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LEARNING LEADING CHANGING

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2002

## Congregational Vitality

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2002

## Congregational Vitality



KAREN STRLECKI

in Focus

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Diana Butler Bass

**Diana Butler Bass** holds a Ph.D. in American religion from Duke University. An award-winning writer, she is the author of two books on mainline religion, including *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community* (Jossey-Bass, 2002). She is still—after 20 years—an Episcopalian and currently teaches at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia.



Deborah Bruce

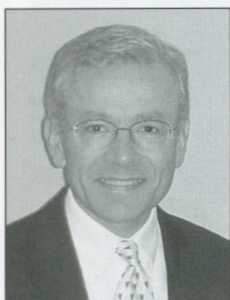
**Deborah Bruce** is associate research manager in the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She received her M.S. in research psychology from San Diego State University and has worked in a variety of applied research settings. Ms. Bruce is the project manager for the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, a research project involving more than 2,000 congregations and their worshipers.



Alan Schaffmeyer

**Rev. Dr. Peter Luckey** is senior pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) in Lawrence, Kansas. His previous pastorates were in Oak Park and Naperville, Illinois. In the summer of 2001, Rev. Luckey received a study grant from the Louisville Institute to develop a strategy for local UCC congregations to identify, mentor, and support young people going into the ministry. Rev. Luckey received his D.Min. from the Chicago Theological Seminary. His dissertation was on "The University Church: A Crucible for Integrating Faith and Work."

**Marlis McCollum** is a freelance writer from Reston, Virginia, who has published articles in CONGREGATIONS as well as *The National Gallery of Art Bulletin*, *The Potomac Almanac*, *The New Prince George's Post*, *The Prince George's Journal*, *Scrip Magazine*, and *Humanities*, the magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



Lee Smedley

**Rev. Alan Schaffmeyer** is interim senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Neenah, Wisconsin. He has served as a parish pastor for 20 years in New Hampshire and Wisconsin. For the past 10 years, Rev. Schaffmeyer has served as an intentional interim minister in East Central Wisconsin, where he specializes in "doing what needs to be done." In addition, he leads congregational workshops addressing issues of transition, conflict, and healthy separation.

**Dr. Lee Smedley** is principal of Smedley Consulting. His background includes work as a college professor and director of organizational development for a Fortune 500 company. Over the years, Dr. Smedley has been a member and lay leader in American Baptist, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and United Methodist congregations. Currently a member of the Bethany United Methodist Church in Hamburg, Pennsylvania, he serves on district and conference teams concerning pastoral transition, ordination, and conflict intervention.



Cynthia Woolever

**Dr. Cynthia Woolever** is associate for congregational studies in the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As a sociologist and consultant, she has 19 years of experience working with congregations, judicatories, and seminaries. Her Ph.D. in sociology is from Indiana University. She is the principal investigator for the Lilly Endowment-funded U.S. Congregational Life Survey, a research project involving more than 2,000 congregations and their worshipers.



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## More Data on Compensation

I HAVE JUST READ YOUR SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2002 ISSUE OF CONGREGATIONS, with particular interest in the ministerial compensation articles. I assume publication timing was the reason for its omission, but a major resource regarding ministerial compensation was not included: the 2002 compensation study of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. Although this study was limited to only one denomination, it included compensation data for 7,794 pastors, 6,353 staff ministers, 3,884 church office personnel, and 1,892 church custodians from over 8,000 SBC churches.

While most compensation study reports restrict a person to gleaning data only from pre-determined tables, a unique feature of this study is the customized study report. Using this option, one can prepare a report that gives averages for only those churches of similar attendance, membership, and budget.

The study was a joint project of 35 SBC state conventions in cooperation with the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. All of the data are available for free through the Annuity Board's Web site, [www.absbc.org](http://www.absbc.org). Or you can go directly to the SBC Compensation Study site at <http://server.kybaptist.org/compstudy>.

Thanks again for the excellent articles and additional resources on this subject.

### DONALD A. SPENCER

Director, Annuity Department  
Kentucky Baptist Convention

## Community Ministries

I COMPLIMENT YOU FOR THE FRESH APPROACH TO CONGREGATIONS and in particular for giving greater attention to public ministry. Your July/August issue was substantive and stimulating for readers with varying degrees of involvement in this field. For instance, I thought the opening article, "Addressing the Housing Crisis," was very effective in describing the affordable housing problem and proposing a wide spectrum of remedial steps.

I want to add another step for congregations to maximize their impact in addressing the housing crisis: join a coalition of congregations traditionally known as "community ministries." These organizations, which were popular in the 60s and 70s, are making a comeback. In fact, I am privileged to lead the prototype coalition for the Washington, D.C. area—based in Rockville United Church, where I am pastor—that is celebrating its 35-year anniversary after becoming interfaith. During that time our budget has grown to \$1.6 million. We employ 60 individuals and document in excess of 6,000 volunteer hours to sustain our ministries.

Affordable housing is a constant priority and we address it in several ways. First, our advocacy program has helped to legislate the issue into the master plan of the city as Rockville's top priority. The city now requires Moderate Priced Dwelling Units in all developments exceeding 50 units, and a coalition of public and private organizations will expand affordable housing to seniors. Second, as a nonprofit with credibility, we were able to obtain a HUD grant—to which we added modest dollars, volunteer organizers, and furnishings—to open three homes for persons moving out of our shelter and treatment programs. Congregations belonging to the coalition had the choice of adopting a home by themselves or with others. Soon congregants, civic association leaders, elected officials, fellow caregivers, and neighbors will be guests of these Hope Housing residents for grand dedications. Third, we assist seniors in independent living situations by providing a home-care program.

Community ministries make it possible for congregations of all sizes, budgets, traditions, and levels of expertise to become effective partners in addressing the housing crisis. Programs like ours are growing across the country as congregations seek more immediate ways to care for God's favorite people, the poor and vulnerable. For more information on community ministries, please contact the Interfaith Community Network at [ICMN@pointsoflight.org](mailto:ICMN@pointsoflight.org) or the National Association of Ecumenical and Interfaith Staff at [naeisjan@aol.com](mailto:naeisjan@aol.com).

### MANSFIELD M. KASEMAN

Executive Director, Community Ministries of Rockville  
Rockville, Maryland



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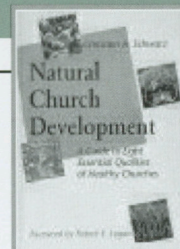
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By Christian A. Schwarz

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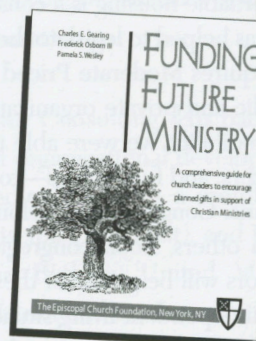
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# The Vital Leader

Of the four great stone faces that gaze out from Mount Rushmore, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the one most of us know least about is Theodore Roosevelt's. Situated between Lincoln, whom he loved, and Jefferson, whom he did not, Roosevelt is the only 20th century president deemed worthy to join his famous predecessors. Ironically, the Rushmore figure closest to us in time, and the one who did more to shape the modern presidency than almost anyone else, is the one who seems most remote.

Edmund Morris's biography *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001) is a major effort to fill in the blanks. Published just a year ago, this book (the second in a projected series of three volumes) focuses exclusively on TR as president. Morris tells the story of a vital leader, a man who filled any room he entered. Roosevelt was a "dynamo" who overwhelmed his staff, his colleagues, his enemies, and at times the entire nation. During his presidential tenure (1901–09) Roosevelt reshaped our nation by opposing the great corporate trusts that threatened to monopolize America. He dramatically enlarged the role of federal government in civil service reform, labor relations, and food and drug laws. He established great national parks and monuments and was the first to make conservation a presidential priority. He instigated the building of the Panama Canal, forever altering the flow of ships, trade, and military forces around the world. Repeatedly he led the United States from the safety of provincialism into uncharted international ventures, being among the first to attempt to realize America's "manifest destiny." The first chief executive who understood how to manipulate the modern press, TR was a genius at spin and leaks, two staples of our own time. The first U.S. president to win the Nobel Peace Prize, he made it seem that the fine arts of diplomacy and legislative politics were not notably difficult. By the time he left the White House, he had transformed the office of the presidency, the nation, and the relationships of nations around the world.

Even the challenges of high office could not absorb all his energies. When confined to Washington, Roosevelt could be spotted galloping through Rock Creek Park waving a revolver over his head, as

beleaguered colleagues scrambled to keep up. The author of more than 150,000 letters, 38 books, and countless magazine articles, he was also one of the most literate of presidents. During his first three years in the White House, he read 114 authors—the lightest being Mark Twain. Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, and Shakespeare were his regular fare.

## A Rushmore for Clergy?

In graduate school as I prepared for doctoral exams, Martin E. Marty, the University of Chicago's renowned historian of American religion, once asked me if I had a Mount Rushmore of religious leaders. I did not. But I have played the Mount Rushmore game ever since, chiseling faces into imaginary rock, erasing some, and chiseling again. A special form of that question puts the searchlight on pastoral leaders. If we were to carve a Mount Rushmore of great contemporary pastors, who would make the cut?

Oddly, when I ask people for their lists, few can name clergy equivalents of the Rushmore quartet. Part of the difficulty, of course, is that comparing presidents and clergy puts us in the apples-and-oranges trap. But more is going on here. Why do clergy seem to be background figures in current national leadership circles? Many believe that clergy have lost their public voice and influence. Our culture seems to have devalued clergy as leaders. We could spend much time and ink trying to explain why.

Rather than obsess on this puzzle, I want to cut against the grain. If we began looking for signs of vital congregational leaders, what might we turn up? Vigorous leaders like Roosevelt move people, for good and for ill. They fill their followers with energy and vision. They help people see themselves and their world differently. They alter the landscape.

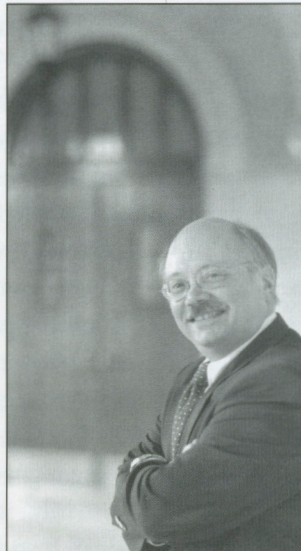
## Pastoral Sources of Vitality

Almost a decade ago, a group of journalists sought to offer portraits of vital congregational leaders. Their essay-length portraits were gathered into *Sources of Inspiration: 15 Modern Religious Leaders*, edited by Gene I. Maeroff (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1992). Despite its noble purpose, the book made little impact. I have heard few people refer to it.

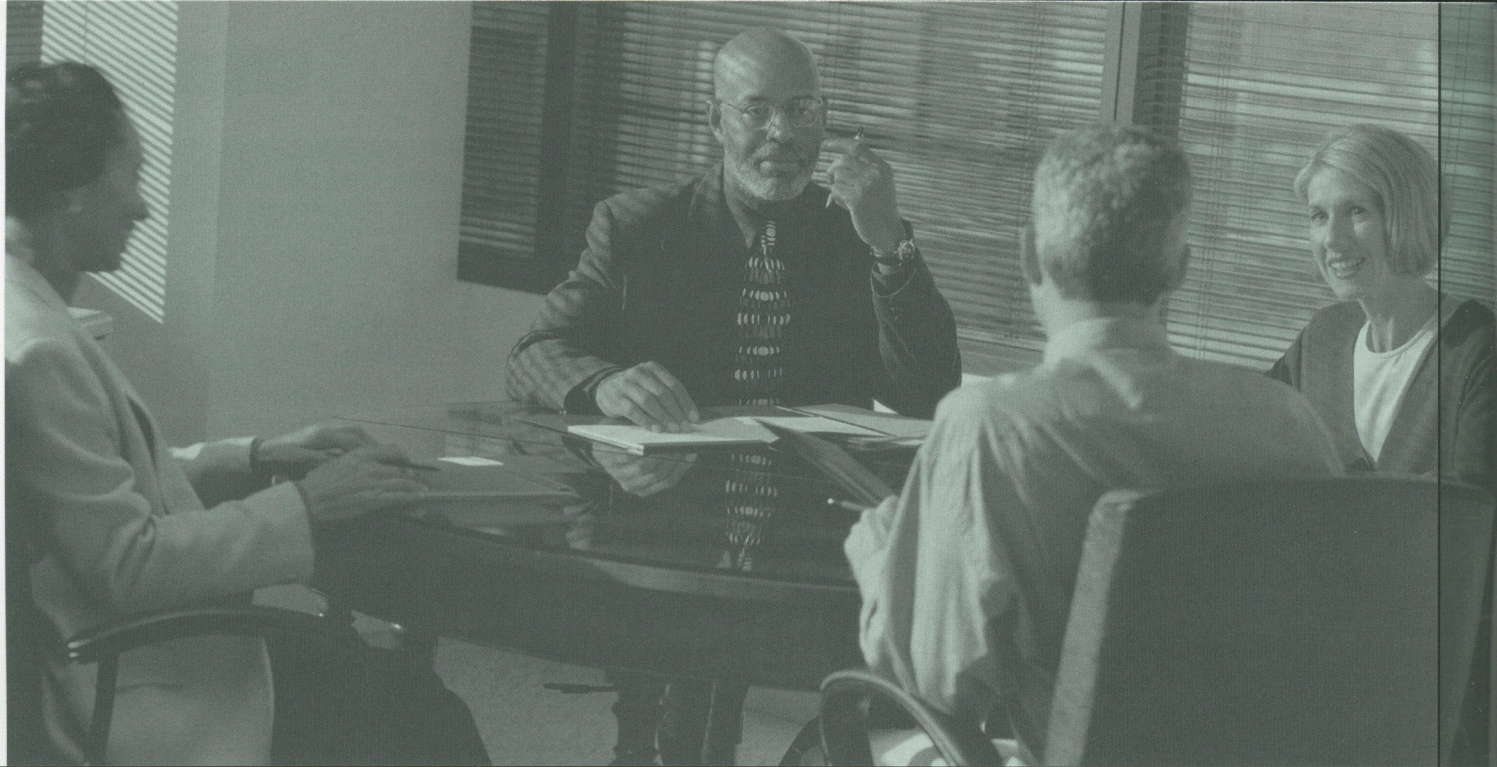
For a moment, I want to resurrect the book and to use it as both evidence and challenge. The hard-nosed journalists who wrote the stories clearly found important evidence. The 15 individuals portrayed in *Sources* were viewed by their contemporaries as sources of vitality. Male and female; Protestant, Catholic, Pentecostal, and Jew; white, Latino, and African American—they made the institutions they served into vital places. While they may not have become national Rushmore figures, they were seen by parishioners, colleagues, and candidates for ministry as local ones.

The challenge for us is to find more of them and to set off a debate about candidates for a new religious Rushmore. Above all, it is to ask, What made them so?

**Rev. Dr. James P. Wind** is the president of the Alban Institute. Prior to joining the Institute in 1995, he served as program director at the Lilly Endowment's religion division. Dr. Wind is the author of three books and numerous articles, including the Alban Institute Special Report on Leadership.







# It's About Discipleship

Two Alban consultants say vitality is about more than numbers

MARLIS MCCOLLUM

In this era of rapid cultural change and declining church attendance, many Protestant congregations have embarked upon efforts to recreate or redevelop themselves. They want to attract new members, improve their financial status, and increase the participation and enthusiasm of their current members—in essence, to become healthier and more robust. They call in consultants to help them write new mission statements and establish new visions for themselves. But what will be required of them if they are to change in ways that truly will bring them new life? What are the characteristics of what many have begun to call “congregational vitality”?

For two Alban Institute consultants, key factors in a church's health are the spiritual growth of its members, its participation in outreach activities, and its cultivation of members' ability and willingness to express their faith and their unique God-given gifts in the world.

“I look at whether the congregation is doing a good job of using its resources, primarily its people and time,” says Alban Institute consultant Terry Foland,

a pastor in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). “I want to know whether the congregation is using those resources well. Is it serving people beyond its own membership, doing outreach into the community, or is it concerned only with maintaining itself and addressing its own needs?” To be truly healthy, he says, a congregation needs to serve both its own members and the community outside its walls.

In many churches, however, the value of outreach is not readily perceived. “In a consumer-oriented culture such as ours, a good many people think that what the church needs to provide is something for them,” Foland says. “They don't think of the church being called to service beyond itself, so that's one of the struggles that congregations often face when they begin the process of reinventing themselves.”

Alban consultant Ed White, a Presbyterian pastor, has a similar view. “One key mark of congregational vitality is the level of discipleship of members,” he says. “It seems to me that we are in the business of trying to transform lives and to help people discover their gifts—and to



develop and exercise those gifts for the glory of God, not only in the church institution but also in the workplace, the home, and the community.”

### Assessment is Key

As a first step in the redevelopment process, both consultants have churches assess their current vitality. Foland has determined that at least 12 areas of a congregation's health must be considered, and within each of those categories he asks church boards to consider several questions. He is interested, for example, in how the congregation's norms and values evolved, and how much its past determines its present and future life.

Other questions inquire into the congregation's identity as a community. What is its culture or ethos? What sort of climate does it provide for newcomers and longer-term members? Does it value differences, deal effectively with conflict, and provide ways for all members equally to get their needs met? How open is the church to hear God's call as a faith community? Is it successful at helping members grow in their spiritual life? Is it responsive to the needs of the surrounding community? Foland also asks about the congregation's shared vision—whether it has one at all and, if so, how members arrived at it and refined it. How broad, he asks church leaders, is the congregation's worldview?

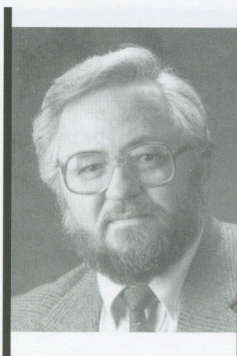
The answers to these and other questions, he says, provide a way for a congregation to increase its awareness of areas needing attention. (For more details, see “The Marks of a Healthy Church” online at [www.alban.org/journal.asp](http://www.alban.org/journal.asp).)

### Surveying Expectations

White uses a similar device to begin a congregational process of self-assessment. He has developed a list of 15 possible expectations a church might have of its members (see the box on page 8) and asks church board members to identify those items that are now employed and those that are desirable but not in operation.

“The items that they invariably check as operative in their membership are supporting the church financially, coming to church on Sunday morning, showing up on Christmas and Easter, serving on committees, and conforming to the culture of the church,” says White. “And anybody who does those things consistently is considered a member in good standing,” he adds. “What that shows is that most of our churches are low-expectation churches; they are in the membership business. They are in the business of recruiting members who will attend and support the institution. . . . [not] the disciple-making business.”

The items typically identified as being desirable but not in current use include



In a consumer-oriented culture such as ours, a good many people think that what the church needs to provide is something for them. They don't think of the church being called to service beyond itself.

— Rev. Terry Foland, Alban Institute Consultant, Astoria, Illinois

members deliberately pursuing spiritual growth through study and prayer; discovering in what they do all week a vocation instead of just a job; developing and exercising their spiritual gifts, both in the church and in the world; sharing their faith; inviting others to church; and being involved in pastoral care.

“What I find from this exercise is that most of the leadership in our churches would like to reclaim the vision of what it means to be in the disciple-making business,” says White. “I think the health of a congregation is reflected in what is happening to its members, and a fundamental difference between a membership church and a disciple-making church is its expectation of change in its members. You could be a member of a membership church for 50 or 60 years and never change. If a newcomer asked, ‘What does

it mean to be a member of this church?’ I would like the answer to be ‘That you are going to grow and change—you are going to grow emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually; and you are going to grow theologically as a follower of Jesus, because we believe that as we work and learn and worship together, God changes us.’ And I would say that a healthy congregation is [a place] where that is happening.”

### Research Provides Comparison Data

While their work with congregations has taught both Foland and White much about what is required for a church to be vital, recent research supports many of their assumptions, and both consultants

now use this research to assist congregations in evaluating their own health and expanding their vision of what it means to be a vital congregation.

For White, the work of German Lutheran theologian Christian A. Schwarz has proved most useful. In his 1996 book, *Natural Church Development*, Schwarz describes the findings from his study of 1,000 Protestant congregations in 32 countries. When all the data were tabulated, he concluded that eight characteristics were consistently present in healthy, growing congregations and missing in unhealthy, declining congregations. These included empowering leadership; development, discernment, and exercise of members' God-given gifts; passionate spirituality; effective structures; inspiring worship; healthy small groups; loving relationships; and evangelism oriented to



the individual's needs (see the box on page 9 for details).

White asks congregations to rate themselves on these characteristics. "What I have found is that the lowest scores for mainline Protestant churches are almost always in passionate spirituality and need-oriented evangelism," he says. "In these churches the category of passionate spirituality isn't even on the radar screen. . . . [It's a revelation for congregations] to suddenly discover that they have a major problem that they weren't even conscious of."

### Being vs. Doing

Most churches embarking on a redevelopment process, White says, talk about

what they should do—new programs they should offer, new fundraising projects they should try, or new building plans, for instance—but he believes their focus is off the mark. "The eight qualities Schwarz has identified have more to do with a quality of being. It's that being-level issue that I think is at the heart of any kind of congregational transformation," he says. "We tend to generate more busy-ness for ourselves without dealing with the essential quality or character of the congregation."

White has also found that using Schwarz's eight characteristics helps churches focus on these qualitative issues. He suggests initiatives for congregations. "Schwarz's wisdom," he says, "is that you go to work on your lowest-

scoring characteristic because you are going to get the greatest improvement not only in that one quality but in the overall health of the church."

Foland also recently began using research in his work with congregations seeking to redevelop themselves. For this purpose, he finds the recently published *Field Guide to U.S. Congregations* by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (see an article by these authors on page 10) useful to congregations as a comparison base. Authors of the guide describe the results of their 2001 study of 2,000 U.S. congregations, in which they surveyed participants on many of the questions Foland puts to congregations. Like White, Foland also asks congregations to score themselves in each of the 12 primary categories he has identified as being important to a congregation's health. The scores themselves are less important than the discussion generated, he says. "That's all a survey like this is valuable for. It's how you open the door to good conversation among people."

### Involving the Congregation

Of particular importance, Foland contends, is involving the entire congregation in redevelopment. He begins by informing the congregation at a worship service about the church's goal of redefining and revitalizing itself and the process that will be used to effect change. He then meets with worshipers informally to get a sense of the key questions they believe need to be addressed. Later he conducts individual and group interviews, as well as small-group discussions. "Then, when I work with the board or long-range planning committee, we have not only their thinking but also the thinking of the people who participated in these discussions," Foland says. In all, he estimates that from 40 to 50 percent of a church's membership is typically involved in the redevelopment process, and the entire membership is kept informed at worship services.

## WHAT DO WE EXPECT OF OUR MEMBERS?

*Many congregations suffer because they have no meaningful expectations of church members. Often, members lose interest and become inactive because they have not been challenged to grow, to make a difference, to be a living part of the Body of Christ. Mark an "X" next to items on the list that are now operating norms in your congregation (meaning that most members practice them) and a "Y" beside items that are not now operating norms but that you would like to see in that category.*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. To support the congregation financially.  | <input type="checkbox"/> 8. To exercise one's God-given gifts in the workplace, home, and community.           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. To tithe.   | <input type="checkbox"/> 9. To discover in what one does all week long a "calling," not just a job.            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. To give a percentage of one's income.   | <input type="checkbox"/> 10. To talk about the work of God in one's life and to share one's faith with others. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. To attend regularly on Sunday morning.  | <input type="checkbox"/> 11. To invite friends and family members to church.                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. To pursue spiritual growth with intention, through Bible study, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> 12. To accept the norms of the congregation for dealing with differences.             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6. To conform to the congregational culture (for example, to like the hymns most members like and to accept the service as it is). | <input type="checkbox"/> 13. To serve on a committee.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7. To discover, develop, and exercise one's God-given gifts and talents in the life of the church.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> 14. To participate in a small group that will provide nurture and pastoral care.      |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> 15. To show up at Christmas and Easter.   |



## Cultural Shifts, Changing Challenges

The issues congregations usually raise for discussion, Foland says, relate to whether to offer more than one service or style of worship and how the church should organize itself. "Most congregations," he explains, "have a structure that came out of post-World War II, when the church was growing rapidly, and it is mostly structured on a business model—a board and functional departments." In many cases, committees and subcommittees that are no longer needed are still listed on the organizational chart. "In today's culture," Foland explains, "a lot of people don't want to commit themselves to a two- or three-year term on a committee that meets once a month whether it has any business or not, but they are willing to commit three to six months to a task or issue they feel is important." He continues, "The struggle for churches is how to throw off the traditional organi-

cultural trends—what's acceptable and how we live with it," he observes, citing the increasing impact of technology on our lives, shifting tastes in music and entertainment, changing notions of marriage and family, and the increasing trend of cohabitation. Even the routine use of credit in our financial dealings has profound implications for how the church approaches the issue of stewardship. Of particular importance in reaching the younger generation, he says, is attention to shifting tastes in music and music's ability to communicate.

White points to another factor that inhibits change in mainline Protestant churches—the fact that many continue to be run by those who, like himself, attended seminary 40 to 50 years ago and were taught to believe in a single, fixed truth and to worship God with their minds. "We were not trained to be spiritual leaders; we were trained to be resident theologians so that we could tell a



The eight qualities Schwarz has identified have more to do with a quality of being. It's that being-level issue that I think is at the heart of any kind of congregational transformation.

— Rev. Ed White, Alban Institute Consultant, Washington, D.C.

zational structure and to determine what structure is needed to carry out their mission as they understand it."

Complicating churches' efforts to reinvent themselves, White adds, is our rapidly changing environment. He identifies the cultural emphasis on hyperindividualism and consumerism and politicians' idolatry of the nation-state as particularly troublesome. "How can you be a Christian in a culture whose values for the most part are antithetical to everything Jesus taught?" he asks churches.

Foland agrees. "There is a continuing [interface] of the congregation with the

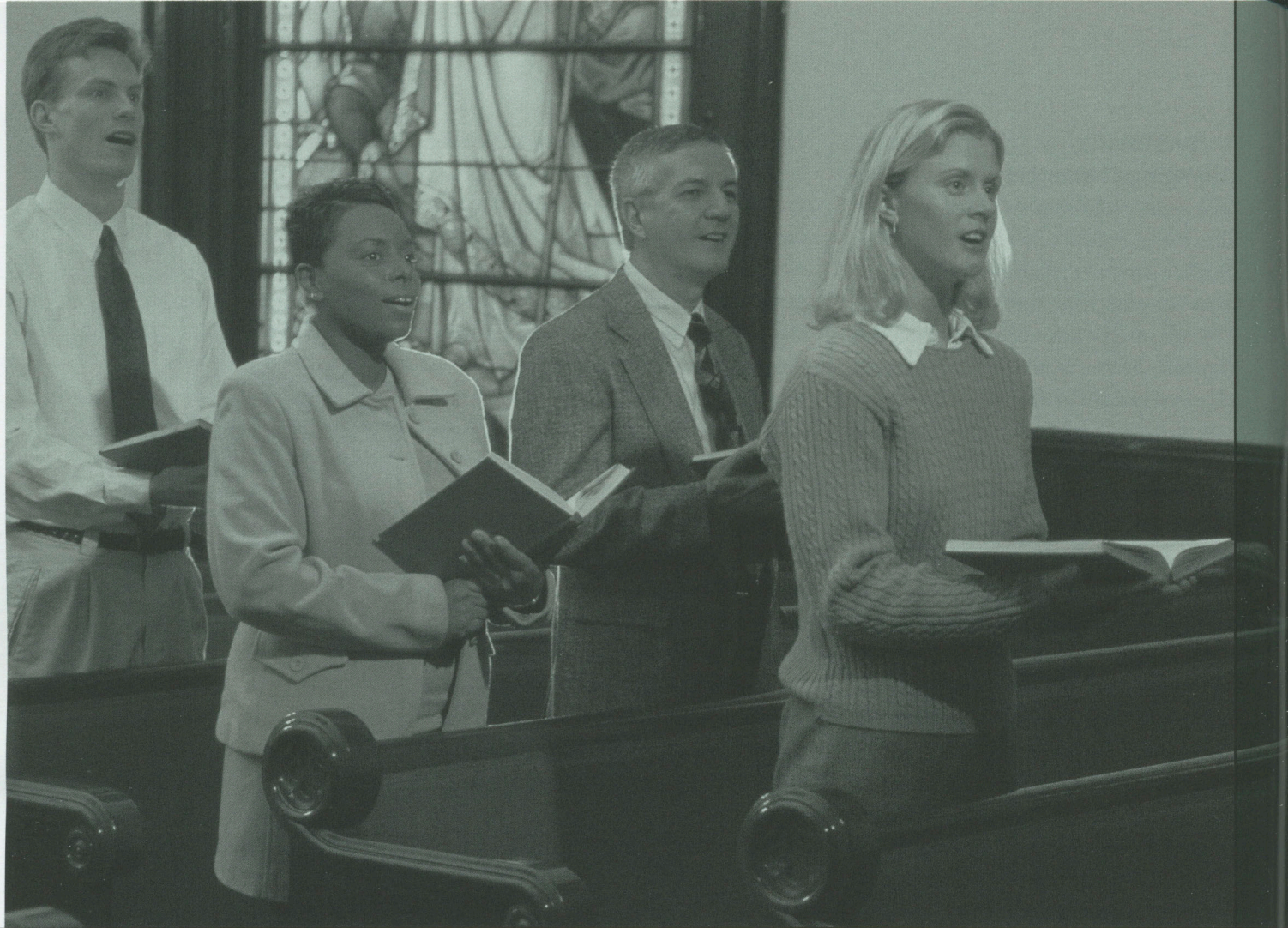
congregation how the Christian faith was a wonderful theological system in which everything made sense. But people are not interested in that anymore. They want to know 'Does it work?'" Understanding these differences is key if churches are going to change, White says. "The difference between the generations today is a whole different way of viewing the world and understanding reality, and this is one of the primary challenges for us if we are to reach the younger generation—those born after the baby boom ended in 1964." ♦

## Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches

*In his 1996 book **Natural Church Development** (Churchsmart Resources), German Lutheran theologian Christian A. Schwarz discusses the findings of his study of 1,000 Protestant congregations in 32 countries. From the analysis of 31,000 survey questionnaires completed in 18 languages, Schwarz identified eight quality characteristics found together in all high-quality, growing congregations:*

1. **EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP.** "Rather than handling the bulk of church responsibilities on their own, they invest the majority of their time in discipleship, delegation, and multiplication."
2. **GIFT-ORIENTED MINISTRY.** "When Christians serve in their area of giftedness, they generally function less in their own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit."
3. **PASSIONATE SPIRITUALITY.** "[T]he life of faith as a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ."
4. **FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURES.** Churches are liberated from being tradition-bound.
5. **INSPIRING WORSHIP SERVICE.** "Going to church is fun."
6. **HOLISTIC SMALL GROUPS.** "The larger a church becomes, the more decisive the small group principle will be with respect to further growth." (Schwarz found that for nearly all relevant quality factors, larger churches compare unfavorably with smaller ones, and that the growth rate of churches tends to decrease with increasing size.)
7. **NEED-ORIENTED EVANGELISM.** "The gift of evangelism applies to no more than 10 [percent] of all Christians."
8. **LOVING RELATIONSHIPS.** Congregations are characterized by lots of hospitality and laughter.





# Ordinary People, Strong Congregations

## A New Profile of People in the Pews

CYNTHIA WOOLEVER  
AND DEBORAH BRUCE

In the final moments of the film *Jurassic Park III* the scientist hero talks with the young boy who dreams of being a scientist. The scientist explains the difference between astronauts and astronomers. He says astronauts accomplish exceptional feats. By contrast, astronomers seldom become famous, but they make those exceptional feats possible. People of faith are like astronomers—essential partners in helping their congregations accomplish an extraordinary mission. Strong congregations are like astronauts—extraordinary heroes moving toward a realm that only God can bring.

Describing a strong congregation rests on our understanding of what a congregation is and what its purpose or mission is. Evaluating a congregation's strengths should reflect how well it is doing in "being"

a congregation. Congregations are strong if they consistently, effectively, efficiently, and collectively achieve the goal of being a congregation. Are they gathering people for worship that is meaningful to those in their community? Are they replacing lost members and welcoming new people? Are they teaching others about the faith, especially the young? Do they provide places where people are emotionally and spiritually nurtured? Are they sharing their abundance with others? Are they conveying a message of hope and meaning?

What is at the heart of strong, vital congregations? A recent study of America's congregations—from Christian to Jewish to Buddhist—profiled their strengths in four areas:

**Spiritual connections**—the worship and faith dimensions of congregations.



**Inside connections**—worshippers' activities within the congregation.

**Outside connections**—how congregations and worshippers reach out to and serve those in the community.

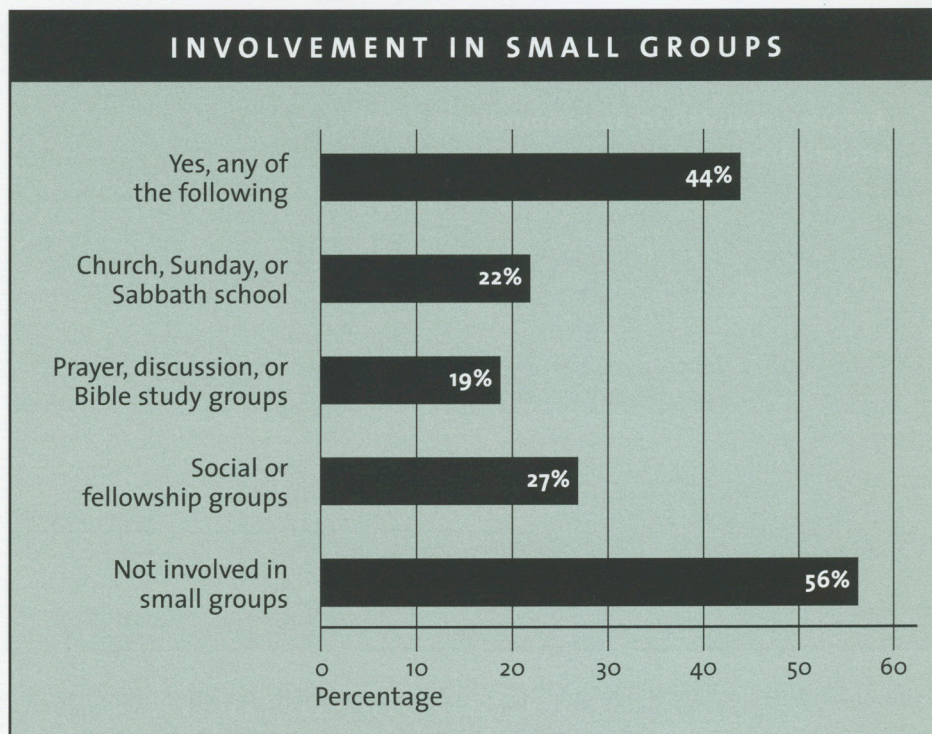
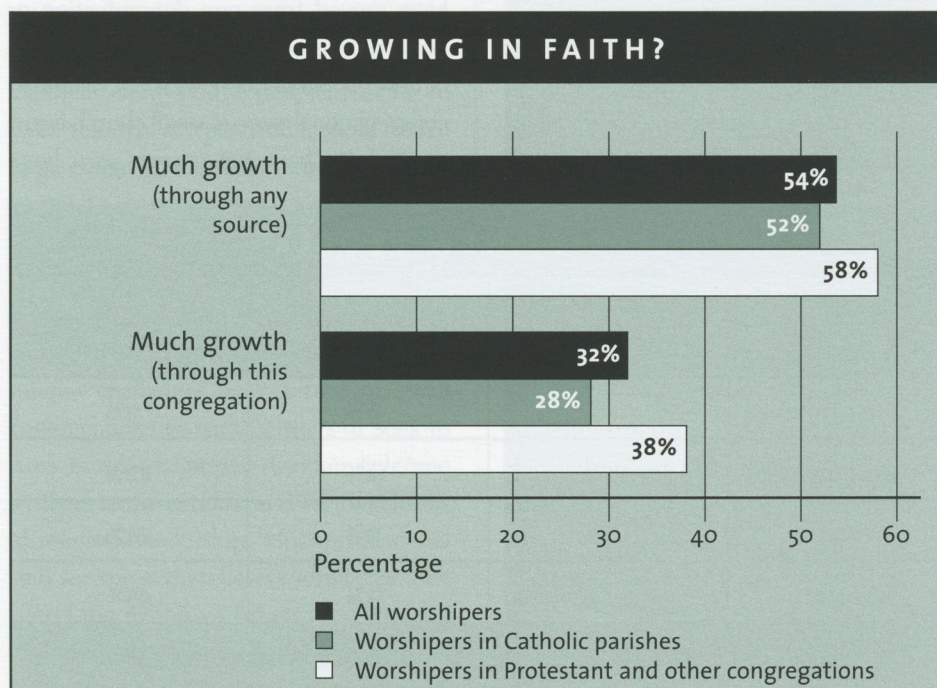
**Identity connections**—who worshippers are and how they see their congregation's future.

More than 2,000 congregations participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, making it the largest study of worshippers ever conducted. Here is some of what we learned from surveying 300,000 worshippers.

### Spiritual Connections

**Where do worshippers find their spiritual growth?** More than half of worshippers (54 percent) said they experienced *much growth* in their faith in the past year (39 percent reported some growth in faith). What fuels their growth in faith? Among those who experienced much growth, most said it came through taking part in the activities of their congregation. A second source of spiritual growth came through the practice of private devotions. The clear majority of worshippers (63 percent) reported that they pray, read the Bible or other sacred

text, or meditate. Almost half (45 percent) said they devote time to this practice daily. Most worshippers (86 percent) said they find services and congregational activities helpful and relevant to their everyday lives. Our findings indicate that many congregations, especially small ones (those with fewer than 100 attending worship services), show strength in nurturing worshippers and encouraging their spiritual growth.



### Inside Connections

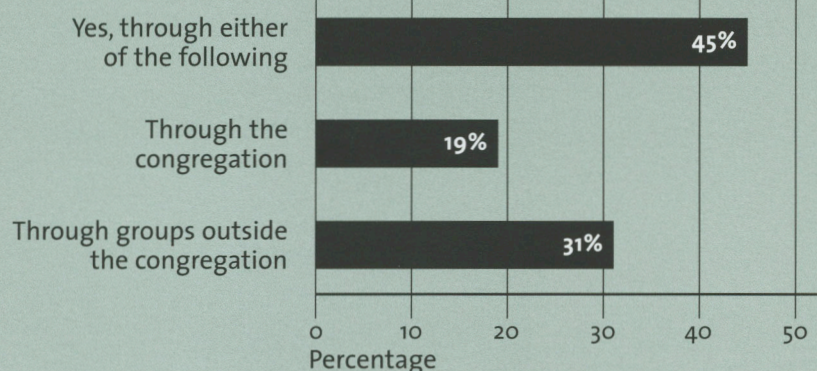
**How are worshippers involved in their congregations?** Attending worship services is the way most people participate in congregational life. Eighty-three percent of the people in the pews reported attending worship services regularly (every week or almost every week). This fact points to the centrality of worship in congregations of all denominations and faith groups and underscores the need to ensure that worship is meaningful. In what other ways do worshippers connect with their congregations? Fewer than half of all worshippers (44 percent) reported involvement in small-group activities associated with their congregation, such as church school, other religious education classes, prayer circles, groups studying the Bible or other sacred texts, or social groups. Small-group participation is more likely to be a strength in small or mid-size congregations, in the congregations of historically black denominations, and in conservative Protestant churches.

Many congregations provide ample opportunities for people in the pew to assume leadership roles. More than one-third of worshippers (38 percent) have one or more leadership positions in the congregation. Being a leader is strongly linked to



## SERVING THE COMMUNITY

Are you involved in any community service, social service, or advocacy groups?



levels of monetary giving. While only one in five overall reports giving 10 percent or more of income to the congregation, regular worshipers and those in leadership positions are more likely than others to give at this level. Small congregations excel in this area—a higher percentage of their worshipers invest in congregational life through leading and financial giving.

### Outside Connections

**How are worshipers involved in their communities?** Worshipers are active citizens. Almost half of all worshipers (45 percent) said they are involved in community service, social service, or advocacy groups. Some take part in such activities through their congregations (19 percent), but a larger number (31 percent) are involved through other organizations. Involving people in community service is a strength of mid-size congregations or parishes—those with between 100 and 350 in worship. Also, churches in historically black and mainline Protestant denominations show above-average strength in these types of community interactions.

Worshipers are far more likely to vote than the average American. More than three-quarters (76 percent) of all worshipers (compared to one-half of the

U.S. population) said they voted in the most recent presidential election. And worshipers are good neighbors. Almost three in four gave money to a charitable organization other than their congregation in the past year. In mid-size and large congregations, and in mainline Protestant churches, larger percentages of worshipers vote and give to charitable causes. Communities of faith are not always aware of the extent to which their worshipers are responding to the call to be messengers of hope and justice in the world.

### Identity Connections

**Who worships and where?** Another strength of congregations lies in the characteristics of the average worshiper.

Worshipers are better educated than the average American. Thirty-eight percent have college degrees (compared to 23 percent for the U.S. population). Along with their active community involvement, this strength attests to faith communities' potential for transforming their neighborhoods and cities.

One-third of worshipers are “new people”—having started attending their current congregation or parish in the past five years. In fact, 20 percent have been in their congregation for two years or less. This high turnover indicates that congregations are not as stable or static as they are commonly portrayed. Welcoming new people and incorporating them into small groups and leadership roles requires explicit, ongoing efforts. Are there avenues to ensure that newcomers understand, feel part of, and support the mission of the congregation?

While most new people (57 percent) are transfers from other congregations of the same denomination or faith tradition, a healthy percentage (25 percent) are getting involved in a congregation or parish for the first time ever, or are coming back to a faith community after staying away for a while. The remaining new people (18 percent) are “switchers” who have moved from one denomination or faith tradition to another. The proportion of new people in the pews is not related to congregational size—a small church is just as likely to have newcomers as a large

## TYPES OF NEW PEOPLE\*

	All Worshipers	Catholic Worshipers	Protestant and Other Worshipers
First-timers	7%	6%	9%
Returnees	18%	12%	22%
Switchers	18%	9%	24%
Transfers	57%	73%	45%

\*New people are those attending the congregation for five years or less.



parish or congregation. However, churches in historically black denominations are likely to have the fewest new arrivals in the last five years, while conservative Protestant congregations are more likely than other faith groups to draw larger numbers of new people.

### The Larger Galaxy: Some Challenges

Certainly the constellation of America's congregational life is not all positive. One problematic paradox lies in this fact: Most congregations are small, but most worshipers attend large congregations. Just 10 percent of U.S. congregations—the largest ones—draw 50 percent of all worshipers each week. The smallest 10 percent of congregations gather only around 11 percent of worshipers in a given week. This extreme unevenness in the average size of congregations and the experiences of worshipers has far-reaching consequences. Small congregations, those with fewer than 100 attending services, find it a strain to fund the salary and benefits of a full-time pastor or priest. As more people experience large churches, the small-church experience will be a foreign one to increasing numbers. As people move and look for new places of worship, this trend may begin to feed on itself. A third consequence stems from the experiences of clergy. Most people seeking to enter ministry as a profession come from a large-congregation experience. As they complete their seminary or other education, they often hope to serve in congregations like the ones they came from—most often large congregations, in urban or suburban locations. Few will know the unique challenges and culture of small congregations or rural settings or seek to work in those contexts. Another outcome surfaces at the national and regional levels of religious leadership. Most professional staff serving at these levels admit that they spend the majority of their time working with the half of congregations that represent only one in 10 worshipers.

Many congregations struggle with finances. Almost all congregations and parishes (99 percent) list individual contributions (in the form of offerings, pledges, donations, or dues) as the largest source of income. The median congregational income from all sources is about \$105,000 annually, and congregational expenses average just \$5,500 less than average income. Operating expenses alone average about \$84,000 annually. Thus, the typical congregation spends most of its income on day-to-day operating expenses and a much smaller portion on program and mission. Most congregations are extremely vulner-

able to shifts in giving, worship attendance, and the local economy.

### Beyond the Ordinary

Are congregations called to be strong in new ways? The ordinary congregation stops short, limits options, and gets stuck in old ways of doing things. Ordinary people are often afraid to venture into uncharted territory. Like astronauts, people in faith communities need to make leaps into the future and into the unknown. Although many congregations are already strong and getting stronger, there is no reason we cannot become even more heroic. In light of the stakes, we must. ♦

## More about the U.S. Congregational Life Survey

Worshipers in more than 2,000 congregations from all 50 states participated in the study. In each participating congregation all worshipers age 15 and older who attended worship services during the weekend of April 29, 2001, completed a survey yielding more than 300,000 responses. Other forms collected information about the key leader and the congregation's facilities, staff, and services.

The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago identified a random sample of U.S. congregations attended by individuals who participated in the General Social Survey (GSS) in the year 2000. Each of these congregations was invited to participate in the project in 2001.

*A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations (Who's Going Where and Why)*, published by Westminster John Knox Press (2002) and written by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, contains the first summary of the national findings. A second book, also by Woolever and Bruce, focusing on congregational vitality, *Beyond the Ordinary*, is scheduled for release in mid-2003.

Congregational leaders interested in seeing how their congregation and worshipers compare to the national picture can use the survey in their worship services. Call Research Services at 888-728-7228, extension 2040, to order survey forms and all other materials needed to conduct the survey in your worship services. Or to learn more about the survey, how to compare your congregation to the national benchmarks, or to see more results, visit the U.S. Congregational Life Survey project Web site, [www.uscongregations.org](http://www.uscongregations.org).





# Confessions of a Reformed Problem Solver

## Alternative Methods Can Help Build Vitality In a Congregation

LEE SMEDLEY

Problem solving is a valuable tool. I've found, however, that it can be overused, much to the detriment of group morale. Alternatives are available—ones I believe to be consistent with the affirmations of Scripture—that can be used to build vitality in a faith community.

Early in my business career in training and development, I was sought out to consult with problem-solving teams. The tools of logical problem solving have been widely used in the business world. They are also appropriate for many purposes in the church—for example, addressing high utility bills or assigning priorities to strategies.

Later, leading organizational development work within my corporation, with nonprofit boards, and with church groups

in conflict, I added other effective tools to the kit—envisioning, team building, and the management of conflict and change. Still, I sensed that something was missing as my clients and I took on more challenging tasks. Too often we felt bone-weary, as though we were carrying the weight of the world. Sometimes resistance overwhelmed us as we sought to put our solutions into practice.

What had gone wrong? I had overused my problem-solving skills and had begun viewing nearly all situations as problems to be solved. I do not suggest that we banish problem solving from faith communities. I do, however, suggest that the secular world has so reinforced and overused this approach that we must exercise caution not to overuse it in our work. When the roof



leaks, it's time for problem solving. When the congregation seeks to discern the Lord's call to action, other options are probably more appropriate.

## Finding New Methods

We commonly employ a set of assumptions, what Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline* calls "mental models" in our day-to-day work. Mental models, or assumptions, that have worked for us in the past represent a kind of shorthand for deciding what to do in our complex and conflicted world. Senge suggests that our ability to use mental models is a core discipline.

Danger emerges when we see the world as though our mental models were reality rather than one way of viewing reality. I knew that. After all, organizational development consultants are paid to help others examine the assumptions and core beliefs behind their actions.

Yet I was regularly overusing the mental model of problem solving, even as a starting point for viewing situations. I was approaching the variety of tools I had learned as nothing more than ways to solve problems. That's like having a complete set of surgeons' tools, a professional woodworking shop, and an automotive diagnostic center at my fingertips, but using them only to change watch batteries! I was stuck.

Discomfort can be the beginning of wisdom. I was humbled, forced to acknowledge my lack of effectiveness. Then I began to listen more to others, to examine my assumptions, and to read others' views. I needed new mental models for my work.

Scripture spoke. For building a faith community and identifying with God's plans for our lives, I found perspectives other than problem solving. I found inspiration, a sense of new possibilities, indeed of new life. Three of my favorite scriptures speak to this reality: 1 Corinthians 12 points to the value of differences and their strength in a common purpose like the

church; Joel 2:28-29 describes a vision for members of a faith community; and Eph. 2:10 tells of the good things already planned for us to do.

To use the guidance of Scripture is not to ignore the reality of sin and brokenness, nor to assume that productive change comes without conflict. It is rather a perspective on the rightful response to God's gift of grace. As I relearned these lessons of faith, I knew that I needed to regard conflict, chaos, and mystery in congregational life as something other than problems. I needed

PROBLEM SOLVING	APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY
Identify problems.	Appreciate what is (discover).
Conduct root cause analysis.	Imagine what might be (dream).
Brainstorm solutions and analysis.	Determine what should be (design).
Develop action plans.	Create what will be (destiny).

to understand them as possibilities for building community and vitality.

In my own search over the past few years, I've found two useful approaches: *appreciative inquiry* and *polarity management*. After a brief overview of each, I will offer suggestions on how to help congregations develop their own vitality while keeping problem solving in its rightful place. Examples include updating strategic plans, dealing with conflict, and developing a vision.

## Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry draws out people's passion for the organization and builds dreams for the future. It includes designing a plan for establishing that future, and making it happen *without* problem solving. Imagine the passion members of your organization might express in response to these questions and suggestions of "appreciative inquiry":

- ◆ Tell about a high point in your life as a member of this congregation, when you felt most effective and engaged.

Describe how you felt and what made the situation possible.

- ◆ What do you value most about being a member of this congregation? Why?
- ◆ Describe three of your concrete wishes for the future of this congregation.

The concept of appreciative inquiry emerged from social science research into healthy community-based organizations in the late 1970s; now it shows up in seminary courses across the nation. It has gained renown as a way to involve large

numbers of people in large-scale change, often in a matter of days or weeks.

The chart on this page shows how appreciative inquiry differs from problem solving. While I am not an appreciative inquiry purist, some say that if this tool is to work, one must keep the problem solving mentality at bay. In my view, many group exercises and activities can work as either appreciative inquiry or problem solving. The difference is in the mental model—problem solving is fixing something that's wrong; appreciative inquiry is stepping into something very right.

## Polarity Management

Polarity management is an approach to the dynamics, often viewed as problems, that never disappear in organizations. In *Polarity Management*, Barry Johnson refers to these unsolvable problems as polarities. In such situations two sides of an issue are always present, and the viewpoints are interdependent. The process of breathing is not a problem to be solved, as in "Which should I do—inhale or



exhale?" This polarity must be managed for health, with an ebb and flow between the two processes.

Polarities in faith communities are often approached as problems to be solved rather than polarities to be managed:

- ♦ conservative vs. liberal points of view,
- ♦ safety/security vs. personal freedom, and
- ♦ tradition vs. innovation in worship.

Barry Johnson's model permits groups with widely differing viewpoints to communicate the upside and downside of each perspective, and to determine together how best to manage the polarity to address the needs of the organization.

An excellent resource on the use of this process in a church setting is Joseph Phelps's *More Light, Less Heat*. He suggests that entering into dialogue on a polarity expecting a solution is not reasonable. While commitment to action is often an outcome of productive dialogue, it is not a precondition. In polarity management in faith communities, mystery and possibility transcend the problem/solution model.

### Working for Long-term Vitality

Here are four recommendations for building or recapturing vitality:

**1. If problem solving does not lead to lasting solutions, explore and use other ways to view the situation.** Here are two examples, one with appreciative inquiry and the other with polarity management as an alternative.

In planning a 10-day process to update a vision and strategic plan for a group of Methodist churches in St. Vincent, West Indies, the Rev. Cuthbert Edwards, then superintendent minister of the Kingstown-Chateaubelair Circuit, and I shared our common disappointment with previous efforts to update existing plans in our careers. Edwards was concerned that the sessions he was sponsoring could descend into bickering and could focus on what had not been accomplished in light of the envisioning and planning for 2002. He also wanted to create a wider sense of owner-

ship for the new vision and plan for 2007, hoping to involve many more laity than were included in the planning for 2002. We chose from the start to focus on the process from an appreciative inquiry mindset.

Edwards set the stage in his kickoff to the program: "We need to celebrate our accomplishments, acknowledge the past, and step with excitement into the future." While we had copies of the 2002 documents available, we spent more time exploring with the participants their celebrations of the past. With purpose, we avoided expending time and energy on trying to solve the problem of what had

directive or responsive. It's rather a polarity to be managed with an understanding that the pastor may at times be directive or responsive, depending on the needs of the congregation. I've helped design discussions that explore the strengths and weaknesses of the directive/responsive pastoral leadership polarity, and I have seen congregations begin to break the unhealthy cycle.

### 2. In envisioning the future, start from what works now, and build on it.

Some congregations begin their envisioning already depressed. Having read books on best practices and critical success factors, they feel overwhelmed. Using a

Focusing on which aspects of the present can be used to move ahead helps create the realistic optimism necessary for progress. Some of the most creative organizational innovations have come from those who are aware of but not bridled by "best practices" or a list of success factors.

not been accomplished in Vision 2002. That stance helped clergy and laity alike to appreciate their accomplishments in the Lord's name and to take ownership of what they discerned as God's will for their churches over the next five years.

Using polarity management, I've been able to help congregations in conflict over the pastor's leadership style—directive or responsive. This disagreement is often articulated in question like this one: "Who is in charge—the pastor or the lay leadership?" Battle lines are drawn, with some congregants hoping to replace the current pastor with one who will do what they desire. Many a congregation has repeated the predictable cycle (firing, hiring, firing) over a decade or more, with several short-term pastoral tenures.

From the frame of polarity management, this behavior is not a problem of choosing a pastor who will be either

mental model of problem solving, they start with a "less-than" mind-set. And they are not at all excited about "getting fixed."

Beginning the process with the group firmly grounded in an appreciation of the present and past helps minimize the "we'll never make it" syndrome. This approach represents a choice of appreciative inquiry over problem solving. Focusing on which aspects of the present can be used to move ahead helps create the realistic optimism necessary for progress. Some of the most creative organizational innovations have come from those who are aware of but not bridled by "best practices" or a list of success factors. These organizations either ignore the standards they "should" be following, or choose to establish a new approach to excellence which hasn't yet been measured.

A favorite example suggests how "best practices" might be misapplied: Picture a



small country church—average attendance, 40; average age, 70. Imagine how dismayed the members would be if they felt obliged to develop youth programs, media campaigns, and diversity and social-justice programs identified as “best practices” by a national church publication. The bondage of someone else’s best practices might have blinded them to the possibilities within—knitting caps for crack babies, developing a senior instrumental ensemble, or organizing a large-print reading program of spiritual classics for their peers in the community.

**3. Leave room for spiritual discernment and emotional connection with the possibilities of the future.** Problem solving can work effectively in resolving issues about task accomplishment or use of resources, but on people issues it may sap a congregation of vitality. Make space for prayerful requests, for discernment and pursuit of one’s passion in exploring the congregation’s future. Allow time for prayer and Scripture study. Ask members to take their concerns to the Lord, and to work to ensure that Jesus himself would feel welcome in your meetings. Don’t let problem solving secularize and thereby drain the spirit from your organization.

Early in my work with faith communities in conflict, I was reluctant to use spiritual language. There are, of course, risks involved, especially if those in conflict see conflict as a problem in which God takes sides. But as I’ve become more comfortable with the mystery and power of the Holy Spirit working in groups, I’ve invited people to dream the Lord’s dream for them. When a problem is tabled in favor of dreaming and asking God’s guidance, the issue sometimes becomes irrelevant in light of new possibilities.

Creating visual representations of the future and discussing consistent themes that emerge from those drawings have helped groups become emotionally involved. Creating these “vivid descriptions” is not only a joyful event; it also helps individuals see themselves as instru-

Do not assume that the work of a few problem-solving “experts” who went away for a weekend will be embraced. This approach, while efficient, is not always effective.

ments of God, actually “being” the future. In the envisioning and planning work on St. Vincent, we created vivid descriptions twice—once for the group of churches exploring their influence across the island, and once for each congregation. These drawings were posted at the churches and became the jumping-off point for goal planning in alignment with the vision of the entire circuit.

**4. Create vitality through collaboration and participation.** Consider engaging as many people as possible in the organization’s work, especially as it relates to the future. Take advantage of opportunities from the beginning and not only when a process nears its end. Generally, involvement builds ownership and reduces the all-too-common tendency for those not involved to sit in the problem-solving judgment seat.

Do not assume that the work of a few problem-solving “experts” who went away for a weekend will be embraced. This approach, while efficient, is not always effective. After the weekend retreat, informational meetings and dialogue may be too little, too late.

Rather, involve members of the congregation as the change initiative is identified, discussed, envisioned, and developed. Excitement will tend to grow, and many concerns will be addressed positively. Resistance to a new idea can never be eliminated, but it certainly will be minimized through collaboration and involvement. In many of my conflict interventions, small-group discussions with large numbers of congregation members surfaced consistent themes. Once identified and named, these issues became the foundation for envisioning and building a brighter future. In addition, parishioners

who participated in the group sessions developed their own sense of commitment and ownership that could never have been created by a task-force report.

As one who has struggled to put problem solving in its proper perspective, I know the need to keep track of my own mental models and their usefulness. I encourage you to do the same. There are appropriate places for problem solving in faith communities, but they are not nearly as common as I once believed.

If you want to help a congregation build long-term vitality, look for mental models, such as appreciative inquiry or polarity management, that will help you help others. Remember, your effectiveness depends as much on what you assume as on what you do. ♦

### Suggested Reading

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# A Tale of Two Churches

Diana Butler Bass considers how we can foster vitality in mainline congregations

I graduated from college in 1981, not exactly a banner year for mainline Protestantism. More

than a decade of numerical decline and internal conflict had taken a toll on old-line denominations as these once-unassailable churches found themselves dethroned as chapels of the American establishment. Evangelical Protestants grabbed Ronald Reagan's coattails—and headlines—when their preachers, folk like Jerry Falwell and Jim Bakker, rode a wave of populist discontent all the way to Washington. Not only did growing evangelical influence in national politics humiliate the mainline; evangelical churches were growing, too. Scottsdale Bible Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, the once-small fundamentalist church where I worshiped as a teenager, moved out of the building it shared with a Jewish congregation and moved into a sun-drenched structure that looked like a corporate headquarters. On Sunday mornings local police directed traffic jams caused by brand-new Cadillacs and Lincolns competing for space in the sprawling parking lot.

Perhaps I was a 21-year-old contrarian, but when Protestant evangelicals hit the big time, I decided to hit the spiritual road. During my senior year in college, I left fundamentalism and opted for mainline Protestantism. Mainline church was my parents' religion. They were Methodists, and as a child so was I. I did not, however, go home to United Methodism. Instead, with full knowledge that I was joining what my friends ridiculed as a "dying church," I became an Episcopalian during my senior year in college.



## A Struggle to Survive

After graduation, I worked as a church receptionist while saving money for seminary. For six months, I answered phones at Glass and Garden Community Church, a congregation of the Reformed Church in America, while I attended St. Stephen's Episcopal Church—both in Scottsdale. I had not been part of a mainline congregation in a decade. But in spring 1982, I

why no one was coming to church. After the initial novelty of a drive-in church wore off, people lost interest in Glass and Garden. Scottsdale Bible Church had built its fundamentalist cathedral less than two miles away, while this congregation struggled to survive. I longed to tell the pastor why, but I never did. Despite its hip packaging, Glass and Garden was the same old mainline congregation—dependent on ethnic identity and

Father Bailey began. We responded, "There is one hope in God's call to us." I participated eagerly as I watched a child whom I would never know brought into God's family, and as we claimed the baptismal covenant on her behalf.

"Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" asked the priest. "I will, with God's help," we all responded.


As I vowed to repent, proclaim the gospel, serve God's people, and work for justice and peace, I entered into baptism's theological mystery. This liturgy proclaimed that Christianity was a distinctive way of life and a journey into God—a way of life and a pilgrimage to which I had been bound before I could even speak.

While attending newcomer classes at St. Stephen's, I figured out that Father Bailey was, like Pastor Goulooze, theologically liberal. He did not approve of fundamentalism and biblical literalism. But his liberalism was not like any liberalism I understood. Not sentimental, he spoke of "Anglican tradition" as if it were a living thing. He prodded the congregation toward "wholeness" and "justice." His theology embodied a dynamic, healing vision of God. His spirituality was both grounded and open—reflecting the congregation as I experienced it. St. Stephen's was not a large church, but it was a vital one—a place where God was obviously present in community.

I would go to work at Glass and Garden on Monday, refreshed and reinvigorated. Then I would listen to Pastor Goulooze fret over attendance and stewardship. I asked myself: Why the difference between these two churches? What makes one so lively, while the other struggles to survive?

## Questionable Statistics

The question of mainline vitality has become one of the guiding questions of my vocational life. As a scholar, teacher, and writer, as well as a congregant, seminary professor, and



Glass and Garden was the same old mainline congregation—dependent on ethnic identity and generational loyalty for members, theologically sentimental and undemanding, and wed to enervated worship. Glass and Garden was dying because it offered so little.

found myself—between work and worship—in two of them. Those churches presented me with a Dickensian tale of mainline Protestantism: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

At Glass and Garden, times were pretty rough. The minister was an old-fashioned liberal who tried to make the gospel relevant by planting a drive-in church. In a radical departure from his Midwestern roots, Reverend Goulooze built a glass sanctuary, replete with both real and plastic plants, with a small stream running through the building. To attract Sunbelt immigrants, the decor minimized "offensive" Christian symbols. Worshipers could either sit in this oasis-like sanctuary or listen in their cars via the then high-tech sound system. Goulooze, a seminary classmate of Robert Schuller's, was a lovely man who thought that Norman Vincent Peale was the greatest theologian of the 20th century. This pastor's sermons generally consisted of feel-good pep talks. Worship focused on the sermon, framed by a few Victorian hymns accompanied on an electronic organ.

On Tuesday mornings, Pastor Goulooze would sometimes sit at my desk and wonder

generational loyalty for members, theologically sentimental and undemanding, and wed to enervated worship. Glass and Garden was dying because it offered so little. I may have worked there, but I could never have joined the congregation. A generation of people like me needed a reason to go to and to be the church.

## A Vital Community

Every Sunday, I worshiped at St. Stephen's, a homey Episcopal parish, where things were better—much better. The people of St. Stephen's would not remember me; I quietly sojourned among them. I never talked to anyone—except briefly to the rector. They, however, witnessed to me about mainline vitality.

My first Sunday at St. Stephen's was a baptism—something I had not yet witnessed as a new Episcopalian. The denomination had recently revised its *Book of Common Prayer*, and its baptismal liturgy was considered central to God's vision for the church: the service proclaims, in robust theological language, the essentials of Christian identity and vocation.

"There is one Body and one Spirit,"



denominational leader, I deal with these concerns daily.

I have, of course, not been alone in my concerns. During these lean years, a kind of “decline industry” has developed around these questions. Books offer answers and quick fixes to grow. Organizations have been born, each claiming to know the reason for decline, each trying to rouse the rest of us to follow its church-growth plan. “Mainline decline” has become a tool for various interest groups in our denominations.

However, much of decline data is problematic. Statistics are outdated or have been disproved. Yes, mainline membership rolls have shrunk, congregations are struggling to survive, and a clergy shortage threatens. But the precipitous drops have slowed or stopped. In summer 2002, both the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the

indicate that while people hesitate to join mainline churches officially, more are attending than in a generation.

While none of this is great news (“Yippee! We stopped bleeding!”), it is not bad news either. Like Wall Street, we may be bumping along at the bottom of a long bear market.

### What Fosters Vitality?

More significant than numbers, however, are anecdotal reports of vitality from across the mainline. These days, every mainline leader seems to know the story of St. What-a-Surprise, a particularly vital, healthy, and growing congregation in his or her town. In recent years, I have heard this tale repeatedly—an old, dying, often urban, church is now thriving.

But what fosters this vitality? How did

Each style may promote vitality under some circumstances, but of the four, the last—the intentional congregation—offers the greatest hope for mainline churches.


### A Matter of Style

In 1972, Dean M. Kelley outlined the evangelical style in his book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row). By suggesting that conservative theology directly corresponded to vitality, Kelley implied that to reverse the decline, congregations and denominations needed to embrace evangelicalism. Denominational conservatives loved Kelley’s book. And his thesis rang true in the 1970s and early 1980s, during the high tide of the Jesus movement, the Moral Majority, and the charismatic revival. Many of the current denominational renewal movements took their cue from Kelley and his followers.

The “new paradigm” style arose in imitation of the success of Willow Creek Community Church, a “megachurch” in South Barrington, Illinois, near Chicago. This strategy suggested that mainline churches would grow if they minimized their distinctiveness and offered seekers what they wanted—an anonymous, symbolically neutral, user-friendly church. This

market-driven approach resonated with the materially successful baby boomers, who were thronging back to church in the late 1980s and early 1990s—people turned off by traditional religion.

The third, the diagnostic style, borrowed insights from psychological therapy and the social sciences. Its proponents contended that mainline congregations suffered from systemic problems inhibiting vitality—most of which could be cured by a skilled practitioner. This approach has been most successfully presented by the Alban Institute, by mainline seminaries, and by some of the denominations themselves. According to this theory, neither mainline theology nor traditions are necessarily prob-



While attending newcomer classes at St. Stephen’s, I figured out that Father Bailey was theologically liberal. His spirituality was both grounded and open—reflecting the congregation as I experienced it. St. Stephen’s was not a large church, but it was a vital one—a place where God was obviously present in community.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reported losses so small as to be statistically insignificant. A decade ago, the Episcopal Church hit a low of about 2.5 million and has maintained that number since. In addition, scholars have become much more sophisticated about numbers. The decline of the 1960s and 1970s followed unprecedented increases in the 1950s—numbers that created a “false high” from which to measure vitality. When compounded with demographic factors of childbirth, aging, education, and mobility, the mainline suffered worst when cultural trends conspired against it. Instead of counting members, many denominations now track attendance. These statistics tentatively

St. What-a-Surprise do it? What was the difference between a Glass and Garden and a St. Stephen’s?

Over the years, church leaders have advanced a number of explanations and programmatic responses to answer these questions. Unlike some observers of mainline religion, I do not think a specific plan or program creates vitality. Rather, I believe that vitality is as unique as a congregation itself. Individual experiences of vitality can be grouped into four general categories:

- ◆ the evangelical style,
- ◆ the new paradigm style,
- ◆ the diagnostic style, and
- ◆ the intentional (or practicing) congregational style.



lematic. Rather, the institutions themselves are somehow “broken” and need to be repaired. Once correctly diagnosed and readjusted, congregations can get on with “being church.”

### When the Theories Don't Fit

All three of the styles described above have, in certain cases, worked—as attested to by a legion of publications, conferences, and devoted fans. However, *not one* of them explains what happened at Glass and Garden and St. Stephen's.

Analyzed by the evangelical theory, Glass and Garden failed because it subscribed to Protestant liberalism and lacked the rigor of conservative thought. However, by that measure, St. Stephen's should have failed as well. St. Stephen's was both lively *and* liberal. Its vision statement still reveals a progressive impulse: that the community is “grounded in the scriptural messages of wisdom, mercy, and justice,” enabling “God's people to engage in co-creation through a nurturing environment.” According to this thesis, however, St. Stephen's should have declined—and probably should no longer exist.

Measured against the “new paradigm” theory, Glass and Garden should have succeeded and St. Stephen's should have failed. Glass and Garden muted denominational distinctiveness, created a symbolically neutral worship space, and geared its services toward seekers. St. Stephen's met in a Spanish adobe building with stained-glass windows and icons; it had two unwieldy worship books (a hymnal and a prayerbook) for the liturgically unskilled to navigate. Yet the parish's newcomer class was full—while Glass and Garden looked in vain for new faces. In the case of these two churches, the one laden with art, architecture, and liturgy from the Christian past displayed more vitality than did the presumably nonthreatening one.

According to the diagnostic theory, Glass and Garden likely suffered from some dysfunction, while St. Stephen's must have been a generally healthy congregation.

However, neither seemed notably better or worse than other congregations of which I have been a member. Both appear, in retrospect, to have suffered from a modicum of conflict and dysfunction. Leadership was not an issue, either. Each pastor was a thoughtful, theologically mature person with a clear sense of identity and vision. But only St. Stephen's was full of life.

### The Intentional Congregation

Mainline observers have largely overlooked an outside-the-box possibility—the emergence of a fourth style, the intentional (or practicing) congregation. The omission stems from the fact that these congregations form no national movement and claim no single source of inspiration. They have no party, no platform, no seminary, no publication, and no organization. Each is a unique and inventive blend of local vision, denominational identity, and Christian practice. Such congregations exist. I know. Over the years, I have been a member of a number of them.

Intentional congregations are neither “conservative” nor “liberal.” They are not seeker oriented, but seekers are attracted by their spiritual practices. Like any other human community, they have their share of conflict and dysfunction. These churches resist labeling, serve no identifiable theological “party,” and reject programmatic fixes. Here's how I would define them:

In these congregations, transmission of identity, tradition, and practice occurs not by birth, and thus, it is not assumed; rather, transmission occurs through choice and through reflective engagement, as a process both individual and communal. These churches tend to be theologically moderate-to-liberal and are reinvigorating historic practices based upon ancient Christian tradition; they might also be called “neo-traditional,” because they reach back so as to move forward. In these congregations, people choose to embrace

or recreate practices drawn from the long Christian tradition—practices that bind them together and connect them with older patterns of living as meaningful ways to relate to a post-Christian society.

These congregations have developed against the backdrop of decline—often struggling alone to be faithful against great odds.

### A Rich Resource for Churches

St. Stephen's was an intentional congregation. Its life was shaped by the practices of thanksgiving (the Eucharist), compassion (works of mercy and justice), and healing (personal and corporate wholeness and pastoral care), which were grounded in—and formed by—Anglican tradition. Two decades after my brief pilgrimage among the people of St. Stephen's, their vision statement proclaims the purposeful faith that I, a stranger, once sensed there: “We are committed to providing experiences for the celebration of God's gifts through the practice of kindness and hospitality.”

Because of its innate creativity, resonance with tradition, and insistence upon Christian distinctiveness, the intentional, or practicing, pattern may be the richest resource for mainline Protestants who seek to revitalize congregations and move ahead in mission. But to draw upon it, we need to see it, name it, and continually commit ourselves to the way of life given through our baptism. We must teach and nurture this vision, and be willing to change as God's spirit directs. When we really live in community—as if our very lives depended on practicing our faith—I can guarantee that our congregations will be more vital. The past 20 years may have been the worst of times, but perhaps those years have forced us to recognize the goodness of grace and wisdom embodied in the ways we practice Christian faith. Instead of weeping over numbers, it is time to appreciate where God has taken us. For some of us, the worst has brought out our very best. ♦





# Missing: Young Pastors

## Reviving Vocational Imagination in the Local Church

PETER A. LUCKEY

My call to the ministry did not come as a bolt of lightning. It was more as if someone had turned on a light. The occasion was a Christmas Eve candlelight service in 1974, when my father, the Rev. Charles P. Luckey, Jr., preached his last sermon. At 50 and at the height of his ministry, he was stricken with a rare and fatal illness. Days after giving that sermon, he was dead.

As I think back to that Christmas Eve service, I recall knowing at the time that his death would come soon. Sitting in the pew that night, I prayed hard, promising God my love and trust.

Now that I am fast approaching 50, I find myself wondering about the young men and women who are now the age I was that Christmas Eve. Will a light go on inside them? Will they sense this calling? Will others experience what my father and I found in the ministry—a life, for all its hardships and challenges, filled with deep satisfaction? Will our young people today know the joy of ministry—of seeing lives transformed, spiritual hunger awakened, real community created?

I write in the hope that other young people will receive the call to ministry as I did. Today the mainline church is faced with an urgent crisis: the loss of young clergy. In the United Church of Christ, only 7.6 percent of clergy are under 40 years old. The picture is as bleak in the Episcopal Church, where 303 out of 7,721 clergy

are under 35.<sup>1</sup> Congregations are begging for profiles and resumés of youthful pastors with vision, talent, and leadership capabilities.

Why are young people not entering the ordained ministry? The reasons are many: a concern for financial security, negative perceptions of the church, and a reluctance on the part of young people today to settle into lifelong commitments. Yet the heart of the crisis is deeper than any of these motives. The mainline church has simply lost the language of vocation, the language of call. The secular culture has influenced our churches to the extent that we have lost confidence in speaking about “vocation” in the root meaning of the word, which comes from the Latin *vocare* or voice.

This culture of call—an ethos in the local church that affirms and supports the language of calling ministers—has been eroded in recent years by the acids of secularism. As the Rev. Verity Jones, a pastor in her 20s who serves a Disciples of Christ congregation in Terre Haute, Indiana, says, “If the mainline church cannot talk about vocation and call, it is because [it] cannot talk about faith.”

Congregations have been and will continue to be the field where new pastors are harvested. The local church, along with the family, will be the place where a young person hears for the first time Christ’s call to ministry. If the local church loses the language of call, where else can it turn to find future leaders of the church?



The good news is that if the local church is the source of the present crisis, it also will be the source of the solution. Priority number one will be reviving a culture of call and vocation in our local congregations. The following are specific strategies a congregation might implement.

### Reviving Vocation: Local Church Strategies

**1. Reclaiming a radical notion of call.** Church leaders will need to articulate a radical understanding of “call”—that is, a call shaped by and surrendered to God. Os Guinness in his book *The Call*<sup>2</sup> suggests there can be no call without a “Caller.” United Church of Christ President John Thomas says, “First and foremost I belong to Christ.”

Pastors can exercise their leadership here by speaking more often from their own experiences of being called. In preaching and teaching, church leaders can be more mindful about sharing stories, their own and stories of vocation from Scripture. Further, baptism

Young adults need a place where they can give voice to the Spirit of God in their hearts. Only when they express their convictions in their own words, from their mouths, will they be able to grasp the full meaning of their vocation.

is an excellent opportunity to speak about “calling.” If the church’s tradition is to present the newly baptized to the congregation, the pastor might take a moment to affirm this new Christian’s unique calling from God. The minister may remind the congregation that all baptized people, not just the ordained clergy, receive a God-given purpose in their lives.

**2. Creating opportunities for others to witness to how God is moving in their lives.** For church leaders, as important as speaking more often about their own callings is creating opportunities for others in the community to testify how God has moved in their lives. Most important, in view of the crisis facing the church, is to afford this opportunity to youth and young adults. Young adults need a place where they can give voice to the Spirit of God in their hearts. Only when they express their convictions in their own words, from their mouths, will they be able to grasp the full meaning of their vocation.

In her 20s, Jocelyn Emerson is a seminary graduate serving as an intern in a congregation. She remembers preaching her first sermon in her home church. Standing at the pulpit, she looked out over a sea of faces waiting expectantly for her words. Deeply moved by the experience, Emerson said, “My home church helped me to find the power of my own voice.” That moment helped propel her toward ministry.

The Rev. Richard Kirchherr, senior pastor of First Congregational Church, Western Springs, Illinois, makes sure that youth who participate in a mission trip have an opportunity at the end to “reconnect” the experience to their lives back home. Youth are asked to speak to

the congregation, to explain “why we are doing this.”

**3. Offering leadership opportunities for youth and young adults.** Many pastors in their 20s credit their home congregations with giving them significant leadership opportunities. Congregations nurture leadership potential in young people by conferring upon them responsibility and leadership, particularly in worship, preaching, and the sacraments. If not in the Sunday morning service, youth in some UCC congregations are leading communion on retreats or work tours (a practice consistent with UCC polity and theology). At the same time, involving youth in areas of the church that do not call upon their capabilities—for example, boring committee meetings—could be the kiss of death for their enthusiasm to serve the church.

First Congregational, Western Springs, engages young people’s gifts for ministry through an internship program called “Summer Experience in Ministry.” This internship offers young people a significant hands-on experience in hospital calling, worship leadership, and other areas of parish ministry. College-age students work 20-plus hours a week and receive a stipend of \$2,000 to \$3,000 for the summer. An endowed fund set up by the congregation pays for the program. The youth interns join in the regular staff meetings and come to feel that they are part of a ministry team.

**4. Creating catalytic experiences.** A teenager shoveling cement as a work team builds a house in Mexico in cooperation with Habitat for Humanity, or a college student making hospital calls as part of a local church summer internship program may have the kind of experience in which a young person is gripped by God’s call. Work tours, preaching, and worship leadership can all become events of such intensity that new levels of meaning and purpose are unveiled in the young person’s life. “Seed” congregations<sup>3</sup>—that is, local churches that have a propensity for raising up pastors—create programs such as work tours, mission trips, and retreats with and for youth, setting the scene for epiphany experiences. These are the moments when a young person may discover a powerful new connection between self, world, and God. And the experience may accelerate a young person’s awareness of God’s purpose in her life.

**5. Planting the seed: “You seem to have the gifts for ministry!”** A young person can discover God moving in his life while building a house in a poor neighborhood or breaking bread in a circle on a beach. Yet that youth needs “God with skin on,” the human voice of a trusted older person, to validate what he feels and to make the connection to the person he is becoming. This is the propitious moment when a minister or other leader’s words, “You seem to have the gifts for ministry,” may fall on receptive ears.

The Rev. Reuben Sheares, a United Church of Christ minister who died in 1992, recalled how the local church in which he grew up planted the seed for ministry. “I never heard God’s voice,” he said; “I heard the people of God’s voice.” He remembered that, as a young man growing up in an African American congregation, he heard a youth leader speak to his youth group. The leader singled



one person out to say, "You are going to be a doctor." Then he looked into Reuben's eyes and said, "And Reuben, God is calling you to be a preacher."<sup>4</sup>

Some congregations "plant the seed" in the confirmation class by asking, "Who in this class is called to ministry?" A good place to plant the seed is on retreats and other intense experiences through which a youth's gifts for ministry will be made evident.

As pastors, we have at times been reluctant to make "the ask." The Rev. Roy Oswald of the Alban Institute says he wonders, "Do we [as pastors] have the conviction to approach a young person who has promise for law or medicine and ask, 'Would you make a commitment to the faith?'"<sup>5</sup> Likewise, we have been reticent to speak with parents. We have not enlisted their support in the cause to invite their sons and daughters to consider the pastoral life.

The youth in churches are up against powerful cultural forces. A college friend of a young pastor said that when she heard her friend had plans to enter the ministry, her first thought was, "That's social suicide." If we want more young people in the ministry, we must resist these forces. We must be willing in our churches to make "the ask."

**6. The mentoring community: shaping the call.** One can hardly think of vocation without thinking of the significant role played by others in helping to shape the call. A calling presumes there is first a "Caller" who is God, as well as people who aid in

shaping that call over time. Grandparents, parents, youth leaders, campus pastors, teachers, beloved ministers, and other trusted elders help to shape the call. In my conversations with pastors in their 20s, all spoke of the crucial role played by mentors in leading them into the ministry. In her work with young adults Sharon Parks found:

How frequently it is the case that when people in later life reflect on how religious communities have been part of their formation, they identify someone, lay or ordained, who singled them out in their young adult years and conferred a deepened sense of trust in their own potential and gave form to their Dream.<sup>6</sup>

The task of mentoring needs to be filled by pastors and lay leaders alike. Pastors may realize that a young person feels freer to talk to someone other than the pastor about her deepest longings for and fears about her future.

At the same time, by living the call themselves, pastors are in a unique position to help young people as they wrestle with their understanding of God's call. The Rev. Don Longbottom, senior pastor of Countryside UCC in Omaha, Nebraska, joins the youth on their weeklong summer work tour experience. During one recent event, the youth group sought Don out and asked him how

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he got into the ministry and what being a minister is like.

In addition to accompanying youth on retreats and work tours, pastors and other church leaders can be more faithful in staying in touch with youth while they are away at college. By reaching out in these ways, ministers can model the very truth they want to convey: the absolutely essential need for friends to support one another in their callings.

The young-adult life stage is a time of profound vulnerability as well as promise. It is a time when trusted mentors are important, people who in a loving way can respond to what is in the young person's heart.

**7. Celebrating a healthy and positive regard for the pastoral ministry.** Uniformly, seed congregations exude a high regard for the pastoral ministry. These congregations respect and admire their pastors. The Rev. Ozzie Smith, pastor of Thornridge UCC, South Holland, Illinois, said that a positive regard for the ministers is absolutely essential for a church that seeks to excite others about the pastoral ministry.<sup>7</sup> This culture of respect for the ordained leadership is no accident. It is nurtured by ministers who communicate to their congregations their deep satisfaction and joy in what they do. Rich Kirchherr of Western Springs noted that the Rev. Robert G. Kemper, retired senior pastor of First Congregational, would often say that ministry was the most fulfilling thing he could be doing.<sup>8</sup> Senior pastors play a critical role in creating this positive affirmation of the ministry. Toward this goal, congregations can be more mindful about celebrating the pastoral ministry during Sunday morning worship. Planning ordinations and installations for Sunday morning instead of Sunday afternoon makes it possible for the maximum number of people to attend. Young people can be part of the "laying on of hands" or the conferring of gifts. A congregational culture that supports and respects the pastoral ministry goes a long way toward encouraging young people to consider a call.

### Both Need and Call

The specific strategies outlined here are only the beginning in making the local church a place of formation for new pastors. The deepest challenge in the local church will be making people aware of their great need for God. In this post-9/11 world, people are looking for answers, compassion, and belonging beyond what the material world can provide. There is a palpable need today not for the church as institution, but as an oasis of prayer, healing, and proclamation of the gospel. If the number of young people going into the ministry is declining, the need for their leadership is as strong as ever.

Need and call are two sides of the same coin: Making people aware of the need today for God and for leaders who can point others toward God is the beginning of creating a congregational culture of call and vocation. From Samuel to Deborah, from the apostle Paul to Martin Luther King, Jr., God calls people to ministry because their gifts are needed. May God's Spirit stir up in our congregation's heart this great need of God so that another

22-year-old will say "yes" just as this minister said "yes" sitting in a Christmas Eve worship service 27 years ago. ♦

### NOTES

1. Hillary Wicai, "Clergy by the Numbers" (CONGREGATIONS, March/April 2001), 6.
2. Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 42.
3. For the term "seed congregations" I am indebted to Dow Edgerton, academic dean of the Chicago Theological Seminary and his project of July 21, 1994, titled "Mentoring for Ministry." He defines "seed congregations" as "churches [that have proved] to be unusually productive of candidates for ordained ministry over an extended period of years."
4. Conversation with the Rev. Rich Kirchherr, July 17, 2001.
5. Conversation with the Rev. Roy Oswald, Alban Institute, Aug. 9, 2001.
6. Sharon Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 204.
7. Conversation with the Rev. Ozzie Smith, senior pastor, Thornridge United Church of Christ, South Holland, Ill., Aug. 9, 2001.
8. Conversation with Rich Kirchherr, July 17, 2001.


## The D.Min. (Prin.) As Vocational Basket Weaving

**No offense intended.** One of the main things the Princeton D.Min. does is teach ministers to understand their ministries *in context*. We usually think the word context refers to our surroundings (geographical or social or literary, for instance) but actually that isn't quite accurate. The word comes straight from the Latin term meaning "weave together," and so a context is about how things interact, interrelate, and are woven together.

You could even say that ministry doesn't *have* a context so much as it *is* one. Like a basket. In D.Min. study we want to explore how all the parts of the work you do are connected, how the context/basket of your ministry is constructed. Different strands and strips fit together in a myriad of patterns: theory and practice, theological and social/behavioral studies, tradition and innovation, vocation and task, person and role, church and society, the world outside and the world within. When you look at it that way, there is nothing trivial about basket weaving.

Exploring the process and dynamics of ministry through the specific weave of your own experience is what we do in the D.Min. If you're interested in that kind of basketry, give us a call.

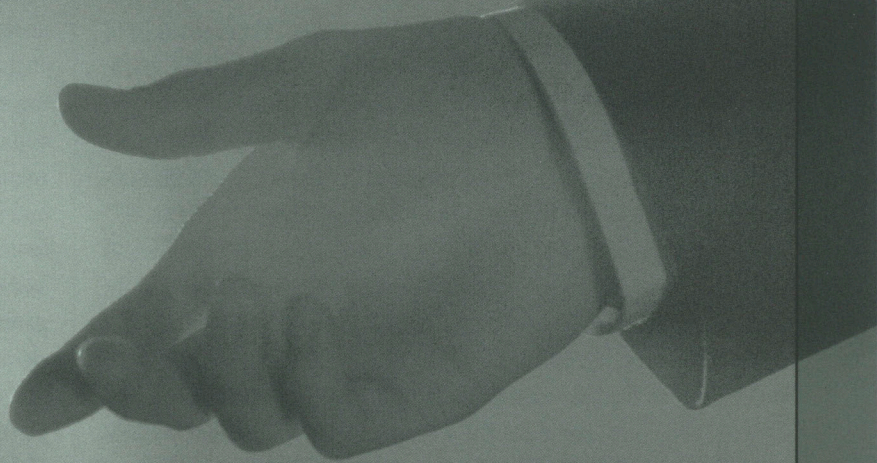
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# On Leaving and Leaving Well

## Planning and Open Communication are the Keys to a Successful Exit

ALAN SCHAFFMEYER

No one is an expert on leaving, but I believe we clergy might learn together how to leave well. My first performance in the role of a pastor leaving came as I finished my internship. In my farewell remarks, I declared that since the seminary was only 50 miles away, it was not as if I were really leaving. Being so close, I could come back often to visit.

As I drove away, I realized what I had done. I had avoided the fact of my leaving. Although the seminary *was* close, my education had its own drives and deadlines. When I returned to school, my classes, activities, research, and just plain life would keep me on campus. Struck by the insight, I vowed to say good-bye to the congregations I would leave thereafter—out of respect for the people and for my own integrity.

Since I work as an intentional interim pastor, leaving is a continual part of my ministry. A typical interim stint lasts between 8 and 15 months. By necessity, leaving is on my mind and heart from the first time I hear about a congregation. This does not mean that I leave well—just that I do it frequently.

### The Well-Done Exit

Leaving is no trick. You just get up and go. Yet in his book *Generation to Generation*, therapist Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman declares how great a gift it is for clergy to leave a congregation well. He further implies that by *not* leaving well, we may cloud the parishioners' future pastoral relationships more than we imagine.<sup>1</sup> Few of us intentionally make a congregation's life more difficult, but

that outcome can result from our words or actions. An exit done well enhances the value of a congregation's and a clergy leader's ministry as much as or more than the attention originally given to the relationships. Leaving well graces a congregation, since it allows the organization and its members the best opportunity to grieve and regroup. It allows the pastor time to mourn while saying good-bye. He will move on to the next chapter in his life with some measure of closure and a healthier focus on the future.

The intellectual clarity we have about leaving well is difficult to put into practice. Since clergy do not spend much of ministry leaving congregations, we are inexperienced at making graceful exits. The process of leaving can be bewildering and stressful for both congregation and clergy. Under stress, we are likely to rely on old, familiar patterns of behavior.<sup>2</sup> As clergy, we are trained to *connect* with others. Little attention is given in our work to *disconnection*. In the face of stress, personal effectiveness ebbs. We may feel distracted, unbalanced, off center, our focus skewed.

Moreover, what passes for care nowadays is often superficial. Instead of caring, we learn to be *nice*. If the congregational system has practiced niceness, then the hard, gritty, graceful, effective work of leaving can be lost in a flurry of well-meaning activity or avid avoidance. Such behaviors have more to do with covering all the bases than with productive ministry.

Wherever you and the people you serve are in ministry, the issue is not *leaving*, but leaving *well*. Some suggested strategies follow.



## Quiet Time

Above all, provide yourself periods of quiet with God in the midst of leaving. Yes, there is much to be done. But you do not have to do everything before you leave. Nor must everything that needs to be done be done by you. Presumably, even a pastor is saved by grace, not by works. Therefore, doing good in the closing weeks will not improve your chances with our ultimate boss!

Plan for quiet time alone. Arrange quiet times with family and friends. Throughout your ministry, it is wise to reserve blocks of unscheduled time in your weekly calendar. Perhaps you have already discovered the value of making time for prayer, devotion, retreat, or reflection.<sup>3</sup> If not, now is a good time to start. Especially while leaving, allow extra time for the unexpected. The fact that you are leaving is no guarantee that unforeseen events will *not* happen. Indeed, your imminent departure might occasion “unexpected”

Recognize that your silence will influence a congregation as much as speech. Silence may be misinterpreted as indifference or disapproval. Consider making an extra effort while leaving to express your feelings to church members.

events generated by people who always meant to say or do something. These incidents may yield last-minute confrontations, reunions, and reconciliations.

## Draft a Plan

Draft a plan for your final weeks. The Alban Institute offers a variety of helpful resources. I recommend the books *Running Through the Thistles* and *New Beginnings*, as well as “Ending Well, Starting Strong” (a six-cassette audio series), all by church expert Roy Oswald; *Saying Goodbye* by consultant Edward A. White; and *Critical Moment of Ministry* by consultant Loren B. Mead.<sup>4</sup> Ask your colleagues for other recommendations.

At its core, leaving well involves for me two elements: grief (mine, the congregation’s, and ours together) and the reality of the impending change. To the best of my abilities, I mean to express my grief over the severing of long-standing, close relationships. I also want to attend to the varied expressions of grief from individuals and from the congregation as a whole. The ways I grieve may not coincide with how others around me feel the loss.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, I intend to declare steadfastly that the upcoming separation is upon us. For me, this admission is difficult. I like making attachments. I like being admired for who and what I am. It would be far easier and more gratifying to maintain my personal contacts, but what would my continued relationship with parishioners do to enhance the ministry of the one who comes after me? While I do not like the impending loss, I have to assert that loss to be real, and

to be coming soon for all concerned. Craft your plan for leaving around these elements.

Involve other people in that plan, perhaps those you consulted during your decision to leave. Maybe those who helped you decide to come here in the first place will offer their support. Include your family members in formal and informal farewells, giving them opportunities and space to grieve and say good-bye. Discuss with them your hopes, fears, and dreams about leaving. Listen to their emotions, thoughts, and sensations. What was best about your joint venture here? What patterns would you want to repeat? Which would you hope to avoid or minimize elsewhere?

## Paperwork

Since much of the work we have done is ongoing, it is essential to leave a paper trail. Ensure that pastoral records are current. Make certain that information which only you might know either goes with you (if it is confidential), or is readily at hand (if the congregation or the next pastor may need it). Leave an envelope (sealed, if need be) with a trusted leader or a denominational official, indicating your perception of your 10 or so greatest triumphs and your 10 or so deepest regrets. Include items you wish you had known when you first came, as well as insights and epiphanies regarding your years with the congregation. List projects and plans that are in process. Indicate your perception of where members are with the plans.

List also potential contacts in congregation and community. Include a listing of significant community-wide groups, clergy Bible studies, ministerial groups, useful denominational meetings, formal or informal support groups, gifted counselors, community leaders, and the like. Establish a format and timetable for your exit interview.

## The Exit Interview

Surprisingly few congregations that I have served had had previous experience with exit interviews. An interview is an excellent way to summarize your learning together. Your judicatory office may have a document or recommended format. One good method: Write a list of questions for the congregation’s council or governing board to use at its last meeting before your departure. I ask council members to submit additional questions. Sample questions are mailed three weeks before our meeting, giving sufficient time to ponder the questions. At our last meeting, I answer the questions face-to-face and hand a written copy of my report to the secretary. The format includes my initial expectations of the parish, my unfulfilled aspirations, my major accomplishments, my perspective on the congregation’s greatest strengths and weaknesses, my hopes for the congregation’s future, and other pertinent insights. I ask the members to provide written and spoken comments on my chief strengths and weaknesses, and to assess the effectiveness of my ministry among them.



Before our final meeting, council members agree whether we will discuss these matters as a group, or if a smaller group will meet beforehand for this conversation. The congregation may need to hear again how its strengths are perceived, so that it can use these resources as it prepares to welcome a new pastor.

### The Temptation of Silence

As with any other crisis, the end of a mutual ministry focuses the minds of individuals and groups on a common topic more sharply than usual. Their rapt attention gives you as their spiritual leader enormous leverage to interpret their past and to suggest possible futures. Use this gift wisely. As pastors, we sometimes shrink from power. When we recognize an opportunity for wielding authority, at a time when people are most attentive, we may choose silence with the best of intentions. We want to be fair-minded and evenhanded. We do not want to influence unduly the place or its people.<sup>6</sup> We may decide to say nothing. But that choice may rob us of the opportunity to bestow a great gift on the congregation.

Recognize that your silence will influence a congregation as much as speech. Silence may be misinterpreted as indifference or disapproval. As people, we project emotions, fantasies, and motives onto others' silence. I think of students from my adolescent years who I first assumed were haughty. Only much later did I discover that many were painfully unsure of themselves. I misread their silence as arrogance, when in fact their quiet manner reflected their own fears. Consider making an extra effort while leaving to express your feelings to church members.

### Make a Clean Break

Disengage from community affairs and obligations. Schedule no events for the new pastor, and make no promises to third parties about what he will or will not do in your stead. If groups are truly interested in securing the gifts and talents of the next pastor, suggest that they wait to make the contact until she arrives. Inventory your current commitments to civic groups, community organizations, boards and commissions, retirement-home worship services or visits, chaplain relief work or on-call duties. Resign from them if you are leaving the area. Do not promise that the new pastor will take over your areas of interest. Create space for that person's ministry to develop as yours did.

In regard to planned events like weddings, begin meeting with engaged couples as you regularly would. At the same time, remind couples that you will not be officiating at their wedding. You can make conditional plans with the bride and her fiancé, but final plans need to be cleared with the incoming pastor, who will officiate. The fact that you prefer, require, or prohibit certain practices does not mean that your successor will hold those same views.

As you prepare to leave, make a list of essential contacts and farewells. Note those to whom you want to say a special good-bye—in the membership at large, the leadership, staff, and wider community. Then determine *how* to visit them. Keep a core group such as the executive committee, church elders, or senior officers apprised of your plans and your timetable. Remain open to their guidance, insights, and questions.

Church consultant Lyle Schaller once said that if an organization or a group of people is told something six times, in six different ways, most of the folk are likely to hear it once!<sup>7</sup> As you depart, seek to include several means of communication. Routine means include the sermon, verbal announcements, leaflets, the church newsletter and worship bulletin, and local newspapers. One way to let everyone know that you are leaving is a special letter. You might use a mass mailing to the entire mailing list, as well as some individual correspondence. For some contacts, you will want to send a personal card. You will preferably want to tell key officers, staff members, and influential though unelected leaders face-to-face, or if that is impossible, in a telephone call. For personal visits, plan where to meet—at the member's workplace, at a home, in a restaurant, at some favorite spot, or at the church.

While planning visits, be aware of the meeting times of significant groups. Ask to be placed on the agenda. Give yourself a time limit with each group. Prepare to be flexible. Practice being a gracious giver and receiver. A pastor's list of contacts often includes significant friends; key lay leaders, formal and informal; favorite supporters; "sparring partners"; and even long-term adversaries. Plan what you intend to say and then listen to your conversation partner. Remember, you are the one who is leaving. Your longed-for outcomes may not come to pass. Your expectations for the visit may not be shared by the one with whom you meet, but it is a faithful act to make the effort.

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## Work the Plan

Within limits of personal wisdom and stamina, give attention to working out your farewell plan. This plan is your “agenda” for the time remaining. *Everything else is secondary.* This is especially true of those “emergencies” that crop up, those that only you can solve. Really? Only you? Have the members *no* other savior? Are people fundamentally helpless without you? How have you contributed to making them helpless? These last weeks are a good time to begin letting others handle matters that you have “taken over” during your tenure. The members will need to learn to do without you when you go. Why not help them, by standing on the sidelines, cheering them on? Let them emote with you and survive that confrontation. As you go about your work, be generous and gracious with yourself and others. Remember to be yourself. For example, if you hate saying good-byes, admit it. Take the time to say what needs to be said—and to listen.

The fact that we live and work in redemptive communities is of enormous value in times of farewell. Where better to note our failures and accomplishments than at the foot of Christ’s cross? During this time, farewell scriptures will come to mind. Many Old Testament pilgrimage stories are appropriate. Philippians 4:8 reminds us of God’s blessings in everything. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul declares that we are all common laborers in God’s extraordinary enterprise: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the increase.” In 1 Thess. 4:13, we are called to grieve with hope. In the biblical narrative we are continually reminded where to ground our hope. Our hope is in Christ Jesus. How have you effected hope in Christ Jesus here? At the Last Day, if never before, we shall be united with one another. The gift of that news can carry you and the people you serve through any separation.

## The Next Place

Sooner or later, the “new” place, if you are called to a new place, will get in touch, asking your opinion is on something. Unless it is a matter of long-range planning (or something like the color of carpeting for your office), avoid the temptation to instruct the members of that “new” congregation.

While they have no resident pastor, their system is open in ways that it will not be until another pastoral vacancy. If you jump in to tell the members what to do, you will never know whether they have the capacity to make wise decisions on their own. Let them be. Allow them to act. Let them see themselves making wise choices.

You might even instruct them that your deepest desire is for them to make good decisions on their own. This knowledge should have a freeing effect on a group’s capacity to want to think and act. This quality will serve you well when you arrive as the pastoral leader. The lay leaders will be strong and confident if their choices went well. If not, they will have learned valuable lessons about themselves and the congregation they serve. An added benefit is that you will be free to spend time at the place you are leaving, instead of dividing your attention unduly, worrying both about the members of the congregation you now serve and the one you are soon to lead.

Restrict your decisions with the next congregation to matters of taste and decor, such as the types of furnishings you desire or require. You may have to consider housing—certainly if you plan to buy or rent a place in the new area. If the congregation is planning renovations to the parsonage (manse, rectory), what is the nature and extent of the plans? A design-conscious member of your family will want a role in those decisions. When opinions differ over simply fixing up a parsonage or fixing it up for you and your family, how you, your family, and the congregation address the question may provide clues to how you will work together in the future.

If you or the new congregation’s leaders must deal with the future in a concerted way, suggest that you hold a short (two- to four-hour) retreat with the leadership to agree on the coming year’s top two or three items of focus. Then let the “new” leaders use that structure to keep their focus and channel the congregation’s direction until you arrive.

## Saying Good-bye

One of the best ways to say farewell is to say good-bye. The English word *good-bye* is a contracted form of the phrase *God be with ye*. May God be with you and the congregation you serve as you go your separate ways. We are all sojourners on this earth. As temporary residents, we work and serve together for God’s glory to the best of our individual and collective talents. Go in peace. Serve the Lord. ♦

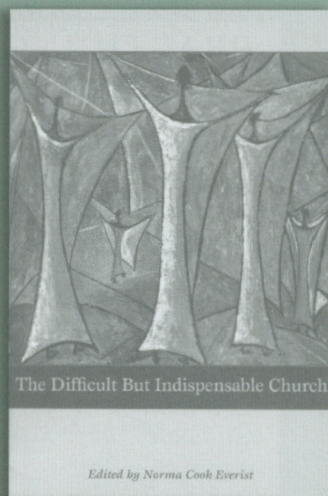
## NOTES

1. Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guilford, 1985), 251–253.
2. Peter Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works* (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 1993), 13–14.
3. Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 22–23.
4. Cf. The Alban Institute, 7315 Wisconsin Ave., Suite 1250W, Bethesda, MD 20814. Phone (800) 486-1318. Web site: [www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org).
5. Wayne Oates, *Grief, Transition and Loss* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 25.
6. Of course, if that were consistently true, then we would resist preaching the gospel, for it is God’s intention always to influence people and places unduly through the preaching of the Word and the hearing of it! We might similarly refrain from administering the sacraments.
7. Lyle Schaller, *Hey, That’s Our Church!* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 113–115.



## The Difficult But Indispensable Church

Norma Cook Everist, ed.  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002



### review book

In this book 21 former and current faculty members at Wartburg Theological Seminary engage in a lively and very readable conversation about what unites and divides congregations today. This conversation, in essay form, is divided into four parts, and addresses personhood in community, the power and centrality of Christ, the necessity of mission, and particular challenges facing the church today. Within each section, these areas are addressed from scriptural, theological, and ministerial perspectives.

I experienced the book in two ways. As someone who works in a Catholic parish the essays gave me a fresh perspective on our call to community and discipleship in Christ, through examples as diverse as a discussion of St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians and a story about an emerging church in Nepal. The authors have suggested that this book, or even individual essays, could be used as a study for parish staff and/or small group adult education classes. I think this would work well; for example, Karen Bloomquist's essay "Communion as a Basis for Formation, Deliberation, and Action," is scholarly but very understandable. (Endnotes help to fill in gaps in study.) She uses the image of communion—the Body of Christ—as a point of reference for a compelling and challenging discussion of ethics, moral formation, and even economic globalization. Bloomquist writes:

The sharing of spiritual and material gifts, which is implicit in communion, cannot be isolated from examining the causes of inequities in wealth and joining with others in seeking change. ...Our ethical horizon and the basis and orientation for moral agency are expanded significantly by communion. Faith becomes active in love not only toward those close at hand who are "like us," but also toward those who are most distant and different from us (pp. 119–20).

I also read the book in light of the terrorist attacks of September 11th and our country's response to them. Issues covered in the book—unity in diversity, ethics, evangelism, religion in public life, life in a global society—take on a special urgency in this time of war and terrorism.

For instance, Peter Kjeseth, in his article "After the Jubilee: The Church's Advocacy Role," describes the power of the Jubilee 2000 movement, a global interfaith effort to break the chains of international debt suffered by the world's poorest nations. Kjeseth demonstrates how in effective public protests and in private discussions in corporate boardrooms the jubilee tradition of Leviticus 25 and Jesus's call in Luke 4 to bring good news to the poor and to free the oppressed have taken on flesh and blood. Churches have seen that people responded to the call for a more ethical society; in turn, churches should embrace their prophetic role in the world.

Now more than ever, no matter how difficult it may be, the Church is indispensable in bringing disparate people together to care for each other and in challenging those same people to live the good news of our life in Christ by reaching out in mission to seek and strive for lasting peace and justice in our world.

**MIMI DARRAGH**

St. Valentine Church  
Bethel Park, Pennsylvania

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Isaiah 49:25*

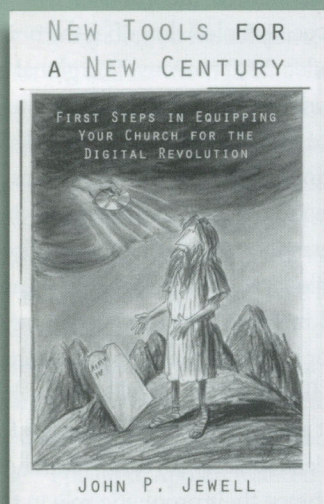




## New Tools for a New Century

FIRST STEPS IN EQUIPPING  
YOUR CHURCH FOR THE  
DIGITAL REVOLUTION

John P. Jewell  
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002



### review book

"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore" (p. 7). Thus opens a fascinating new book discussing the incorporation of technologies such as the Internet, computers, LCD video projectors, and software such as PowerPoint and FrontPage into worship. John Jewell, director of the media center at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, explores both why and how the local church can join the digital revolution to further its primary mission of spreading the faith. For Jewell, the new technologies enhance access to mission fields such as outreach, education, and worship ministries.

The first four sections begin with the assumption that the reader has limited knowledge of the new technologies and provide an in-depth discussion of the various equipment and software that can be used by congregations. (For those with a working knowledge of basic computing theory and the Internet, the author offers a "Skip Quiz" that lets them determine if they

can safely skip the first two chapters.) The sections finish with methods for acquiring the people, programs, and pieces to bring these new forms of ministry into creation. A well thought out chart on page 36 helps define the purpose for which the equipment is to be purchased. One chapter is devoted to educating parents and pastors about effective and safe use of the Internet in the presence of the children of the church. Jewell also maintains a companion Web site ([www.newtools-online.com](http://www.newtools-online.com)) with current information about the ever-changing nature of computer equipment, as well as links to other Web sites of related interest.

As a person who has been involved with personal computers in ministry for almost 20 years—and as one who uses PowerPoint presentations, LCD video projectors, scanners, desktop publishing, and Web design in his work as a middle judicatory staff person for the Unitarian Universalist Association—I found Jewell's book to be an excellent primer for religious leaders as they struggle with the difficulty of integrating new technologies into the church. Jewell quotes the Barna Research Group in a study that says, "one out of six teens (16%) said that within the next five years they expect to use the Internet as a substitute for their current church-based religious experience" (p. 60). The local church will have to learn to use these technologies well if it hopes to keep a connection between itself and these digitally wired, visually cultured youth.

Jewell has provided a book that asks all the right questions about modern technology, with reference to Scripture for support, and provides a sound methodology for answering these questions through good discussion and planning. Now the church has the tools for a new century to meet this digital revolution.

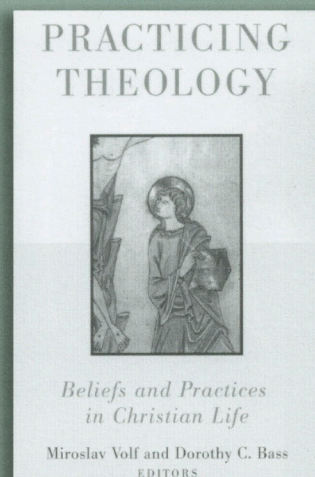
**REV. DR. RICHARD SPECK**

Joseph Priestley District, UUA  
Wilmington, Delaware

## Practicing Theology

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN  
CHRISTIAN LIFE

Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds.  
Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002



### review book

Several years ago, a book of essays crossed my path and became part of my everyday life. In *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, a range of religious thinkers explored 12 Christian practices and the way they fostered a relationship with God. The themes of *Practicing Our Faith* became part of my preaching and part of my reflection on Christian life and our attempt at Christian community—it moved into my mind in an unexpected way.

A newly published sequel, *Practicing Theology*, has emerged to examine the theological underpinnings for various Christian practices. Its approach is quite different from the earlier effort: gather up 13 systematic theologians, ask them to connect their academic understandings to real life, and show that the resulting collection requires either some background in theology or a willingness to learn. Each essayist has a different theme, a different concept one must understand, and just as it comes into focus, the essay concludes and you're on



to challenge the next. And the challenge is worth the effort.

*Practicing Theology* makes essential connections for those practicing in the local parish, and links issues of church systems, hospitality, discernment, change, living, community, liturgy, and healing to theological doctrine. The interplay of belief and practice is explored in ways that move to the deep “why” that grounds our attempts to sustain a Christian community. The book is theoretical *and* down to earth; it informs us while illuminating our experience and confirms, according to editor Dorothy Bass, “the conviction each of us had already reached in previous years of theological study and Christian living: theology is a communal enterprise” (p. 5). The essays are at once abstract and in touch with the messiness of living, finding examples that connect theory to life. They provoked my own thinking about congregations I work with, about my own religious community, and about my own beliefs. Like the essays of *Practicing Our Faith*, *Practicing Theology* is moving into my mind in an unexpected way.

*Practicing Theology* provides a wide array of stories and teachings that link the concepts of doctrine and dogma with real life. The essays not only explain theological concepts, but also bring theology to life.

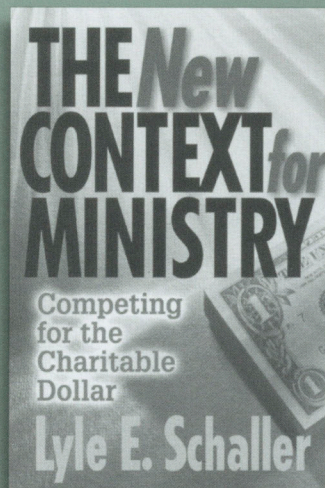
**PATRICIA HAYES**

Field Consultant  
The Alban Institute

## The New Context for Ministry

COMPETING FOR THE  
CHARITABLE DOLLAR

Lyle E. Schaller  
Nashville: Abingdon, 2002



### review book

When a book ranges in subject matter from urban renewal to seminary tuition, from public high schools to cake mixes, from inflation and multi-campus congregations to the history of church and state, and includes both an extended bull session among men who have belonged to a New England congregational church for more than 200 years and an account of the history and economics of the tooth-fairy business, you can be pretty sure the author of the book is Lyle E. Schaller.

In *The New Context for Ministry*, Schaller, one of the elder statesmen of parish consulting, reflects on how American society has changed in the 72 years between the stock market crash of October 1929 and the terrorist attacks of September 2001. The overview is sweeping, provocative, and a bit overwhelming to read. Schaller on the speaker's platform is quite capable of saying, “I have seventeen answers to that

question,” and then rattling them off from memory. In writing, he sometimes utters a generalization, but then, as if by way of apology, offers a long list of specific observations backing it up. One could say that Schaller enumerates the trees, leaving readers with a list of questions to help them describe the forest themselves.

The generalization for which *The New Context for Ministry* gives particulars is the observation that changes in the American economy and religious culture “have created a need to replace the old playbook on ‘How to do church’ with a new playbook” (p. 22). Schaller's message gives no comfort to clergy who hope to coast into the 21st century with outdated skills and habits.

Increased competition for charitable dollars, as the book's subtitle indicates, is the change Schaller holds up for the most attention. Americans have much more discretionary wealth than they once did and more choice in how to spend, invest, and give it away. Add to this a cultural shift toward individual freedom and away from permanent commitments to institutions and communities, and the challenge of obtaining charitable gifts and volunteer time has grown far more complicated than it was in the 1950s. People still make generous gifts, but increasingly the largest gifts go not to congregations that have provided quiet service over many years, but to colleges, hospitals, symphonies, and other institutions with professional fundraisers and sophisticated systems for honing their appeals, cultivating prospects, and (above all) asking for support effectively and often.

Our consumer-oriented, free-market economy shapes people's expectations, but many congregations still behave as though they had a natural monopoly on donors' loyalty. Schaller challenges us instead to learn the rules of a new and tougher marketplace. His book offers



mountains of examples of how this can be done.

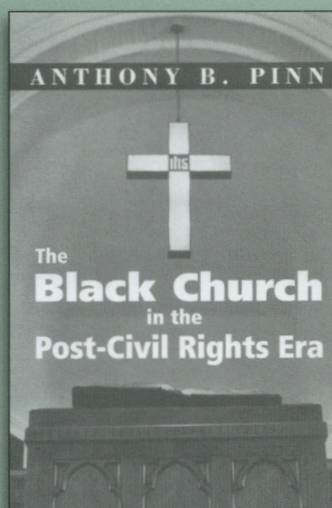
*The New Context for Ministry* is blunt, unconventional, and filled with many stimulating facts and associations, as readers of Lyle Schaller's many books have learned to expect. It also sparkles with a newly playful, sometimes ironic tone. One hopes for many more surprises from Lyle Schaller in the years to come.

**REV. DAN HOTCHKISS**

Author, *Ministry and Money:*  
*A Guide for Clergy and Their Friends*  
Milton, Massachusetts

## The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era

Anthony B. Pinn  
Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002



### review book

In *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Anthony B. Pinn provides a much-needed contemporary snapshot of the life of the black church in America. Much has changed on the black church landscape since the Civil Rights era, and Pinn does a very capable job of sketching these changes: the decline of denominationalism and the rise of black megachurches; black church burnings and leadership scandals within the National Baptist Convention; the rise of women in the ministry, including the installation of the first black female bishop in the African American Episcopal Church; and the challenge of HIV/AIDS, drugs, and black male incarceration.

Through well-documented research and comments from a wide variety of black church leaders, Pinn carries home the point that although the landscape around the black church has changed, the centrality of the church in sustaining and improving the quality of life for

African Americans remains evident. The author chronicles the black church's practice and experience with several new initiatives, including economic development, health care programs, technology, and environmental racism.

A particularly thoughtful section of the book addresses the rise of black megachurches and raises the question of their viability in meeting the pastoral care needs of their parishioners. The book also raises an important question about the rise of the "prosperity gospel" and whether or not it is consistent with the civil rights and social agenda needed in light of the large number of economically disadvantaged African Americans.

An unavoidable shortcoming to Pinn's analysis is that it is impossible to cover the entire landscape of the black church in just 139 pages. The book whets one's appetite for further insight and discussion on the issues confronting the black church—and, much to Pinn's credit, he provides an in-depth resource list, including Internet references for further research on the various issues.

Overall, Pinn's book is an excellent resource tool and should be in the library of anyone working with black churches or concerned with improving the social condition of African Americans.

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## RESOURCES ON VITALITY FROM THE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

Ammerman, Nancy T., Jackson W. Carroll, Carl Dudley, and William McKinney. **Studying Congregations: A New Handbook.** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). This handbook enables seminarians, clergy, academics, and congregational leaders to analyze the ministries, stories, and processes at work in congregations. It is a useful tool for clergy and lay leaders seeking to develop strategies and cultivate leadership skills as they examine faith communities in their environmental contexts.

Bass, Diana Butler. **Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community.** (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). Diana Bass details her experiences with eight Episcopal congregations and concludes that mainline churches have a vital mission. Poised to fill a spiritual void and embrace a vibrant pilgrim spirituality, they can become communities that will begin once again to embody the journey toward "the maddening inclusivity of God."

Guder, Darrell L., ed. **Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998). Our mandate is to move from "doing" to "being" mission, from church with mission to missional church. This book envisions a missional encounter of the gospel with North American culture. The key concept here is that the members of congregations are apostles sent to their own communities.

Hammond, Sue Annis. **The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry.** (Plano, Tex.: Thin Book Publishing, 1996). Appreciative inquiry (AI) seeks to facilitate organizational transformation by identifying, strengthening, and doing more of "what works." The *Thin Book* summarizes the assumptions of AI, contrasts AI with traditional problem solving, and provides guidelines to applying AI. Interested persons might also want to check out [www.thinbook.com](http://www.thinbook.com).

Mead, Loren. **Transforming Congregations for the Future.** (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1994). Loren Mead identifies a transformed congregation as a dynamic center that nurtures disciples by building community, proclaiming God's word, teaching sacred stories, and developing gifts. Offering both inspiration and a realistic

appraisal of the roadblocks to transformation, this book challenges congregational leaders to re-envision themselves and their tasks.

Schwarz, Christian. **Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches.** (St. Charles, Ill.: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996). What are the quality characteristics of churches that are growing spiritually as well as numerically? From Christian Schwarz's extensive research, this book names and explores eight: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships.

Senge, Peter M. **The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.** (New York: Doubleday, 1994). This book is written for the corporate world, but parallels to faith communities can be identified. Offering a half-dozen approaches to implementing and sustaining a learning organization, *The Fifth Discipline* is for leadership open to building a faith community fully dedicated to the growth and development of its members.

**U.S. Congregational Life Survey ([www.uscongregations.org](http://www.uscongregations.org)).** 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202. To help congregations understand themselves and assess their ministries, a survey of over 300,000 worshipers was conducted in 2001. Survey results describe the identity of worshipers, their connections with each other, their involvement in public life, and their spirituality. Survey information may also help denominational leaders assist congregations. (Similar surveys in Australia, England, and New Zealand extend the National Church Life Survey conducted earlier in Australia.)

Woolever, Cynthia, and Deborah Bruce. **A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why.** (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). Drawing on the findings of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, this field guide highlights popular misconceptions that immobilize congregations (such as the myth that people under 30 do not participate in religious activities). It also provides some significant guidelines for leaders seeking to renew their congregations.

[www.congregationalresources.org](http://www.congregationalresources.org)



# Preventing Burnout in Board Members

**Q:** When I was elected to my congregation's board, I thought I would have a more meaningful connection to the work of the congregation. Instead, I find myself dreading the meetings, which tend to focus on "brick-and-mortar" issues more than on setting directions.

I've noticed that once people have served on the board, they tend to drop out of any active role in the congregation and to suffer burnout. What can we do?

**A:** A focus on routine tasks or unending crises tends to take over the agenda of congregational boards or governing bodies. Over time, board members may become disenchanted with their roles or burned out by long meetings that lack direction and vigor. Over time, a notable opportunity has been missed for developing strong leadership to guide the congregation in living out a renewed sense of mission and purpose. Moreover, these leaders can feel "spent"—rather than renewed for future leadership positions.

Charles Olson, in his book *Transforming Church Boards* (Alban Institute, 1995), considers the possibilities of developing the board as a "community of spiritual leaders." He writes:

Strategically speaking, the board, or council, is a crucial arena for congregational renewal and revitalization efforts. If the board can move beyond "business as usual" into the experience of active and energized faith, it will model and lead in ways that impact the whole church. If the board becomes a community of spiritual leaders, the church is bound to feel its effect (p. 76).

A shift to seeing the governing board as a "crucial arena for congregational renewal and revitalization" requires not only a new perspective but also a commitment to practices that embody this approach in the agenda and in the board's deliberative processes. Can we imagine ways that boards can do their work while strengthening their own religious lives and capacities for reflection, analysis, and vision?

Yes. I know it is possible. In leading retreats with dozens of congregational boards, I find it helpful to understand the event as an opportunity to launch new practices that the board will continue afterward. During the sessions I stop periodically and

ask the board to list "implications for our ongoing practice." At the end of the retreat, we review the list, and members commit to the practices that they believe will make the greatest difference for their work. A review three to six months later allows the board to assess what it has learned by engaging in new practices—and how it can sustain the commitment to transforming its work.

## Suggested Practices

Any new practice in our lives (for example, an exercise program, regular meditation, or daily prayer) is hard to sustain. As soon as a board feels overwhelmed by too many items on the agenda or by a crisis, it usually reverts to "business as usual," with predictable results. To sustain a new practice, one must continue, no matter what, until it is mastered. A board might consider adopting some of these:

**1. Begin the meeting with a time of prayer, meditation, or reflection on Scripture to remind the board that its work is sacred.** Sometimes I've observed a board beginning with prayer or reflection but then rushing into its agenda to get to the "real work." When done well, this worshipful beginning is not merely another agenda item to check off but a way to set the tone and context for the board's work.

**2. Provide time for a board member to share briefly some highlights of her own faith journey and what this congregation means to her.** Even if this sharing takes five minutes of meeting time, it is time well spent. It helps members to appreciate and understand one another beyond their roles on the board. It reinforces the connection between a member's personal life mission and the mission of the congregation.

**3. Recognize that some significant decisions require time for theological reflection and interpretation in the context of the congregation's mission.**

Often we move from identifying a problem to determining a solution with no steps between. Occasionally, we need to ask: How does our faith tradition inform this decision? How do we interpret this decision in light of our mission statement? A congregational board's decision making should strengthen the leadership's ability not only to analyze the data, but also to reflect on that information through the resources of faith and the stated mission of the congregation.

**4. Take a meta-view of some decisions.** Alice Mann, in her book *Can Our Church Live?* (Alban Institute, 1999), poses three formative questions whose answers shape a congregation's development and revitalization: "Who are we?" "What are we here for?" "Who is our neighbor?" It is helpful to pause before taking action and ask, "How does this specific decision articulate our response to these three questions?"

**5. Advocate for your ideas—but also be willing to be influenced.** Often board members feel that they must represent a particular constituency, or advocate for a point of view—no matter what. It takes spiritual discipline to be open to the influence of another's ideas, experiences, or data. The balance between advocacy and a willingness to be influenced provides an atmosphere of dialogue that can enrich decision making as well as transform decision makers.

**6. Pause for reflection or prayer before or after a decision.** Sometimes we rush from one task or agenda item to another. Pausing occasionally before or after a decision allows participants to put the action into a meaningful spiritual context and to share further reflections. Asking for spiritual guidance can become part of the spiritual discipline of a board as well as of its individual members.



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CONGREGATIONS is a bimonthly publication of the Alban Institute, a nonprofit, interfaith membership organization founded in 1974 to provide a comprehensive range of resources to Christian and Jewish congregations. Our mission is to provide clergy and lay leaders with practical, research-based information and ideas for effective ministry as they grapple with an ever-changing environment.

The Alban Institute serves leaders – both ordained and lay – across the denominational spectrum through consulting services, education events, book and periodical publishing, and research. Our work is supported by membership revenue, grant funding, and the sale of programs, services, and publications.

The Alban Institute encourages dialogue with many faith traditions, people of diverse ethnicity, men and women, large and small congregations, and urban and rural congregations. We invite you to join in conversation with us by becoming a member or writing an article for CONGREGATIONS – or both! Please call us at 301-718-4407 or send an e-mail to [membership@alban.org](mailto:membership@alban.org).

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