

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

April 2012 - Volume 20, Number 4

Copyright © 2012 by C. Jeff Woods

How Is Your Congregation's Health?

While every congregation is unique, congregations fall into three broad categories of health: healthy, intentional, and fragile. Within these three health categories are ten specific types.

Where would you place your congregation's health?

Healthy Congregations

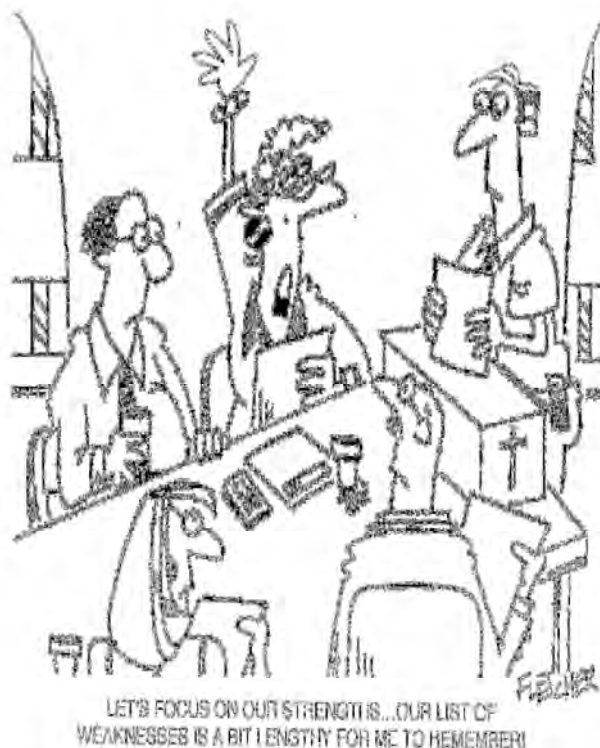
While not perfect, these congregations recognize and capitalize on their strengths. That factor alone is often all they need to move to a healthy operating level. Healthy congregations are well past survival mode. They possess a well-articulated focus on the future, and their budgets reflect their priorities. They embrace change. Every year, they add a few ministries and abandon others, according to their members' gifts and their communities' needs. Equipped with these values and behavior habits, these congregations maintain their health in a variety of different ways.

Teaching/Modeling Congregations are creative, independent thinkers. They maintain their health by focusing on Godly things and staying away from distractions. Often excelling in certain ministries, they may be a leader in one or more specific aspects of ministry (such as tutoring or hospital follow-up) and not realize it. Their leaders and members may take for granted or under-estimate their church's strengths and abilities. But neighboring congregations are typically aware of these strengths and learn from this teaching/modeling behavior. Teaching/Modeling congregations compare well to the Church of Smyrna, "... you are rich." (Rev. 2:9, NRSV). These churches do not try to be all things to all people, but they are clearly God's letter to certain people.

Leadership Congregations prize their leadership position among neighboring congregations and within their denomination. Populated with long-tenured members, they embrace the values and achievements of previous generations. Their members look beyond the local church for places to make a difference nationally and internationally. They regularly hold new member classes, promote giving to denominational offerings, and mirror the espoused values of their heritage. Their commitment to furthering the works and ministries of previous saints propels them. Leadership congregations echo the Church

of Pergamum—"...you are holding fast to my name..." (Rev. 2:13). Mission-minded globally and locally, they regularly develop new disciples of Jesus Christ who are committed to their congregation's ministry priorities. They supply judicatory and denominational leaders and benefit from those relationships.

Networking Congregations maintain their health by relating to like-minded churches. Some of them develop membership in networks, such as *Willow Creek* in Chicago. While teaching congregations tend to underestimate their potential for growth, networking congregations tend to over-estimate their potential. Because of that, these churches are vulnerable to conflict. While both teaching and networking congregations reflect the Church of Smyrna, networking congregations might benefit from the instruction to Smyrna, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." and, "Be faithful until death." (Rev. 2:10). Judicatories can be a catalyst for relationship building, spiritual formation, and accountability.



Intentional Congregations

These congregations plan, set priorities, or unleash energy to strengthen the sense of community among their members and discern where God is leading. Typically, these churches have used some type of internal reflection or congregational assessment to learn their strengths and problem areas. They know where they are, where they would like to be, and are working on a strategy to get there. Intentional congregations come in two forms, those that are learning more about healthy congregations and those that are striving to become one.

Transforming Congregations are on their way toward becoming healthy congregations. Their people have attended church-health conferences, read and worked through resource materials together, and started to implement the principles that they gained. Transforming congregations reflect the Church of Philadelphia—"If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; and you will never go out of it." (Rev. 3:12). These churches' needs are specific—such as the ability to normalize conflict and to receive encouragement as obstacles appear that threaten their effectiveness.

Learning Congregations have arrived at the key recognition that they cannot continue doing the same things over and over and survive. This understanding is the beginning of all transformations. Prior attempts at renewal looked like a solo leader's efforts that were too far ahead of the rest of the congregation, or the acquiescence of a small group of people who believed that they were doing the judicatory a favor by attending the latest church renewal seminar. Obtaining congregation-wide ownership and commitment to renewal is critical.

Fragile Congregations

These churches may exhibit few vitality signs, and they typically are unwilling to invest in the learning and work required to become a healthier congregation. Less-healthy congregations come in five forms, outlined below. Some are unaware of, or in denial, about their changed environment, think a quick fix will do it, and are blocked from considering transformation due to distractions. As the Church of Laodicea discovered when they were told, "...because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." (Rev. 3:15).

Stalled Congregations display many signs of vitality, but have become routine and lost energy. Their primary distinguishing mark is that they have neither abandoned nor added new ministries in the past five years. They may still be doing some excellent ministry. But without a constant flow of new ideas and relinquishment of old ones, they soon find themselves battling more over their assets and properties than over the quality of their ministries.

Technical Congregations look for a quick fix to achieve congregational health. They are convinced that the right approach, a key program, or an insightful conversation with someone "in the know" will launch their congregation into a pathway of renewal. They view transformation as following the right steps rather than adapting sound principles. Technical congregations may emulate other churches, but more often, they seek to add one or more new programs as their silver-bullet to success. Like the Church of Thyatira, their "love, faith, service, and patient endurance" and their recent ministries may be "...greater than the first." (Rev. 2:19).

Isolated Congregations may be in the "middle of nowhere" geographically, or in the heart of a city. Most members drive in from other neighborhoods. In either case, they have largely cut themselves off from the community. Like the church of Sardis, they must "Wake up, and strengthen what remains...." (Rev. 3:2) or eventually face death. Isolated congregations display amazing resiliency, but find vitality difficult when cut off from the world. Until these churches sense urgency and request assistance, denominational staff can do little to assist with change.

Distracted Congregations, like the Church of Ephesus, have "...abandoned the love you had at first." (Rev. 2:4). They pay too much attention to internal conflict, the pain of a former disappointment, or the antics of a resident antagonist. As a result, they have forgotten how to do effective evangelism, discipleship, and worship. Common reasons for their denial and distraction crop up—a controlling patriarch or matriarch, an angered family, a previous split, clergy misconduct, tragic loss, or a revered leader who never left the congregation. Often in a co-dependent relationship with their distractions, health eludes them until these issues are addressed.

New Congregations, often defined as churches established within the past five years, are by their nature also fragile. Encouragement, support, and appropriate challenges from their regional denominational leaders can help to counter this fragility. New congregations need to stay focused on ministry. They are most effective when they only develop the minimal organizational structures and systems necessary to support their growing ministries.

Note: Go to "Free Resources" on the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site to download resources for these congregational categories and types titled A Typology of Congregational Health.