Powerful questions can persuade people to accept change and point to the rewards of new ministry methods. Answering the questions below helps churches understand who they are, where they have been, and what God is calling them to be in the future.

- If you made a list of the best things that have happened in this church during the past five years, what items would appear on the top of that list?
- If you made a list of some things that have happened during the past five years that were not so positive, what would appear on that list? Can you make a list of areas where the church needs to be stronger?
- As you look to the next five years, what are some of the challenges this church will need to address in a positive manner to build a better future?
- Assume that it is now one year from today, and this consultation process has yielded everything you thought it might in your wildest dreams. If you were making a list of the major changes that have occurred, what would be on that list?

### **The Bottom Line**

The consulting process may cause church leaders to face some bad news that they would rather ignore. Ignoring certain realities only leads to more anxiety. The willingness to put all issues out on the table for consideration actually reduces anxiety. Resolving the central issues that prompted the consultation won't be perfect or complete, but it will be realistic and produce desired changes emerging from the best efforts by the pastor, members, and consultant. Congregations can discover the many strengths that they already have in ministry, find unexpected hope in their current circumstances, and learn about new strategies to grow stronger in ministry.

1. These insights are based on Herb Miller's congregational consultations in more than seven hundred congregations in twenty-eight denominations.

2. See the resource at <http://www.theparishpaper.com/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%2023.pdf>.

3. See Community Profile Builder (<http://www.thearda.com/profile/>); and the U.S. Census website, the American Fact-Finder (<http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml###>).

4. See a survey for discovering core values (<http://tinyurl.com/ParishPaper-CoreValues>); and another survey that reveals church strengths ([www.USCongregations.org/survey](http://www.USCongregations.org/survey)).

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Editor: Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

November 2014 - Volume 22, Number 11

Copyright © 2014 by Cynthia Woolever

### Should We Consider Closing Our Church?

This year ten out of every 1,000 congregations will close their doors for the last time. Across the U.S., this means that more than 3,500 churches go out of business annually. Surprisingly, the average congregational mortality rate of one percent surfaces as among the lowest for any type of organization.<sup>1</sup> That fact is little comfort for the members, pastoral leaders, and communities who witness the death of a beloved spiritual community.

An economically viable church has enough financial and human resources to keep up its current programming, staffing, and building maintenance without depleting savings or endowments. But viability is not the same as church vitality. Strong churches enthusiastically pursue their mission, move forward based on their unique calling, and do so with abundant joy. In short, some churches remain viable but are not vital. Likewise, many new churches show great vitality but are not yet able to be financially self-sustaining. Congregations that lack viability and exhibit anemic vitality inevitably slide toward downsizing, merger, or final dissolution.

#### What Are the Warning Signs?

A number of opinions circulate about the correlates of at-risk churches. Careful research supports only some parts of these uncomplicated theories.

*The aging church assumption.* Many experts refer to a church life cycle, which equates a congregation's expected lifespan to the human lifespan. If this myth were true, the average congregation's age (counting from the year of the church's founding) would be roughly equal to the average life expectancy (currently seventy-six years for men and eighty-one years for women).

In fact, the highest rates of church closures actually occur in the first decade of congregational life (years one to ten). Closure rates decline after that and remain stable in the second and third decades of church life. Mortality rates peak again after the church lives for four decades. Closure rates drop again until a church reaches the seventy-five-year

mark when the possibility of closure climbs upward once more.<sup>2</sup> What might account for this up and down closure rate pattern?

New and young congregations (those in existence ten years or less) brave the greatest mortality risk. They most often face isolation from other community institutions as well as little denominational support. Many attract insufficient members for a critical mass of resources. The resulting combination of youth and small size places them at great risk for closure. Because religious groups differ in their church planting strategies and level of support for new churches, denominational affiliation also plays a role. Evidence suggests higher closure rates among new church plants for independent or conservative Protestant groups than for churches in mainline Protestant traditions.

In the later decades of a church's life, other dynamics present obstacles to viability. Around the forty- to fifty-year mark in a church's history, the generation of people who founded the congregation begin to disappear. For the church to continue, a new generation—typically, the children of the first generation—must move into participation and leadership. Among congregations that do not retain sufficient numbers of their first generation members' off-



WE PUT IT OFF AS LONG AS WE COULD...  
BUT THE CONGREGATION VOTED 6 TO 2  
TO CLOSE THE CHURCH.

spring, closure is almost a certainty. Congregations are always at risk during generational transitions unless they attract new members unrelated to current participants. In general, participation by multiple generations points toward greater vitality. One researcher describes this generational pattern as the “half-life” of churches: half of the churches founded in any given year will not exist in another sixty years.<sup>3</sup>

*The church size assumption.* True—large, well-funded churches rarely close their doors. Still, size is only a surface indicator of other important vitality resources. Churches that eventually close experience declining worship attendance—either a sudden drop or a slow downward trend over many years. At some point, a congregation reaches a number that is close to or below a critical mass—the lowest possible number of active members necessary for survival. The average survival threshold is about thirty to thirty-five participants, but could be even fewer people if a congregation chooses to draw on financial reserves.

*The “clear sign” or “decisive moment” assumption.* Few highways to closure post a huge sign that declares “NOW.” In some cases, a crisis occurs that forces church leaders to ask, Can we continue to be a church and carry out our mission without a pastor or a building? However, in most cases the majority of congregations slowly turn inward—focusing more and more on current members’ needs, building maintenance, and meeting budget demands. Like a slow tire leak, people ignore the waning enthusiasm of volunteers until programs fall completely flat. Committees or individuals over-function in desperate attempts to administer artificial life-support to their dying church. Spiritual growth and vitality slip away long before leaders recognize the point of no return.

### **The Pain of Closure**

Because any given church comes into being for a particular purpose, in a specific place, and supported by a unique group of people, changing circumstances can produce insurmountable obstacles to viability. Members, the pastor, and the wider church struggle to understand and perhaps accept their decision-making responsibility to close the church.

*The impact on church members.* Discussions about closure generate fear and stress for worshipers, which may keep members silent or delay critical conversations. Their response parallels what people go through when they lose a loved one—grief, denial, anger, and depression. Grief can also produce shame, self-blame, or the scapegoating of others.

*The impact on the pastor.* Leading a congregation through the process of closing its doors and ending its ministry within the community is stressful for clergy too. Regardless of the pastor’s prior work history, serving in a closing church is a threat to a clergy’s professional identity. No pastor wants to see a church close under his or her watch. First-call pastors—those newly ordained and serving as pastor in their first church—find these circumstances the most devastating. They may be the most likely pastors to leave ministry after the church closes. And when expectations for revitalization by judicatory leaders go unmet, the episode is even more painful if the church eventually closes.<sup>4</sup>

*The impact on the community.* Local residents depend on the church’s ministries (such as feeding programs) and they feel the loss too. In rural areas and in some neighborhoods the church may be the only community meeting place.

### **A Graceful Ending**

A healthy closure is possible if members believe that the church will be resurrected in new forms as part of the universal church—through a church merger, partnerships with other organizations, or creative use of financial assets (such as a legacy trust). For example, one congregation dispersed funds to various mission projects in their final year that exceeded their total mission giving for the previous 14 years. Another church sold their building to a newly organized congregation that needed affordable worship space. The critical question is not Should we stay open? but How can we discover new ways to do ministry together?<sup>5</sup>

---

1. S. Anderson, et al. “Dearly Departed: How Often Do Congregations Close?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2008) 47(2): 321-28.

2. K. Dougherty, et al. “When the Final Bell Tolls: Patterns of Church Closings in Two Protestant Denominations,” *Review of Religious Research* (2008) 50(1):47-73.

3. Dale Jones, Director of Research Services for the Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center, 2014, email note.

4. Gail Cafferata, “The Last Pastor: Adaptive Challenges and Pastoral Well-Being among Protestant Clergy Closing Their Churches,” Association for the Sociology of Religion presentation, 2014.

5. L. Gail Irwin, *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2014).

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller and Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

October 2014 - Volume 22, Number 10

Copyright © 2014 by Cynthia Woolever

### How Can We Prevent Suicide?

Matthew Warren, 27, took his life after a long battle with mental illness. Even with medical care and spiritual support from his parents, Rick and Kay Warren, he was not able to overcome his depression. Rick Warren, founder of Saddleback Church and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, has shared how he and his wife tried to cope with their loss: "Behind every publicly successful ministry, there is private pain. Pain is God's megaphone." Warren also said, "We mistakenly think that the world is impressed by how we handle prosperity, but the fact is the world is impressed by how we handle adversity."

#### Rising Suicide Rates

More than 30,000 Americans commit suicide every year. These deaths exceed the number from homicide and motor vehicle accidents. Over the past ten years, suicide rates have increased and the rate change appears to be specific to certain age groups. Although the rates remained stable for those under thirty-five and over sixty-five years old, the rates rose substantially for persons between thirty-five and sixty-four years of age.<sup>1</sup>

While stress associated with the recent economic downturn could play a role in this increase, researchers have also found a "cohort effect" that suggests people born thirty-five to sixty-four years ago are at greater risk for suicide—a risk that continues throughout their lives.

Outside of the growing number of suicides among middle-age persons, two of the highest at-risk groups for suicide are youth (particularly LGBTQ-identified youth) and veterans. Finally, the widespread use of opiate pain medications provides at-risk individuals an easily accessible and low-pain-level suicide method through intentional overdose.

#### Risk Factors and Warning Signs

The effectiveness of suicide prevention rests on our deeper understanding of how and why suicide occurs.<sup>2</sup>

**Risk factors.** Identifying risk factors gives family members, friends, and health-care providers important information in order to detect and assist individuals who need care. Risk factors are things that make it more likely that people will consider, attempt, or die by suicide. Some risk factors are individual (mental disorders, genetic or personality traits), some are family (violence, dysfunction), and some are community-related (availability and quality of mental health services).

Nine out of ten people who die by suicide had a mental disorder at the time of their death. Unfortunately, their disorder had not been recognized, diagnosed, or appropriately treated.

Among those who take their own life, depression is more common than any other disorder. Major depression, a serious emotional and biological disease, is different from the normal human response to loss or disappointment. Although the symptoms of major depression may be subtle to observers, the person who suffers from the disease experiences changes in thoughts, feelings, behavior, mood, and physical health. Some of these significant shifts include changes in sleep, appetite, energy level, self-esteem, interests, and concentration.



WHEN I'M DEPRESSED, I NEED TO BE IN CHURCH...  
TO HEAR ENCOURAGING WORDS, SING SONGS OF HOPE,  
AND MAYBE EVEN LAUGH AT YOUR CHOICE OF TIES!

**Warning signs.** Warning signs tell of an immediate danger of suicide and apply only to individuals at a specific time. Typical warning signs that indicate someone is seriously considering suicide include threatening or seeking to hurt or kill oneself, hopelessness, increasing alcohol or drug use, dramatic mood changes, and efforts to put personal affairs in order. In addition, the risk of suicide increases when someone experiences a tipping point—the loss of an important relationship, financial or medical problems, physical or emotional pain.

### Reducing the Risks

Because depression is a significant risk factor, any action, intervention, or policy that lessens the number of people suffering from depression will result in reducing the suicide rate. The same is true for factors associated with drug and alcohol abuse.

*Equipping pastoral leaders.* Many people go to their pastor before they go to a health-care professional. Training and supporting pastors and lay leaders to recognize symptoms and helping to ensure that they have up-to-date information on community mental health providers are critical.

*Spiritual support and friendship.* Several studies show that a belief in a loving God, along with participation in a church whose members care for one another, leads to positive mental health, including lower rates of depression.<sup>3</sup> Because anyone can struggle with these challenges, churches can debunk the myth that depression or mental illness is a sign of spiritual weakness.

*Reducing the stigma of mental illness.* In any given year, an estimated twenty-five million American adults experience major depression but less than half will receive treatment. In every congregation, attending adults who are not dealing with depression or mental illness themselves often know someone who is—a family member, friend, or coworker. People suffering from depression or other mental problems are less likely to attend religious services and when they do attend, are not as likely to be part of a small group. Finding ways to welcome and include everyone is the goal. For example, 22,000 churches have a Celebrate Recovery small-group ministry (<http://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

*Advocacy for community mental health care.* Members and pastors can advocate for greater accessibility and improved quality in the treatment of mental illness in their community. Congregations can be part of this conversation by understanding the availability of services around them and contacting

government officials to petition that change happen in their community and nationwide.

### Responding to Warning Signs

When you suspect that someone is considering suicide, take it seriously. At least half of those who attempt suicide tell someone else about their intention. First, express your concern for them, and then ask if they're thinking about suicide. The idea that people attempt suicide for attention is a myth, and sometimes an individual will not tell anyone their plans without prompting. Try to find out where they are in the ideation process. Are they just thinking about suicide, or do they know how they're going to do it? Do they already have the means ready at home? Listen without judgment and do not try to argue, reason, plead, or preach. Also, maintain focus on them; comparing struggles of your own or others nullifies their feelings and may cause them to shut down.

Encourage them to get professional help immediately and if they will let you, take them to a walk-in clinic, doctor, or emergency room. Do not leave them alone and, if necessary, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255).

### Not the End of a Story

After her son's death, Kay Warren found comfort in the phrase "God is not helpless among the ruins."<sup>4</sup> She describes the essence of her faith as "living with hope in the face of mystery." She says that faith won't survive without hope, and hope won't survive without the realization that some mysteries will not be answered. She believes "if you can embrace both, you can have a vibrant faith." When faced with this tragedy, people of faith claim there is more to this story than how it ends.

---

1. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6217a1.htm?s\\_cid=mm6217a1\\_w](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6217a1.htm?s_cid=mm6217a1_w).

2. "Understanding Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide," Suicide Prevention Resource Center, <http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/RandPPPrimerFormattedfinal.pdf>.

3. "Gratitude to God, Self-Rated Health, and Depressive Symptoms," N. Krause, R. Hayward, D. Bruce, and C. Woolever, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2014) 53(2):341-55.

4. "Kay Warren: A Year of Grieving Dangerously," *Christianity Today* (March 2014).

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller and Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

September 2014 - Volume 22, Number 9

Copyright © 2014 by Cynthia Woolever

### Back to School: How Churches Can Partner with Local Schools

Every healthy community builds on the resources of local churches and schools. The vitality of these two key institutions tells the larger story of the community's overall quality of life. Historically, churches and schools formed partnerships that benefited children, their families, and the development of future leaders. Today's schools face unprecedented challenges—such as declining funds, poverty, performance pressures, and violence. What can churches do to strengthen their relationship with local schools?

#### It's Not a New Program

The successful initiative is not about starting a new program—it is about beginning a relationship with others in your community. Starting and growing any relationship requires an investment of time and listening. Leaders can take the first step by learning about the community and its schools. Get to know as much as you can about community needs, what others are doing, and potential partners—the school district, social service agencies, community non-profits, local government, and other churches. Be open to hearing and learning about the most crucial needs. Identify the individuals (the school principals and other key administrators) who are the primary players in any successful school-church partnership. Finally, find ways to build a relationship of trust and respect.

#### Ideas for Relationships and Partnerships

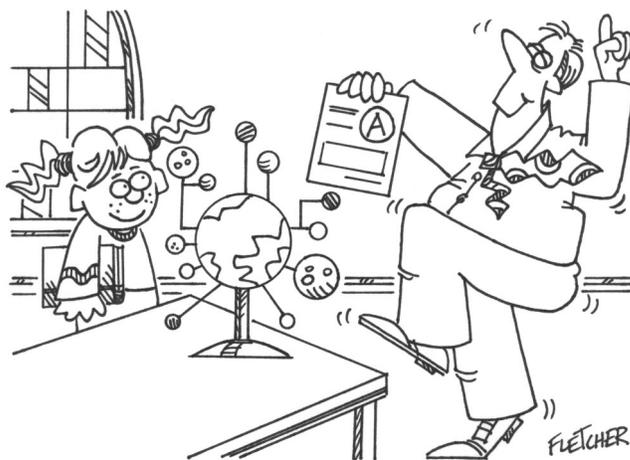
Dr. Lovett Weems, Lewis Center for Church Leadership, identifies four categories that provide a framework for thinking about church/school partnerships. Congregations can (1) help students succeed, (2) assist with student needs, (3) support and affirm teachers, and (4) advocate for schools and education.<sup>1</sup>

**Helping students succeed.** The most common partnering role by churches involves volunteer mentors or tutors, or after-school programs. Many communities already have these programs in place and churches link members to existing opportunities to volunteer. Other options include offering space for a homework club, computer labs, practice space for

music or art, a community garden, and other school-related activities. Some churches help college-bound students with test preparation, college forms and applications, and college selection.

**Assisting with student needs.** Because student enrollment reflects the community, the percentage of schoolchildren that receive free or reduced-cost school lunches is one important indicator of area poverty. In many schools across the country, 100 percent of the attending children qualify for the free/reduced-cost lunch program. Once the figure reaches 40 percent or more, the number of children and their families requiring support and assistance is significant. These children often do not have some of the basic necessities to succeed in school—adequate nutrition, books and supplies, or school clothing and uniforms.

Some examples of ways that congregations partner with local schools to meet student needs include collecting and distributing school supplies as a new school year begins and assisting with the purchase of school uniforms, shoes, or sports uniforms. Because many children are at risk of hunger when school is not in session, some churches offer a summer lunch program or organize a backpack food program for the weekends (see the excellent starter toolkit for the Backpack Food Program by Hunger



PASTOR TED QUESTIONED THE AFTER-SCHOOL TUTORING PROGRAM'S EFFECTIVENESS UNTIL HE GOT AN "A" ON LISA'S SCIENCE PROJECT.

Free Colorado: <http://www.hungerfreecomunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/HFC-Toolkit-for-starting-a-BackPack-Food-Program.pdf>.

### ***Supporting and affirming the work of teachers.***

Teachers receive more blame and disrespect in political debates about public education than they deserve. Teachers welcome any positive words or actions to bolster their calling as educators. At the beginning of the school year, worship services can honor teachers, celebrate their contributions, and bless their future work. Create a community event at the end of the school year to celebrate the accomplishments of students and teachers. Other ideas from school-partnering churches include contributing or funding supplies used in the classroom, hosting a thank-you lunch for teachers, and providing volunteers for the classroom, lunchroom, or playground.

***Advocating for schools and education.*** No single congregation can do everything, but every congregation can do something. If a congregation does ministry *with* their community (rather than *to* their community), they create solutions and possibilities together. Encourage members to become advocates for public education. Track the actions of local school boards and educational policies at the district, state, and federal levels. Invite a principal or panel of educational leaders to speak at your church. Congregations can help community leaders identify the root causes of economic injustice and how inequality affects children and their schools. Church leaders can also assist with organizing parents and teachers to create better schools.

### **Three Necessary Questions**

A successful partnership between the church and community must meet three criteria by answering yes to the following questions.<sup>2</sup> First, do our efforts fit with our church's mission? Many wonderful initiatives and options exist but not all make theological sense for a local church. Second, what are the real needs of our community's children? Are we considering plans that satisfy and reward our members? Or, have we strategically identified where our partners and we might make the most difference? Third, what do we do well as a church? Do we have the passion, assets, and volunteers to carry out a successful partnership? When we lack the necessary capabilities even though our efforts fit with the church's mission and meet significant community needs, burnout and failure are the result. When real needs are overlooked or unmet even though our efforts fit with our mission and we possess the required strengths, irrelevance and disappointment

are the result. Doing what is best does not require great strength. But great strength is required to choose the right path.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Few Cautions**

When children are part of the picture, additional assurances must be considered.

- All church-school partnerships must put child safety first. Train all volunteers to follow the guidelines for appropriate adult-child interactions. Check that church facilities are free of hazards and safe for children of all ages.
- Churches must honor church and state boundaries and refrain from evangelizing in the school context. Trust that your actions speak louder than words.
- To avoid setbacks, churches should begin small—by initiating a partnership with one classroom teacher, one school principal, or the parent leaders in a classroom. Long-term success relies on careful thinking about sustainability, accessibility, and scalability. In other words, if our efforts succeed, will we be able to meet future needs without exceeding available resources?

### **The Bottom Line**

After World War II, the city leaders of Pittsburgh brought in Frank Lloyd Wright for a consultation. They were concerned about the downtown's dreary appearance stemming from steel manufacturing. They said to him, "What shall we do with Pittsburgh?" He studied the matter and then gave them this reply: "Bury it!" But those leaders stayed with it because they had a vision for their city. Pittsburgh became one of the most beautiful and livable city centers.

Unfortunately, many leaders have given up on public education and feel a proper burial is in order. People of faith can remain steadfast in their vision of how public schools are the best investment to create healthy communities and the next generation's leaders.

---

1. See the Engaging Local Schools Resource at <http://www.churchleadership.com/serveyourneighbor/EngagingLocalSchools.asp> for extensive material about how churches work with local schools.

2. Dr. Lovett Weems, "Identifying Strategic Initiatives" in Engaging Local Schools CD (2014).

3. Elbert Hubbard, American editor, publisher, and writer, 1856-1915.

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller and Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

June 2014 - Volume 22, Number 6

Copyright © 2014 by Cynthia Woolever

### Caring for the Caregivers

Rosalynn Carter pointed to the universal nature of caregiving when she said that there are four kinds of people in the world: those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers.<sup>1</sup> The church plays a unique role by helping many people realize that they are already engaged in some form of this ministry. Caring for a family member or loved one is a vocation that can be supported and celebrated by the congregation. Still, part of this support requires acknowledging that caregivers often put their own needs last and risk losing their ability to continue as caregivers.

#### What the Caregiver Experiences

Caregivers deal with immense personal stress, and often without much awareness of its effects. In the face of a problem or situation that cannot be fixed, feeling overwhelmed, helpless, and frustrated are common responses. Over time, isolation, loneliness, or depression can surface. All caregivers feel guilty, angry, or resentful at some point. Most caregivers express physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual concerns. Unfortunately, caregivers typically wait too long before seeking out personal medical care too.

The caregiver is also struggling with the feelings and needs of the care-receiver. Their loved one may experience physical limitations, lack of independence (such as no longer driving or an inability to care for self), poor health, and loss of the family home, church, and friends. Both the caregiver and care-receiver must try to find pathways to acceptance. This acceptance may take the form of understanding that some kind of end has occurred; grieving the loss or change; and feeling a sense of gratitude for what has ended. People fall prey to the “focusing illusion”—focusing on what is lost after a major surgery, illness, or large life change. The illusion neglects the fact that we have extraordinary capacity to adapt and enjoy a new life that is not “perfect.”<sup>2</sup>

Those who care for the caregivers can help them realize that all these feelings are normal. Gently ask

caregivers what they are doing to take care of their own needs. For example: How are you kind to yourself? What do you do or whom do you talk to when you are discouraged? Do you allow others to help you? What blessings have you received as a caregiver? Point them to online resources that identify the warning signs of caregiver burnout.<sup>3</sup> Depending on the circumstances, consider sharing with them the Caregiver’s Bill of Rights.<sup>4</sup>

#### Ideas for the Caregiver

Caregivers need to care for themselves in order to care for others. Starting or strengthening spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, meditation, Bible reading, journaling, or singing help family caregivers handle their own emotional needs. Continuing to engage in activities that bring joy such as physical exercise, hobbies, reading, or time in nature also provide some respite. Doing social things like lunch or an outing with a friend, playing with children, going to a movie or concert, or shopping for oneself give people a break from care giving. Time away generates the most benefit if caregivers start early in the care giving process.



BOB REALIZED KAREN WAS APPROACHING BURNOUT WHEN SHE BEGAN SLIPPING INTO CAREGIVING MODE WITH TOTAL STRANGERS.

## Ideas for Church Members

Individual church members can take actions that help caregivers—offering to do grocery shopping, assisting with transportation, or staying with the family member while the caregiver takes some much-deserved personal time. Prayers, cards, phone calls, and visits always bring comfort. Finally, never underestimate the power of listening to the caregiver’s concerns.

## Ideas for the Congregation

Beyond what individual, caring church members can do for caregivers, the congregation as a whole can leverage resources and coordinate efforts to support caregivers. Here are some examples of how congregations can support caregivers.

*Develop a Care Team or Stephen Ministry.* Congregations of every size need a care team or system for providing care to one another. Without such a team or system, some members fall through the cracks. Details on establishing a care team are in a free resource on *The Parish Paper* website (Church Effectiveness Nuggets # 9: How to Develop a Congregational Care Team; [www.theparishpaper.com](http://www.theparishpaper.com)).

Thousands of congregations have trained their staff and members to be Stephen Ministers, a way to provide one-on-one confidential Christian care. This nonprofit organization ([www.stephenministries.org](http://www.stephenministries.org)) offers training to equip local trainers, who in turn train others, who offer care and support to people in the congregation or community. After completing the training, a Stephen Minister is assigned to a care-receiver, who they visit once a week. Participants who complete the training report that the skills they learned were useful in many other settings where caring ministry was needed.

*Start a caregiver support group.* A staff person or member organizes a group of people who share the common situation of care giving. The group provides nonjudgmental support, and helps participants deal with emotions that accompany the role of caregiver. The group can also be a place to hear about community and governmental resources that could assist in the care of the family member. The group coordinator or convener should not currently be a caregiver and should encourage the full participation of the group members in choosing meeting times, topics, and guest speakers.

*Coordinate a prayer shawl ministry.* Some congregations gather a group of people who love knitting or crocheting to make shawls. Those who make a shawl offer prayers and blessings for a caregiver or their loved one. More information about this ministry is available at [www.shawlministry.com](http://www.shawlministry.com)

*Offer workshops, lectures, or series about care giving.* Caregivers and members who want to support them benefit from additional information about particular illnesses, conditions, technologies, and other topics related to caring for loved ones. Presentations could range from a single session on Alzheimer’s disease to a series on multiple topics related to community resources. Many local social service agencies are willing to send a speaker for such a program.

*Create a resource directory.* Compiling a directory of local organizations or services (such as Adult Day Care, respite care) is a time-saver for caregivers. The directory can also assist members who wish to make contacts on behalf of the family.

*Share weekly worship services.* If worship services are recorded or streamed on the internet, find out if families who can no longer attend services are interested in the opportunity to worship weekly.

*Hold services of prayer and healing.* Many congregations prepare special worship experiences several times a year where time is devoted to prayers for healing. Making extra efforts to invite and include caregivers in these services is greatly appreciated.

*Organize additional outreach at Christmas, Easter, and during other religious seasons.* Holidays and other busy times stress the already overwhelmed caregiver. Conversations with caregivers and their families can reveal ways that the congregation could be part of making rituals surrounding holidays more meaningful and less stressful.

## Who Cares?

When we offer sympathy, empathy, compassion, concern, or the willingness to listen, we show our care and love. In Matthew 19:19, Jesus said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young lawyer who pressed for the details heard the story of The Good Samaritan. Jesus’ story of compassion illustrates how we can overlook the one who cares unselfishly for another.

1. Rosalynn Carter, *Helping Yourself Help Others* (NY: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 3.
2. Maureen Dowd, “Decoding the God Complex,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2011.
3. <http://www.webmd.com/healthy-aging/caregiver-burnout>.
4. Jo Horne, A Caregiver’s Bill of Rights, <http://www.caregiver.com>.

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller and Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

May 2014 - Volume 22, Number 5

Copyright © 2014 by Cynthia Woolever

### How to Welcome Children with Autism and Their Families

Kylie, an active five-year-old, does not speak but she is learning sign language. Sometimes Kylie's behavior is similar to what professionals see in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Her parents want to attend church with Kylie and her two younger brothers. Unfortunately, several disappointing worship experiences have discouraged them from seeking out another church. They remain hopeful that they can eventually find a congregation committed to nurturing the spiritual growth of all their children.

#### Common Areas of Difference

A diagnosis of ASD indicates that an individual might be impacted in his or her social interaction, communication, and behavior. The word spectrum conveys that no two individuals are alike. There is a wide variety in how people can be affected. An understanding of possible differences can help church teachers and members plan for the inclusion of all children.<sup>1</sup>

*Language skills.* Some individuals with ASD may be unable to speak or to use sign language, while others may possess a broad vocabulary but find grammar and sentence structure tricky. Sometimes their voices are too loud or too soft for the setting. Matching the content of the message (such as sad news) with the appropriate facial expression or voice tone is another type of struggle for some.

*Social skills.* Children with ASD find that reading social situations and making decisions about how to interact with others extremely hard. These types of differences can lead children to pull away from others. They may find eye contact or touch uncomfortable. Some children respond in the opposite way by charging into a group or acting aggressively toward others. Because social situations are not easy to analyze, a schedule or routine provides structure and a bridge to others for those with ASD. Any change in the routine can create anxiety.

Another feature that individuals with ASD can exhibit is a repetitive passion for one topic—such as trains, trucks, a favorite animal, or a book character. As a result, they may find it tough to relate to others who do not know as much about their topic or show little interest in it.

*Sensory Responses.* The sensory systems of many people with ASD are turned up to a higher volume. This creates a sensitivity to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings that would not be a problem for individuals without ASD. In striking contrast, the sensory systems for others with ASD are set way below the average for others. In this case, a child may not respond to conversation or touch.

#### Strategies for Inclusion

Barbara Newman, author of *Autism and Your Church*, outlines strategies that she uses with children and adults who have ASD. She believes that churches do not wish to exclude or isolate any individual but that they may not have the necessary information to include persons with different abilities. Her strategies open up the possibilities for welcoming all people (not just individuals with



"ROUTINES HELP CHILDREN WITH ASD  
FEEL SECURE...LUCKILY FOR BILLY,  
YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED THE MUSIC FOR 65 YEARS."

ASD, but all those who find access to church life challenging), such as those who use wheelchairs; those with hearing loss or impaired vision; worshippers dealing with memory loss, dementia, or Alzheimer's; and people who suffer from mental or chronic illness.

**Strategy 1: Gather information.** Newman suggests that the congregation appoint one person to contact the family, care facility, or group home to assess gifts and needs. Privacy is always a concern. Church teachers should show respect for the amount and type of information individuals wish to share and reassure families that information would only be shared at their request. Because they do it all the time, parents of children with autism: (a) may be tired of telling the same things to different people in every situation they encounter; (b) are good at outlining who their child is and what their child needs. Listening, practicing patience, and asking for clarification are greatly appreciated by parents.

**Strategy 2: Share information as needed.** Pastors, other worship leaders, teachers, mentors, and peers benefit from critical information in order to best plan and interact with children.

**Strategy 3: Monitor sensory output.** Newman suggests setting up a rest or "reset" area that individuals with ASD can use when they need a break from loud noises or too much social interaction. A small room with limited sound and few distractions works best. Headphones or sound blockers are another option to filter out sounds and background noise.

**Strategy 4: Take their perspective.** When children have trouble or upsetting situations occur, they may not be able to communicate what is bothering them. Teachers and mentors can think through several questions to uncover what might be wrong: What happened immediately before and right after the incident? Who else is part of the setting? Can they share insights into the person's behavior? If the child attends school or participates in another program, ask if someone can talk to the teacher or observe the child in another setting. Learning and seeing what works well for the child in other settings increases the odds that the church can make helpful changes in the church's environment.

**Strategy 5: Make comfortable routines.** Because children and adults with ASD may not be able to process everything that is happening around them, they rely on routines to provide structure. Everyone needs to feel secure and others in the church can benefit as well. For example, a printed order of worship, picture schedules (a set of pictures that illus-

trate the sequence of activities), and projected PowerPoint slides that highlight the current activity all work well. Including ways that the child or adult can serve and offer their gifts is a good strategy for creating meaning in the routine. Depending on the individual's ability, they could be a greeter, hand out bulletins, light candles, help with food or table preparation, or other church activities.

**Strategy 6: Use advance warning systems.** Before a nurse sets up an IV, she describes to the patient what she is going to do and why and what a patient might experience. She also periodically asks how the patient is doing. Giving the patient this type of advance warning reduces anxiety and builds trust.

In the church setting, teachers can give a verbal countdown during class ("In five minutes our class will end and we'll go to the sanctuary for worship."); use a special clock that visually displays disappearing time; and hand parents or guardians printed information about any upcoming activity that is not usually part of the routine.

**Strategy 7: Multiply communication.** To reach those with limited language skills, become familiar with any electronic communication devices that they may use. Consider recruiting mentors to learn and use signing.

**Strategy 8: Use visual cues.** To reinforce verbal messages, try to think in pictures. Use paper and pencil to sketch or write notes. Some children find drawing a picture of what happened or their feelings easier than verbal descriptions. Churches with strength in the arts, photography, and media are especially equipped to communicate effectively with children in worship.

### **Everyone is Welcome Here!**

Jessica described herself to her mother: "My body has autism, but my spirit does not." She attends a church that shares the conviction that her connection to God is not hindered by ASD.<sup>2</sup>

By emphasizing all that we have in common and that we all belong to God, congregations can transform children, adults, and families. "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."<sup>3</sup>

1. The content of this issue draws from Barbara Newman, *Autism and Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Friendship Ministries, 2011). Her book includes many reproducible resources. See also [www.TheParishPaper.org/free-resources](http://www.TheParishPaper.org/free-resources).

2. Newman, 17.

3. 1 Corinthians, 12:27.

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller and Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

October 2013 - Volume 21, Number 10

Copyright © 2013 by Cynthia Woolever

### Growth or Decline? 10 Key Questions about Worship Attendance

Three out of four congregations attract the same number of or even fewer worshipers than they did five years ago. Review the following questions to determine if your church could take steps to attract and retain more newcomers.

**1. Does your newcomer rate exceed your departure rate?** Churches lose members each year—through death, transfers to other churches, members moving out of town, or people becoming less active participants. To maintain a stable and active membership, churches must offset any losses by welcoming new members. The average congregation loses 7 percent of its members each year. Therefore, for every 100 members, a church must add 7 newcomers annually for the church to remain the same size.

**2. In any given year, what percent of your worshipers are visiting for the first time?** On average, 2 percent of attendees in any given worship service are attending that congregation for the first time. Without first-time visitors, congregations shrink in membership over time.

**3. What prompts someone to visit your congregation for the first time?** Half of new members say they found out about the church they eventually joined because someone they knew mentioned the church or invited them to attend worship. More new members in conservative Protestant churches—two out of three—say they visited a church for the first time because of this personal invitation.

One out of four first-time visitors said they decided to attend services because they noticed the church building when they passed by. A small number—one in ten—said they were actively looking for a church associated with a particular denomination.<sup>1</sup>

What other factors increase the number of first-time visitors? Visible signage informs potential visitors about the kind of congregation it is and when services are held. Additional signage should designate directions if the church is set away from major

roads, building entrances, parking, the nursery, and other important areas of the church. Adequate signage signals to visitors that you are expecting them.

Additionally, an increasing number of people now “see” your church for the first time through the church’s website. Your website should be designed to meet the needs of both visitors and current members. On the home page, give visitors the essential information they need—the times of worship services, the church’s street address, a map showing the location, and how to contact the pastor and other church staff. Don’t make your potential first-time worshipers click through your site searching for basic information.<sup>2</sup>

**4. What percent of your first-time visitors return for a second time, and again and again, until they become members?** About one in three new members say they visited *one* other congregation before attending their current church for the first time. An equal percentage visited *two or more* churches before attending the present one. On average, congregations can expect about 10 percent of their first-time visitors to become future members.



ACCORDING TO YOUR WEBSITE, THIS CHURCH IS CURRENTLY “UNDER CONSTRUCTION.”

In a few fast-growing churches, as high as 30 percent of first-time visitors eventually join. Increasing both the number of first-time visitors *and* the percent that return is essential.

#### **5. Why do first-time visitors decide to return?**

Research shows that newcomers name three factors that most impressed them as worship visitors and made them want to come back again: the friendliness of the people (40% mentioned it), the overall worship experience (36% gave this reason), and the quality of the sermon or homily (34% said this played a role in their decision to return).

Visitors often report that they were only greeted by the official greeters posted at the door and the pastor as they exited. Divide the sanctuary seating area into sections and station additional undercover greeters to look for visitors. If a fellowship time or study group follows services, ask the pew greeters to invite visitors to go with them. Having someone show the way is another demonstration of generous hospitality.

#### **6. How does your church follow up with first-time worship visitors?**

Surprisingly, one in three new members said they were *not* contacted after their first visit to the church. Asking visitors to complete a visitor card is the first step in gaining the information for a later contact. Design a strategy that involves multiple methods (letters, postcards, emails, phone calls, or personal visits) based on the number of times someone has visited. A first-time worship visitor would receive a different kind of follow-up than on subsequent visits.

#### **7. What percent of your attendees are between 18 to 29 years of age?**

The aging profile of current members strikes many young people when they visit for the first time. That is because the average worshiper is 54 years old, 10 years older than the average American. Often the largest age group among attendees is worshipers over 65 years of age. In the average congregation, one in three worshipers is 65 years of age or older. Attracting 18 to 29 year-old visitors is not impossible. Congregations with a high concentration of emerging adults offer multiple points of entry into the life of the congregation such as non-traditional worship times and formats, study groups and age-specific adult education, opportunities to volunteer in community service, and social gatherings. An expert on best practices for young adult ministry argues that congregations should pay more attention to the church's identity, not less.<sup>3</sup> Even congregations

with small numbers of emerging adults can provide opportunities for worship leadership and ministry in the church or community.

#### **8. What percent of your current attendees are not yet members?**

On average, one in ten worshipers regularly participate in a congregation but are not yet members. Most of these nonmembers are not involved in any church programs or activities beyond attending worship services. Nonmembers tend to be younger than 45 years of age. How does your church construct a bridge that helps attendees cross over into membership? Are new-member or adult programs aimed at explaining tenets of the faith and a call to discipleship?

#### **9. How is your congregation known in the community?**

If a dozen random people in your area were approached and asked, "What do you know about [fill in the name of your church]?" How many would say they have never heard of it or that they know nothing? Every community is different and every congregation has the opportunity for unique ministry that fits their location such as quality children's ministry or school-age programs, senior services, outstanding music or promotion of the arts, or advocacy for marginalized groups of people. Identify and build on your congregation's distinctive strengths to better serve God and others.

#### **10. Do the worship services help people connect to God?**

Long-time members grow accustomed to the liturgy, music, and pace and find meaning in the familiar. Ask the last 10 people who joined the church how they experienced the services when they first began attending. Also contact recent visitors and ask them about their reactions to the service. Listen carefully to these reflections and share them with worship leaders. Newcomers often provide good insights into the ways services can be more effective in meeting attendees' spiritual needs.

---

1. Statistics in this issue come from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey ([www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)).

2. See the free download, *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 8, How to Attract First-Time Worship Visitors* ([www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)).

3. J. Roberto and M. Hayes, "Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation," Lifelong Faith Associates (2007).

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

August 2012 - Volume 20, Number 8

Copyright © 2012 by Cynthia Woolever

### Keys to Growing a Small Church

Small churches *can* grow. A recent national study found that 15 percent of small churches—those with fewer than 125 attendees—grew in worship attendance over a five-year period.<sup>1</sup> However, too many small congregations are like lockboxes that constrain the current size; this lockdown eventually leads to decline.

While increasing percentages of people are attending megachurches, fewer than 2 percent of all congregations attract more than 1,000 weekly worshipers. Small churches are the most common type dotting the American landscape. The nature of these churches is complex, with a more diverse profile than larger churches. They exhibit unique leadership arrangements, member relationships, contextual pressures, and growth barriers. These features make pastoral and lay leadership more challenging because one-size-fits-all strategies do not fit all small churches.<sup>2</sup>

#### Size-Specific Methods

Some church-growth principles are applicable to congregations of all sizes. However, size is the most significant single factor in designing effective approaches. These steps highlight how smaller churches can become bigger churches.

**Step 1—Increase the church's visibility.** Church-growth methods should be consistent with the congregation's biblical understanding and theology, but methods are not the same thing as theology. Methods are simply strategies. Ultimately, the message to newcomers and the community is always: we are located here, we care about you, and we welcome you. Hundreds of high-tech and low-tech tactics help spread that message.

*High-tech efforts.* An electronic presence enables a small church to create a billboard as large as any megachurch. New forms of social media multiply the ways to advertise for free or with minimal expense. Every small church needs a basic website and Facebook page. For help, consult *Web-Empowered Ministry: Connecting with People through Websites, Social Media, and More*, by Mark Stephenson (Abingdon Press, 2011).

*Low-tech efforts.* The church building and facilities need to be highly visible to foot and auto traffic by: readable and lighted signage; greeters in the parking lot and outside all entrances before and after services; attractive church exterior seasonal signs, banners, or displays; and well-kept landscaping. If the church is nestled in an area with little traffic, post directional signs at nearby major intersections.

Aggressively advertise through low-cost approaches such as windshield fliers, direct mail to all households within a designated radius around the church, ads in free community newspapers, and posts on community bulletin boards (like grocery stores or gyms). Some churches distribute yard signs for members to display, while others give gift cards for a cup of coffee at a local shop.

Members can attend community events as a group wearing hats or t-shirts bearing the church logo. If parade, walk, or run routes pass by the church, consider organizing volunteers to hand participants cups of water or other refreshments. Many churches



NO...I SAID, IN ORDER FOR OUR CHURCH TO GROW IN THIS CULTURE, WE NEEDED AN ELECTRONIC PRESENCE.

host a free event once or twice a year to get to know others in the community. Above all, look for opportunities to share church facilities with community groups.

**Step 2—Increase the number of worship visitors and visitors to other congregational activities.** People cannot visit your church if they do not know it exists, but knowing it exists does not automatically lead to new visitors. Today's small-membership church leaders should target a fifteen-mile radius or more around their congregation for outreach.

Younger people and new residents may do Internet research before visiting a congregation. However, the majority of people visit a congregation for the first time because someone personally invited them. Why do people return? First-time worship visitors say it is because they get a warm welcome from other attendees, enjoy the sermon message, and like the overall worship service experience.<sup>3</sup>

Growing churches of all sizes need to follow-up with their visitors. The most effective people for personal contacts are new members who joined in the past five years or members who joined during the tenure of the present pastor.

Churches attract first-time visitors of several varieties. People with an active church relationship can become members as *transfers* (those moving their membership from another congregation of the same denomination) or as *switchers* (those who move their membership from a church of a different denomination). Another visitor variety is people with a dormant active church relationship (*returnees*) or *first-timers*. The varied faith background of potential visitors calls for more diverse methods to ensure more results.

**Step 3—Customize methods for your community.** Glen Daman in *Shepherding the Small Church*<sup>4</sup> suggests that knowing the predominate community values steers leaders to strategies and programs that work in context. How would you describe your community?

- Active vs. sedentary: Are people's lifestyles filled with activities or do they spend their leisure time indoors? If active, be represented at sports and outdoor events. If sedentary, use windshield flyers or free newspaper ads.
- Family- vs. career-focused: Do people form goals based on their careers or on their family relationships? If family-focused, host a family picnic or offer daycare for a Parent's Day/Night Out. If career-focused, offer evening programs.

- Stable population vs. mobile population: Does the population exhibit a high turnover rate, or is it generally stable? What factors contribute to the turnover rate? If the population is stable, reach out through family and friend networks. If the population is mobile, invest in an electronic presence and direct mail.

**Step 4—Build on the unique strengths of small churches.** Small churches excel at nurturing members' spiritual growth and training young people to become future church leaders. The best small churches know how to help newcomers feel a strong sense of belonging. To produce the needed changes for growth, do so by addition rather than by subtraction. For example, start new groups and ministries for eighteen- to forty-four-year-olds. Look for ways to change the single-cell church, which operates like one small group where everyone knows everyone else, to a multiple-cell church. The latter adds its sense of mission, leadership, tradition, and location as bonding agents. Also, see *Small Membership Congregations* ([http://www.centerforcongregations.org/system/files/Small\\_Membership\\_Congregations.pdf](http://www.centerforcongregations.org/system/files/Small_Membership_Congregations.pdf)).

**Step 5—Become a learning congregation.** Try new strategies and evaluate them. Learn from what does not work. Rework your methods and try again.

### The Bottom Line

Anthony Pappas has said that a small church is like a loaf of French bread. The aroma and taste are great, but what a thick crust it has! Small churches are tough!<sup>5</sup> Read the above paragraphs with the church's leadership group. Underline the phrases that you feel are true of your church right now and the methods worth considering. What are the next steps to break open your small church?

1. U.S. Congregational Life Survey ([www.uscongregations.org](http://www.uscongregations.org)).
2. Download the free resource, *Church Effectiveness Nugget, Vol. 14: 25 Turnaround Strategies for Small-Membership Congregations* ([www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)).
3. U.S. Congregational Life Survey ([www.uscongregations.org](http://www.uscongregations.org)).
4. Glenn Daman, *Shepherding the Small Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 34-36.
5. Anthony G. Pappas, ed. *Inside the Small Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2002), 125.

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

July 2012 - Volume 20, Number 7

Copyright © 2012 by Cynthia Woolever

### What Message Are We Sending about Giving?

The largest source of congregational income is what individuals contribute through their offerings, pledges, donations, and dues. On average, nine out of every ten dollars a church receives come from what individuals give. Churches rely much less on other income sources such as trust funds, investments, bequests, and charges for use of their facilities. The typical worshiper gives an average of about \$1,500 a year, which breaks down to \$125 a month or \$28 each week.<sup>1</sup>

What encourages or discourages members to give financially to their church? Part of the answer lies with the factors that motivate individuals. A second part of the answer rests with factors associated with the congregation itself.

#### Why Do People Give to the Church?

Research findings from a University of Notre Dame study on the motivations for religious giving identified four reasons people offer for making financial contributions to their church.<sup>2</sup>

*They were taught to give.* Many churchgoers say that they follow the example set by their parents or other important adults. Essentially, their habit of generous giving stems from the training they received as they were growing up. They internalized that concept and continue a giving practice as adults.

*Their beliefs and values foster giving.* Worshipers often attach significant theological meaning to their financial contributions. The belief that everything belongs to God—including one's material possessions—prompts some members to return a portion to the church. Others say that they give out of a sense of gratitude for God's love and goodness. Church members who express a sense of religious duty to give believe that God requires giving or that it is what the Bible teaches.

*They respond to needs.* Contributors often say that they want to contribute to God's work in the world. Worshipers who know about needs locally or globally report that they contribute to support those causes.

*They give out of guilt.* People can also give because they want to avoid the negative emotional consequences of *not* giving. For some, guilt is a motivator for giving.

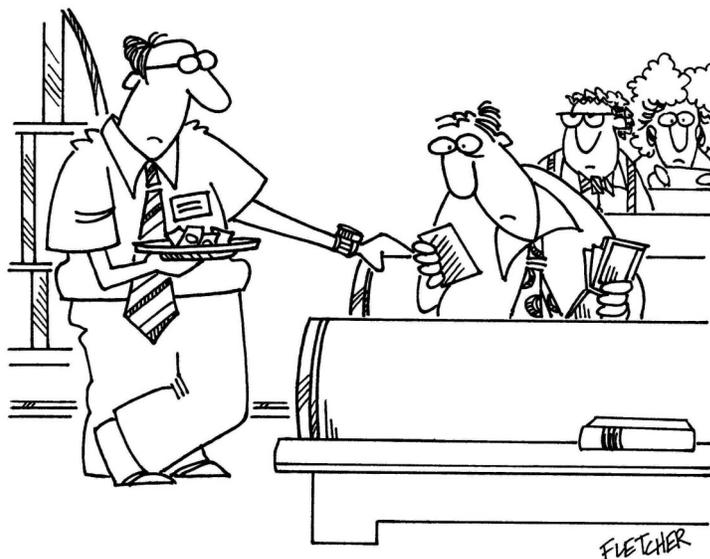
ing. These givers say that if they do not give, they will be doing something wrong or letting someone down.

#### What Are the Obstacles to Giving?

Despite their relative affluence, American Christians give less than two percent of their income to charity. While some factors push people to give, other things constrain people to give less or nothing at all. The Notre Dame research also reveals several interesting challenges to generous giving.

*They feel insecure financially.* Some worshipers indicate that they cannot give as much as they would like because they lack the resources to do so. They are afraid to give away money due to the risk of losing security or status. However, people at all income levels offered this reason—hinting that, in many cases, the *perception* of security plays a larger role than actual resources.

*They show signs of giving illiteracy.* When interviewed, many members were confused about what the standard of giving should be and about how to apply this standard. Some members held the belief that they



...THE OFFERTORY SOFTLY PLAYS...  
USHERS MOVE THROUGH THE SANCTUARY...  
AND EUGENE CONSULTS HIS  
"CALCULATE YOUR TITHE" CHART.

are high givers when in reality they were not. What are the sources of this giving misperception? Members might not know about others' giving habits (how often and how much), especially if there are processes to shield worshipers' privacy. Or the individual or household simply does not keep track of how much they give.

*They experience a comfortable level of guilt.* Another obstacle to generous giving is a low level of guilt. When members feel guilty about not giving more and yet they do not experience enough discomfort, their giving stagnates. In the absence of strong push factors, a little guilt goes a long way to prevent increased giving.

### **What Does Our Method Say About the Message?**

Just as individuals are not all alike, the congregations they attend are quite different too. Differences in church theological beliefs and tradition set the stage for particular financial approaches. Among churches, three philosophies, which are linked to typical giving methods, are common.<sup>3</sup>

*Tithing churches.* In these churches, all members understand that to be in good standing with God and the congregation they need to tithe 10 percent of their annual household income. As a result, the church does not ask members to pledge. Nor does the church hold an annual stewardship program or annual appeal. Many conservative Protestant churches (like Assembly of God or Seventh-Day Adventist) fit in the category of tithing churches.

*Pledging churches.* These churches favor tithing but tend to believe it is unrealistic to expect all members to tithe. As a result, the church asks members to consider an annual dollar amount or a percentage of their annual household income when making a financial pledge. Typically, these churches conduct an annual stewardship campaign. Many mainline Protestant churches (like Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Methodist) fit in this category.

*Offering churches.* Some churches believe in tithing and pledging but they do not stress either. As a result, they rarely launch annual campaigns, do little teaching about the theology of giving, and offer little guidance about the spiritual meaning of gifts. To increase giving, church leaders emphasize the size and quality of programs, costs of buildings and properties, and future plans. While churches of all denominations can fall in this category, the majority of Catholic parishes fit here.

### **Motivation + Method = Results**

The percentage of tithers is the key feature that distinguishes one congregation from another. Overall, only one in four worshipers report tithing to their church. Yet

among conservative Protestant members, four in ten are tithers. Fewer mainline Protestants (only two in ten) and Catholics (only one in ten) tithe regularly to their church. These percentages relate to the proclaimed message and methodology used in these congregations.

When worshipers make their giving decisions based on a percentage of their annual income—the pattern for conservative Protestants—their church's total contributions soar. Contributions are somewhat lower when worshipers decide instead on an annual amount to give—a pattern common among mainline Protestants. Worshipers' contributions are lowest when the amount is decided on a weekly basis—a typical pattern in Catholic parishes, where contributions per worshiper are about half that of Protestant churches.

### **The Bottom Line**

*High contributors* are also high in motivation. As one member stated, "You put your money where your blessing is." *Low givers* focus on giving obstacles. They mention tight budgets and seem misinformed about expectations. They tend to provide an additional rationale for giving less—that time spent volunteering is a substitute for their below-average giving. In reality, worshipers who invest the most time also invest the most money.

High-percentage-tithing churches teach giving-literacy to children and adults by linking faithful giving to faithful living. Leaders encourage a movement to percentage giving with the goal of growing that percentage over time.

Ultimately, leaders need to answer these questions: How do we communicate the connection between faith and money? Do we use methods and strategies that help members make the connection? Do we focus on the need for the giver to give or on the church's budget gaps? Are we willing to change the culture of giving in our church?<sup>4</sup>

1. Cynthia Woolever, "Getting to the Bottom of a Full Collection Plate," <http://www.uscongregations.org/pdf/how-values-enhance-giving-woolever-ppt.pdf>.

2. B. Vaidyanathan and P. Snell, "Motivations for and Obstacles to Religious Financial Giving," *Sociology of Religion*, 72:2 (2011), 189-214.

3. Dean Hoge, et al., *Money Matters: Personal Giving in American Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 98-127.

4. See *Church Effectiveness Nugget, Vol. 5: How to Increase Financial Stewardship* ([www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)).

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

June 2011 - Volume 19, Number 6

Copyright © 2011 by Herb Miller

### What Is the Pastor's Role in Church Finances?

*Question:* How involved should the pastor be in making sure the books are in order, the bills are paid, etc.? How can the pastor act responsibly regarding the financial health of the church without micro-managing?

*Answer:* Most clergy eventually ask that question, usually in response to one or several problems. Which of the following ideas seem applicable to your church?

**1. Encourage distribution of a printed treasurer's report at every governing board meeting.** Tax laws hold governing boards of all non-profit organizations accountable for reviewing financial reports on a regular basis. Oral (non-printed) financial reports give treasurers inappropriate authority. Oral treasurer's reports encourage gradual development of a financial fiefdom in which one individual can bang a yes or no gavel on any new ideas that cost money. The result: resentment toward the treasurer and stifled ministries.

**2. Encourage the tradition of an annual audit.** A free internal audit procedure (done by a special committee) is available from some denominational offices and from [www.nacba.net/](http://www.nacba.net/) (National Association of Church Business Administration). Some large churches contract with a local accounting firm, which in conjunction with an audit can also provide advice for improving financial management. Annual audits protect the treasurer's reputation as well as the church's accounting credibility. Embezzlement happens in less than 1 percent of congregations. But why risk a truck wreck of such magnitude?

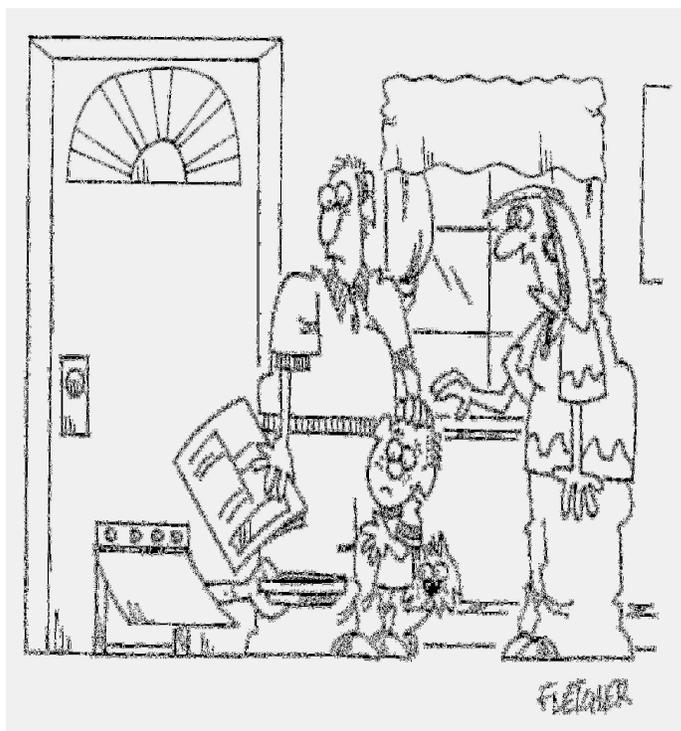
**3. Encourage the governing board, at least quarterly, to make the treasurer's report available to the congregation.** Some churches note this in the worship bulletin and stack copies in the narthex. While few people actually pick up copies, their availability increases donors' confidence that "someone is minding the store." Quarterly reports also inspire a few donors to give special over-and-above gifts.

**4. Encourage the financial secretary to mail quarterly giving reports to all "donors of record."** Say thank you in each one. Quarterly reports strengthen financial stewardship. Despite their best intentions, a few

people forget to give to the church during the first few months of the year (or think their spouse took care of it). If six months go by before they learn of their error, the amount they should send feels so overwhelming that they decide to send nothing and "start over next year."

**5. Encourage the appointment of a stewardship committee.** In addition to the finance committee (charged with budget-building and financial-resources management), congregations need a stewardship committee (charged with teaching stewardship through the annual stewardship campaign and a variety of year-around ways). In other words, the stewardship committee asks for the money and the finance committee manages the money.

Stewardship committee member qualifications: Appoint *only* people who believe in and practice giving a significant percentage of their income to the Lord's work through their church. Committees whose members lack that trait are rarely effective.



I THINK IT'S DOUG...  
FROM THE STEWARDSHIP COMMITTEE.

**6. Encourage both the stewardship committee and the finance committee to study and discuss “best practices.”** One possibility is *Herb Miller’s Nuggets Volume 5: How to Increase Financial Stewardship* (go to [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) for a contents-description and order form). Along with its comprehensive finance and stewardship suggestions, this study/discussion volume (a) lists the thirty-one myth traps regarding church finances that circulate in church conversations and (b) helps lay leadership identify which myths are hurting their congregation’s financial health.

Examples:

*Myth Trap #5: “One of our wealthy, generous church members always bails us out when we get into a financial jam and at the end of each year.”*

This procedure risks dangers such as (a) gradual buildup of resentment by that generous individual, (b) damage to his or her spiritual health, (c) creating a benevolent dictator who makes most of the church’s financial decisions, (d) limiting the congregation’s vision to paying its bills, (e) financial disaster after that donor dies, and (f) limiting parishioners’ opportunities to grow spiritually by becoming generous givers.

*Myth Trap #8: “Christian people automatically commit themselves to generosity in financial stewardship—without any effort by governing boards and clergy.”*

Many pastors graduate from seminary with the conviction that they will preach the gospel with such compelling power that people will respond enthusiastically, the money will come in, and church finances will take care of themselves.

Wrong! People do not drift into good giving habits. They decide into them. Research indicates that 82 percent of church members decide to increase their giving if someone asks them in a positive way to consider doing so. An effective annual stewardship campaign is the best way to ask!

*Myth Trap #25: “The finance committee should take care of stewardship; pastors shouldn’t talk about money or be involved in the annual stewardship campaign and budgeting process.”*

One of the pastor’s major responsibilities is to build mature disciples. Financial stewardship is such a fundamental part of our spiritual relationship with Christ that authentic discipleship does not exist without it.

Pastors cannot wait until people grow spiritually so that they begin giving generously; some people cannot grow spiritually until they decide to give generously.

**7. Encourage yourself to feel comfortable about preaching and teaching financial stewardship.** A *Wall Street Journal* article said that 85 percent of clergy are untrained in the theology of stewardship and have no books in their libraries on stewardship, money, or giving.

Many pastors are uneasy talking about giving, percentage giving, and tithing, for several reasons.

Pastors are often

- Fearful that their parishioners will be irritated, or
- Fearful of appearing to interpret Scripture in a legalistic way, or
- Fearful of coming across as judgmental instead of pastoral and caring, or
- Fearful that people might think they are talking about money as a way of promoting the support of their own salary, or
- Fearful of having to examine their own giving habits.

Pastors overcome those anxieties when they

- Believe Ashley Hale’s assertion that “The giver is the principle beneficiary of the gift.”
- Understand that tithing and percentage-giving help people grow spiritually.
- Decide to practice appropriate personal giving habits.
- Have experience with annual stewardship programs that treat financial giving as a spiritual rather than a fund-raising matter.

Pastors of churches with generous donors teach and preach the biblical principles of financial stewardship. These pastors also provide theological and methodological advice, counsel, and leadership for the annual stewardship campaign plus other giving projects.

**8. Encourage people to recognize that churches would need to teach financial stewardship, even if they didn’t need the money to balance their budgets.**

Jesus summed up the spiritual connection between money and our relationship with God this way: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:34).

That verse succinctly defines Christian stewardship: *treasure management that helps us to experience meaning and joy by escaping the trap of selfishness and keeping our hearts spiritually focused on God.*

Each of us makes one of two choices in life. We either become emotionally attached to our money or we become emotionally attached to God. Although we often hope to do both, in our hearts we know that cannot happen.

Financial stewardship helps us overcome the temptation to break the First Commandment and put a false idol first, instead of the God who came to us in Jesus Christ.

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

January 2008 - Volume 16, Number 1

Herb Miller

### What Core Values Drive Our Church?

How do we explain these contradictory facts?

*Fact #1:* During recent years many churches wrote excellent vision and mission statements—assuming that this process would increase their congregation’s effectiveness.

*Fact #2:* After a few years of setting goals and making plans based on those carefully crafted words, many churches report no improvements in their effectiveness. As one layperson said, “Year after year, we continue to do pretty much what we’ve always done.”

Congregational behavior does not stem from what its leaders write on paper but from the core values of its members. Congregations *always act on their core values*, not on their goals and plans. If a church’s core values do not support its vision statement and mission statement, the writing process creates zero change.

**What are congregational core values?** To understand the powerful nature of core values, think of an apple core: the seeds in that core are the apple tree’s core values; these seeds create the future. *A congregation’s core values are deeply ingrained thought-patterns that motivate behaviors.* Core values are those beliefs and convictions that are extremely meaningful to the majority of a church’s leaders and members. Usually unwritten and unstated, a congregation *expresses its core values* (deeply ingrained thought-patterns) *in behaviors* such as the following:

- Ministries to which most of the members are willing—or unwilling—to give time and energy
- Programs and activities with which most of the members feel comfortable—or uncomfortable
- Policy-setting and planning decisions that key laypersons vote for—or against
- Clergy and staff member actions that key laypersons affirm—or oppose

Unfortunately, a congregation’s core values are partially invisible to its members and key lay leaders, submerged in “the way we have always done things here.”

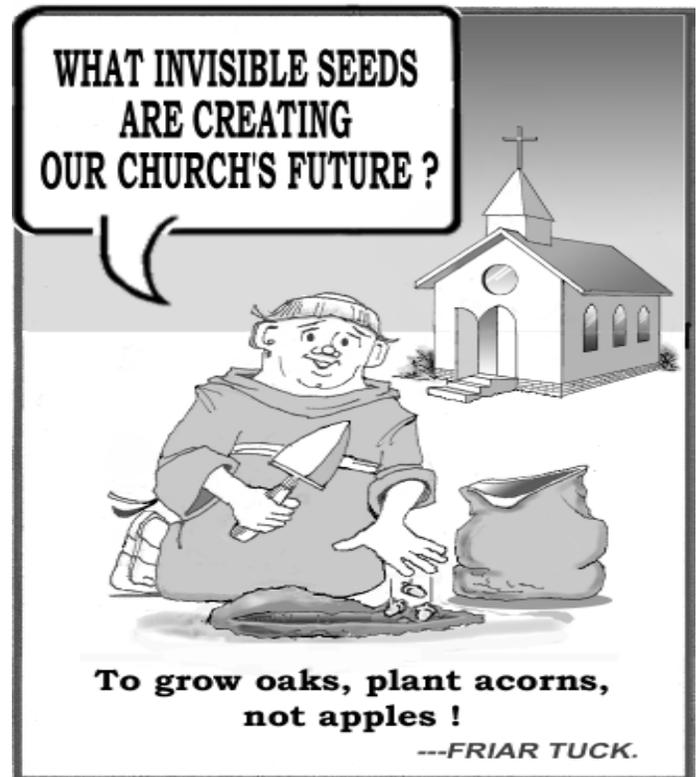
**What causes a congregation’s core values?** Just as the physical health of human beings derives from multiple causes—such as exercise, diet, genetics, and stress—the actual core values of congregations derive from a complex

mixture of many factors. Three important ones:

1. *Theological focus.* The theological imperatives that Jesus taught his first disciples summarize as follows: (a) Encourage people to grow spiritually in their relationship with God. (b) Love our neighbors in church, community, and world. (c) Offer Christ to people outside our walls. (Luke 10:27 and Matthew 28:19-20)

Congregations rarely give *equal* emphasis and energy to all three of Christ’s theological imperatives. That selection-decision regarding which one gets greater emphasis decides a church’s theological focus, the biblical imperatives about which the church feels the most passionate.

2. *Core-values-driven ministry activities.* The ministries, or behaviors, that congregations emphasize arise from the deeply held core values of (a) the present pastor, (b) previous pastors, (c) influential lay leaders, and (d) the congregation’s traditional behaviors from previous years and decades. Year after year, the congregation tends to unconsciously live out in its thinking, planning, and behaviors the core values that stem from those four influences.



3. *Current community context.* The most effective ministry activities are consistent with the needs of people in the community in which the congregation is embedded. Unfortunately, church tends to lag about one generation behind in its ministry behaviors; thus, reducing its ministry effectiveness. Therefore, the leaders of effective churches continually ask, “What ministries are *currently* effective in this particular community, at this point in history?”

*Summary:* To be effective, a congregation’s theological focus and its core-values-driven ministry activities must match the reality of its current community context.

**Why do clergy and lay leaders often fail to recognize their congregation’s core values?** Inability to see and understand the invisible power of core values stems from at least four factors.

1. *Church leaders tend to confuse their PREFERRED core values with their ACTUAL core values.* Clergy and lay leaders often articulate what they want to happen in their congregation. But in their desire to strengthen congregational effectiveness, lay leaders and clergy often blur the distinction between the *ideals* toward which they are striving with vision and mission statements and *actual* core values (deeply ingrained thought-patterns that have driven a congregation’s behaviors during past years and decades).

2. *Church leaders tend to confuse core values with other terms that comprise congregational personality.* Words such as ethos, hopes, dreams, priorities, goals, vision, mission, plans, and strategy are not congregational core values. A church’s core values are the deeply ingrained thought-patterns of influential lay leaders and members—beliefs and that determine “*what* we do in this congregation” and “*how* we do things around here.”

3. *Church leaders tend to confuse the qualities listed in secular “Values Statements” with core values that motivate congregational behaviors.* This substitution is a natural inclination. That type of “values statement” usually contains words that reflect *ideal* thinking and behaviors. Church leaders often see these on the walls of hospitals and businesses.

But using classic corporate values-statement models in congregations has at least five flaws: (a) They are more like a list of *ideal* ethos, spirit, or behavior descriptions than a list of *actual* core-values (deeply ingrained thought-patterns) that produces effective ministries. (b) They are not directly related to the theologically rooted vision, mission, and core values that Jesus taught his disciples. (c) They seldom influence the behaviors of church staff and members. (d) They are difficult to measure. (e) They are difficult to hold church staff and members accountable for accomplishing.

4. *Church leaders tend to confuse printed vision statements and mission statements with core values.* For example, one congregation expresses its vision as “Seeking life-changing encounters with Jesus Christ.” That church

states its mission with these four words: “accepting, transforming, equipping, and sending.”

But those four valuable and biblically rooted words do not define that congregation’s *actual* core values. Rather, those words express that congregation’s *preferred* core values.

**How can a congregation discover its actual core values?** Look at recent history. What has been happening during the last five to ten years? The most accurate way to obtain that information is a survey of leaders and members. These people know the actual core values that drive a congregation’s vision, mission, strategies, and tactics.

During a typical worship service (not a holiday weekend, late May, or summer), do a seven-minute “Personal Opinion Survey for Worship Attendees” to identify the “Top Ten Core Values” that drive most of this congregation’s *thinking, planning, and actions.*\*

**How can a congregation transform its desired core values into actual core values?** Anyone who reads unpleasant information on bathroom scales knows that information does not equal transformation. Facts do not automatically produce behavior changes.

Does this mean that congregational change is impossible? No! That pessimistic conclusion would deny the power of God’s Spirit to bring change to individuals and churches.

Horticulturists can produce a new variety of fruit tree by grafting new limbs to an old tree. Pastors and lay leaders can add new knowledge and new skills to a congregation’s repertoire of ministries. By this grafting process, pastors and lay leaders can strengthen the ministries essential to their congregation’s overall health and effectiveness (a) with this generation of members, (b) in this community, and (c) at this time in history.

Transforming a *desired* core value into an *actual* core value does not happen by writing a vision or mission statement. It happens when several influential laypersons experience “cognitive restructuring.” They revise some of their deeply ingrained beliefs and convictions. Usually, this is a several-year process.

What process is our church using to transform *desired* core values into *actual* core values that drive congregational effectiveness?

\*Go to [www.TheParishPaper@aol.com](http://www.TheParishPaper@aol.com) to obtain a free survey process, titled “What Core Values Drive Our Church?” plus content-descriptions and an order form for optional how-to resources that leaders can use to transform *desired* core values into *actual* core values, titled *Herb Miller’s Nuggets*. (Note: the free core values survey process noted above is provided only at [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) and not in response to requests by E-mail, U.S. Mail, FAX, or telephone.)

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com)

April 2011 - Volume 19, Number 4

Copyright © 2011 by Herb Miller

### Incoming Pastors: Building Smoother Transition Bridges

Thad did not have an opportunity to communicate with Harold, the outgoing pastor. Thus, some of Thad's information was patchy and secondhand—as people occasionally said, “That’s how Harold did it.”

Incoming and outgoing clergy communicate sparsely for three primary reasons:

- Departing pastors want to avoid giving advice—and arriving pastors want to avoid fending off suggestions.
- Incoming pastors are highly self-confident—so they don’t think they need information.
- Outgoing pastors want to avoid prejudicing incoming pastors regarding parishioners with whom they had less-than-positive relationships—and new pastors know that they may get on quite well with those individuals.

But this communication, plus five other information opportunities outlined below, can help incoming pastors build smoother transition bridges.

#### Talk with the Outgoing Pastor

The fruitfulness of such a discussion depends on asking the right questions in the right way. The following wording excavates valuable information:

1. If you were making a list of this congregation’s greatest strengths—what we are good at—what would you put at the top of that list?
2. If you were making a list of things in which this congregation is not as strong as you wish it were—what we are not good at—what would be the first one or two items on that list?
3. If you were making a list of this congregation’s most cherished values—what we think we ought to be doing if we are at our best—what would be the first one or two items on that list?
4. When people talk about the best pastor this congregation ever had, what did he or she do best?
5. When people talk about pastors who were not very effective, what did they do poorly?
6. When this congregation considers a major decision, what one or two highly respected people (whether they hold an office or do not hold an office) usually exert a strong influence in that discussion?
7. In your experience, is there a group that must affirm a new idea before it can become reality? In other words, what group can veto a new idea if it is not included in the discussion at an early stage?

*Note to incoming pastor:* In small churches with fewer than 100 in worship attendance, such an invisible power group may number only one or two people. In midsize congregations of 100 to 300 in worship attendance, such a power group might be the choir, an adult Sunday school class, the women’s organization, or the trustees. In larger churches, the power group may be the executive committee, the governing board, or the senior pastor.

Outgoing pastors never have a perfect take on reality. But hearing their responses to these questions can save time, reduce stress, and improve results.

#### Talk with Three Highly Respected Laypersons

Conduct these conversations one at a time, not as a group. Ask these questions:

1. Looking back over the years, when was our congregation’s effectiveness at its highest peak, and what was happening during that period? (*These answers picture an ideal time to which a few older people will keep hoping the church can return.*)



After some jolting surprises, the new pastor thinks more historical information regarding this church might have been helpful.

2. Looking back over the years, what pastors were exceptionally capable, and what did they do best? (*These answers predict how several people will unconsciously measure the incoming pastor's skills.*)

3. During the past five years, what are some of the best things that have happened in our church? (*These answers illustrate values and experiences that were meaningful to numerous people.*)

4. No organization is perfect. Thinking back across the last five years, what are some things that seem less than positive? (*These answers identify why some people criticized the outgoing pastor.*)

5. Looking down the road at the next five years, if you were asked to list some of the challenges our congregation is facing, what would you put on that list? (*These answers reveal many of the church's cherished values.*)

Some of these answers inevitably surface (a) weaknesses in the present program and staff, (b) points at which the church has insufficient staff, and (c) major criticisms of the last pastor.

### **Talk with the Personnel Committee**

Meet with the personnel committee (called staff-parish relations committee in some denominations) during your first week on the scene. Say to them that your effectiveness depends on their willingness to communicate with you honestly, especially in personnel committee meetings. Begin that communication by asking *everyone* in the room to take turns answering three questions:

First, ask, "In your opinion, what one or two good things are happening in our church right now?" Listen carefully. Take notes. (*They are telling you what the congregation highly values.*)

After everyone shares, ask the second question, insisting that everyone give an answer: "In your opinion, what one or two issues should we be concerned about as we work together to build the best possible ministry for future years?" Listen carefully. Take notes. (*They are giving you some of the congregation's dreams.*)

Finish with a third question. Again, insist that everyone express an opinion: "Which of the several issues we just mentioned should we put on the agenda for review at our next meeting?" (*They are giving you some of the congregation's priorities.*)

Thank them for sharing. Say that you want to meet with them quarterly throughout your tenure (bimonthly is better). Urge them to save their comments for the personnel committee meetings, "where we can think about them together"—rather than coming to you one at a time with their concerns.

At each meeting, repeat the three questions. Listen carefully. Take notes. This procedure prevents domination by the committee members who are the most comfortable with vocalizing.

By listening to one another, the committee gains a sense of unity and desire to work together as a team with the new pastor.

### **Talk with the Congregation**

Schedule a series of home gatherings to which you invite twelve and not more than sixteen people (in a larger group some people will not express their views). Ask the following questions:

1. What factors drew you to our congregation?

2. What is one of the most important things that happened in our congregation since you began attending?

3. What are some of the best things you see happening in our congregation right now?

4. As we look down the road at the next five years, what are some of your hopes and dreams for our church's future?

Ask a reporter to take notes. After all groups have met, publishing the results in summary form can create unity and begin to build momentum.

### **Talk with the Staff**

Meet with each staff member during the first three weeks after you arrive. State that you want to get acquainted with "how we do things around here."

In preparation for their meeting with you, ask staff members to write a detailed description of what they do, their schedule, and to whom they report.

At the meetings, review those role descriptions and ask clarification questions.

Then, ask these questions:

• What one or two ministry tasks occupy 70 percent of your time?

• What one or two skills do you feel are most important for someone in your type of ministry?

• What one or two things do you find yourself doing that make you wonder whether they are a waste of time?

• What can I do to help you succeed in your ministry?

Staff members know some things that no one else in this congregation knows. Help them feel that they are on your team and you are on their team.

### **Talk with Everyone**

Involve the governing board, committees, and ministry teams in selecting priorities and acting on them. One such process is the *How to Accomplish Effective Congregational Planning*, downloadable free of charge from the [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) Internet site.

### **The Bottom Line**

A poster featuring a cute kitten quips, "Things are always at their best in the beginning." To make your first year better—plus your later years—learn as much as possible from people who've been around for awhile.