*LEADING TO A HEALTHIER CONGREGATION*

This does not have to be rocket science. The health of a congregation increases or diminishes based on its relationship with leaders, in particular, the clergy. In their unique role, clergy generally have more influence over the health of the congregation than any other single factor. The corner stone of any healthy relationship is trust. Clergy may be elected by the congregation to serve, but they are still the outsiders. Invited in as may be, the onus for building trust is disproportionately on the pastor. Most congregations will be defensive about their unhealthy aspects and will resist an outsider until trust is built. Trust is built on consistency and reinforced through acceptance. It is their sense of being accepted for who they are that will allow them to open themselves to attach to the clergy. Being loved will permit them to risk and venture out into mission and service. Three of the behaviors essential for strengthening the foundation of health are listening, speaking their language, and affirming the congregation.

**Listening**

Far too many clergy leave seminary and enter the parish with the admonition, which they have literally heard, or at least inferred, *Now, go and put your mark of ministry upon the congregation.* The operative message is that the congregation is a blank slate upon which one draws out a plan for ministry much like the professor approaching the whiteboard in the classroom to outline the defense of the thesis of

the day. Congregations, however, are anything but blank slates. They each have their own corporate personality, which, at some level, most lay people and clergy acknowledge although they are unprepared to name. Beginning in the next chapter readers will engage in a process which will lead to a clearer definition of the corporate personality of the congregation.

Even as the corporate personality comes into focus, healthy and wise leadership remains essential. Seminaries are focusing on the pastor as leader. The context and size of various congregations is considered. They designate little class time for exploration into the dynamics within the congregations which makes each one unique. Congregational leaders, lay and clergy, have not yet discovered the importance of developing an awareness to ask enough questions, especially ones assisting the congregation in claiming who it is and how it has been gifted.

Since an awareness of the congregation as having a definable personality has not been fostered, many clergy begin a new position as pastor focusing on their abilities, their knowledge, and their expectations of how the congregation should function. Search committees may even ask during initial interviews, *What is your vision for this congregation.* Knowing this to be a new relationship, one often likened to marriage, and being quite unconscious of the congregation's personality, the clergy looks at the congregation as if its a mirror at best only to see, as dim as it may be, a reflection of his/her own personality. As the congregation is also unaware of its own personality, it may attribute too much of its successes to its clergy, or it may be blaming the clergy for failing to measure up to some set of unspoken

standards and expectations, including the expectation clergy will "use us, try to change us, and leave us." It becomes too much about the "new pastor" not about "our relationship with the new pastor." The clergy performance pressure is on. The more it is perceived to be about one's abilities, the greater the opportunity for insecurity to consciously or unconsciously control the pastor. Beyond the potential for unhealthy attitudes and behaviors, the cycle leads to greater isolation. Clergy, when ministry becomes about their abilities and inabilities, become the "Lone Rangers." They tend to further undermine their own ministry by depreciating the importance of relationships with members and especially with colleagues.

The demands and expectations to be in control often stifle any desire to gather the information about the congregation that would be helpful and healthy: history, traumatic experiences, dynamics and dysfunction, abuse, leadership style of past leaders and perceived health of the congregation with hurts and regrets, as well as the congregation's mission and ministry interests, abilities and accomplishments, the hopes and fears. Such information is vitally important in understanding the state of health and unique characteristics of the congregation. Listening validates and affirms the other. Through the process of being "listened to," the congregation learns it can be accepted for who it is.

To learn about the congregation, one often has to take the lead by asking questions. Questions can either connote an air of superiority, which immediately puts the other on the defensive, or an atmosphere of mutuality, which invites the other into a safer relationship. For the new pastor to ask, "Why is there always so

much clutter in the gathering space?" conveys a parental question inviting those hearing it to immediately react defensively. It is hearing, "Why haven't you cleaned up your room?" Such questions are not as much designed for gathering information, as they convey a failure by the hearer to meet an unspoken expectation. They cause the hearer to stay dependent on the authority figure and to simply maintain a mode of survival.

The discovery process one engages to learn about another sets the tone for the relationship. Most people do not think of listening as a process. The process of listening begins with being more conscious of the motivations for listening. This clarity will help amplify one's ability to focus on the other. As one's attention is drawn to what the other has to say, rather than one's own agenda, the relationship can move forward. The foundational process for inquiry, which helps to build trust in relationships, is for a person to ask questions to which they have no anticipation of content in the answer. Having no prejudgment or expectation for a specific response leaves the inquisitor open to, and willing to be surprised by, the answer. Further exploration is thereby encouraged. This demonstrates the listening is not about a specific agenda, power, or position. A style of asking questions, facilitating more deeply honest listening, helps build and maintain a balanced relationship wherein each is honored.

Listening is more than hearing the words. While one is listening to the stories, the history, the joys and sorrows, it is important to listen for the patterns. One sees the pattern in the reoccurring themes. How does this congregation handle challenge

or conflict? What really works here? What types of issues repeatedly become stumbling blocks for this congregation? What gives them a sense of pride? Is there a consistency in the causes of hurt and their reactions? When do they feel closest to God and/or sense God being closest to them? What are their accomplishments? In listening for the patterns, you are listening to the personality of the congregation. Various personalities will be troubled by differing issues, be hurt and respond in dissimilar ways, and sense the closeness of God in divergent experiences. By personality congregations will differ in what they judge to be an accomplishment, what they know is important in being a congregation, and how they celebrate. The patterns give voice to the personality of the congregation. Knowledge of corporate personality type theory will give leaders greater understanding in what they are hearing.

**Speaking Their Language**

Using words that are understood

Sitting at lunch, during the 13th Biennual International Conference of the Association of Psychological Type, the Director for Jewish Education in Orange County, CA asked, *This instrument might work in our synagogues, but what does this word mean?* She was pointing at a word in the Profiler for Congregational Personality Preferences, PCPP.

As we had talked the day before I had given her the PCPP and had suggested she complete it based on her home synagogue. She was very skeptical, but

completed the PCPP and now raised her question. The word with which she was not familiar was *Ministry*. I responded, *Ministry? This is a catchall word used by many Christians to refer to primary activities in which they engage both within the congregation and out in the social community. You might use the terms mission and service.* She responded indicating a new understanding. Indeed *ministry* is a word understood today by many professional leaders in the Christian church, but not necessarily with as broad of meaning by the mass membership. In asking members from various congregations what the word *ministry* means, I too frequently heard, *Ministry? It's what the minister does.* My point is this word is so common that even when there is not agreement on the fullness of its meaning is does not produce anxiety in congregational members.

On the other hand, the wide use of another word has fairly recently begun to cause anxiety and conflict in Christendom; at least in the USA. In the first decade of the 21st century being *Missional* became the vogue word of seminary professors, students and subsequently clergy. Being *missional* was reclaimed with the 1988 publishing of *Missional Church: A Vision for the sending of the church in North America.*[1] This book was grounded in a three year research project of six missiologists for the *Gospel and Our Culture Network*.[2] In 1999 Craig Nessan, seminary professor, published his work, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission*[3] and students became further immersed in missional language and took it into their future congregations. Reggie McNeal announced a *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*[4] in the book he published under that title in

2009.

McNeal asks tough questions that churches needed to entertain. In Missional Renaissance, he outlines three significant shifts in thinking and behavior that he judges leaders need to embrace on a journey toward being missional: a change of focus from internal to external, "ending the church as exclusive social club model"; turn from running programs and ministries as a core activity to developing people who act out their faith in the world; and not relying on professional leadership to run the church, but develop a community in which everyone shares leadership.

Reggie became a popular speaker for denominational meetings, church leadership seminars, clergy continuing education and retreats. Because of the challenges that McNeal and others lay out, some missional communities have been developed. Congregations have been reviewing their focus and style of ministry. The movement toward being more missional and less like a "country club" is vital to the Church being faithful in North America.

However, I am concerned about the use of the word *Missional;* not infrequently with disastrous consequences. By 2008 *Missional* became a word that was widely used and as widely confusing. Alan Hirsch, published a 2008 article in the Leadership Journal titled, *Defining Missional: The word is everywhere, but where did it come from and what does it really mean?*[5] He identifies the problem:

> *It has become increasingly difficult to open a ministry book or attend a church conference and not be accosted by the word missional. A quick search on Google uncovers the presence of "missional communities," "missional leaders," "missional worship," even "missional seating," and "missional coffee." Today, everyone wants to be missional. Can you*

*think of a single pastor who is proudly anti-missional?*

> But as church leaders continue to pile onto the missional bandwagon, the true meaning of the word may be getting buried under a pile of assumptions. Is it simply updated nomenclature for being purpose-driven or seeker-sensitive? Is *missional* a new, more mature strain of the emerging church movement?[6]

More than half a decade later clarity in meaning and use of the word *Missional* has not been established. Congregations continue to become anxious because the word is quite foreign to them and often clergy and students, eager to adopt this word du jour cannot clearly and concisely explain what it would mean for the congregation. What the members hear often is a "big picture" word with little or no tangible details or facts, nor a clear path forward. What the people hear is condemnation for "loving" their sanctuary and maintaining their property. What they hear is that buildings are a drain on financial resources which should be used for mission - not upkeep. The message heard by congregational members often is that they and there buildings, committees, programs and ministries are bad; being missional is good, it's what Jesus wants us to be.

Imagine the sense of betrayal, confusion, and anger erupting in members who have been baptized, confirmed, and married in the sanctuary, who have buried beloved family members from there, that now hear that they are the core of the congregation's unfaithfulness. As an interim pastor who goes into congregations that have experienced severe pastor/people conflict, I have witnessed the damage done by pastors needing to jump on the missional bandwagon. Without clear definition of being *Missional*, and with clergy who think it is their job to be more the

prophet who reveals the wrong, than the leader who increases understanding of what it would look like for the congregation to be missional in it's social context, the use of this word continues to be problematic and harmful.

A big misstep taken by congregational leaders, that frequently result in resistance and/or conflict with being missional, is that they frame being missional in contrast to maintenance, to facilities, to programs and committees within the church facilities; an *either/or* dichotomous choice is created. Given such a choice in most congregations the unknown future choice, becoming missional, will not only not be chosen, but will be perceived as a threat. Further, putting "being missional" forward as a dichotomous choice opposed to maintenance, especially with the implication that one is good and the other bad, borders on misconduct, is not scriptural, and ultimately diminishes the congregation's ability to be missional. People come together as a congregation, in part, for mutual support through division of labor. Consider the first Christian community as they intentionally identified members to care for the needs of other members, *their widows*, leaving the others to focus on evangelism and the proclamation of the Gospel:

> Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. Act 6:1-6 NSRV

The community needs to be maintained; maintenance of the community is vital to ensure and enhance mission. Now that doesn't necessarily mean pouring countless dollars into a money-pit-facility. Each community should come to terms with the necessity and changing requirements of aging buildings that were designed to support the purpose and ministry of a previous age. They must consciously review and reframe what is needed to maintain their community; what worship, what education and spiritual growth, what care for one another, and what functionality and design is needed in their facilities. I recently was the interim in a congregation of 1,000 members and nearly 100 were 80 years old and older and there was not one handicap accessible bathroom in the 52,000 sq ft building. Who is caring for *their widows*?

Yet, the issue in not being missional or not. The issue is semantics; what the word means and how it is used. *Missional* is a visionary word, used in a visionary form. This becomes a foreign language to congregations whose personality appreciates and uses a concrete language of facts and details, with an orientation more to the traditional past than toward the visionary future. Missional, at minimum, merely indicates one of the two directions for our congregational activities and resources. The word missional never needs to be used by leaders to "motivate" or "judge" a congregation. Simply, leaders who desire to have their congregations be more active in the world, to be more *Missional,* simply need to become leaders working with members and people of the social community to

identify needs, design training and help develop resources to give those interested the confidence and tools to be in the world in God's name making a difference. Leaders become more effective as they discover the power of affirming the congregation through learning and using the language of the congregation; translating words and ideas of writers, theologians, and professors, as well as of other members, into the language that speaks to the congregation as a whole in worship and congregational life.

Communicating with a congregation whose personality differs from one's own requires developing skills akin to learning a foreign language. It is going to take patience, practice, consciousness (you can't run on autopilot), and the willingness to be immersed in their world. Much like accent, tonality and rhythm are essential to more fully communicate in a foreign language, understanding the language nuances of personality type aid the pastor and the congregation in being able to truly communicate with each other. This builds trust and strengthens relationships. It is not helpful, but rather off-putting to start throwing around the four letter designations for personality types of people and congregations which you will learn in the next chapter; type designations of ISTJ and ENTP, for example. Similar to using a nebulous word like *missional*, using type designations would be meaningless and received as an act of calling them names; names they may not yet understand. This would be experienced as condescending. What is helpful is to learn the language to which they respond. The language of facts and details is different from one oriented to experiences. Some personalities listen for ideas and

connections of thought, rather than hard facts. Some personalities frame their decisions in language of rules, logical consequences, established procedures, and what they judge as right or wrong, while others prefer to express decisions in more relationally based language; who is going to be affected and how.

In preparation for a move to Germany, I took a class at the local community college. I got the basics down. Upon arrival I had some experiences of making myself understood. It was helpful when the native speaker was extremely patient. On the other hand, I could hardly understand a word spoken to me. Most of it didn't sound at all like the German I studied. It was then I recalled my teacher talking about Low German, or the dialects, *Plattdeutsch*. She had told the class about the regional dialects such as Swabian and Bavarian. The reality in which I found myself, living in a village of 400 people, was the Platt of one village can be very distinct, and difficult to understand by villagers of a neighboring community just three kilometers distant.

You may have taken another call in the same region of Pennsylvania, or Texas, or North Dakota and the people may sound like they speak the same language as your previous congregation, but can you communicate with them? How does the Platt, the dialect, of First Christian differ from the dialect used at New Life? As villages of a couple hundred people or less in Germany can each have their own unique dialect, so congregations of every size throughout the world may have a dialect nuanced with the elements of their preferences, abilities, values, and experiences. The odds of a congregation understanding what their pastor is trying

to teach them greatly increases as the clergy learn the local dialect; learn how to speak to them in the language of their values, personality, and spirituality.

My time in Germany also taught me another truth about foreign languages and relationships. The times when I spoke English and tried to get others to understand me they wrote me off. In their mind it was as though I was acting like English was superior and they were the foreigners who should understand me. My speaking slower and louder added to the air of condescension. This behavior cultivated distrust. However, when I made the attempt to speak their language, imperfect as I am with it, they displayed greater willingness to work toward understanding me. I am showing them honor and respect by attempting to speak their language. This effort on my part fosters an increased atmosphere for trust.

**Affirming the Congregation's Personality**

The health and vitality of the congregation is linked to its use of its energy. Unhealthy congregations can expend a tremendous amount of energy perpetuating their survival mode. It is hard and exhausting work to maintain a state of vigilance, defensiveness and fear. It is even more exhausting for a congregation to maintain a persona of something it is not. A healthy congregation will have an honest estimation of who it is. It will be energized through engaging its giftedness in pursuit of spiritual and ministerial goals and activities in line with its personality. Congregations become more healthy as they are encouraged in their purpose and mission by healthy leaders who affirm the congregation's corporate personality.

Affirmation for a congregation, similar to an individual, is recognizing it's unique interests and abilities. It has greater potential in some areas and lesser abilities and interests in others. Affirmation requires both introspection to identify interests and real experiences to learn whether the interest can be honed into a skill. Affirming the congregation's personality is not just saying patronizing words or comments intended to be encouraging or manipulating. Affirmation is more than words, it is about engaging the congregation, or the person, in such a manner that allows, invites, and encourages them through "who they are" and "what they do".

Leaders are called to affirm the congregation by being a mirror for how it is an image of God's presence and how God has gifted it for service and mission. Affirming the congregation means one is attentive to its spirituality, which is the core of its energy for being and doing. Listening with the intent of truly hearing and learning to speak the congregation's language are fundamental for affirmation. Responding using particular words with which they can identify and need to hear will both affirm and motivate. For example, a person, or congregation, who tends to live more out of the head than the heart, will generally hear affirmation in the recognition of what they do and what they have accomplished. Affirmation for the one who lives more through the heart comes in being acknowledged for who they are and how they are important to you or to others. Simply telling a head person he or she is important to you, or a heart person how good their work is, may not be received as the affirmations you intended. The challenge is that often our attempts at affirming another tend to be based on what we consider as an affirmation and

would want to hear, not what they need to hear. Leaders increase the power of their affirmations, strengthening the identity of the congregation, by giving the compliments and encouragements the congregation needs to hear. Affirmations based in knowledge of the congregation's personality will be heard as more genuine, and will further the development of trust.

The differentiated congregation, or person, is more equipped to hear and own affirmations, have a health assessment of self and connect with others in healthy relationships. Friedman, referencing Murray Bowen's innovative work on family systems theory, defines self-differentiation:

> Differentiation means the capacity of a family member to define his or her own life's goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures, to say 'I' when others are demanding 'you' and 'we.' It includes the capacity to maintain a (relatively) non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one's own destiny and emotional being...The concept should not to be confused with autonomy or narcissism. Differentiation means the capacity to be an 'I' while remaining connected.[7]

The goal of the process of identifying the congregation's corporate personality is to further the healthy maturation of the congregation into being differentiated; collectively being an "I" based on the confidence of knowing who it is while staying connected. Knowing its preferences, acknowledging its spiritual posture and building on its strengths will foster the identity of the congregation. By acknowledging and working with the congregation's unique qualities and characteristics leaders will nurture the health of the congregation supporting the process of differentiation. Affirming the congregation means nurturing its health,

helping it claim its identity, its personality, and honoring its spirituality, its unique gifts, attributes and expressions of being a "child of God."

Bowen identified anxiety as a major factor in unhealthy families and social systems. There is an inverse relation between differentiation and anxiety; the greater the differentiation the lower the anxiety, and the greater the anxiety lesser the degree of differentiation.[8] In his book *Healthy Congregation, A Systems Approach,* Peter Steinke give practical steps for leaders to address the debilitating effects of anxiety by building healthy behaviors and practices.[9] I believe the benefits of a systems approach to increase the health of the congregation will realize even greater benefits as one's looks at the congregation through the lens of personality differences. An anxiety trigger for one personality, for example, will be worship that does not start on time, while for a congregation with an opposite personality type leadership which is too structured and inflexible will spark anxiety.

Self-differentiation for the congregation is dependent on it understanding its unique personality. As the congregation discovers the authenticity of its personality and is encouraged to function according to its values it will increasingly develop a non-anxious presence. Non-anxious congregations do not overreact to challenges, nor are they distant from, or enmeshed with, clergy. The development of a healthy personality is not only dependent upon recognition, affirmation, and encouragement. It will thrive on opportunities to live honestly through its spiritual posture. The more the congregation lives by the values of its personality and grows

within the framework of its spiritual posture, the greater the potential for a healthier existence. As the congregation becomes confident and stronger in its sense of its identity, it will replace unhealthy protectionist rules and survival mentality with healthy living in the world that is able to take risks.

It is easy for a leader to get caught-up in the cycles of identifying what is unhealthy about congregation. Leaders have become very proficient in identifying the unhealthy attitudes, behaviors, and other manifestations of being a broken community with a spirituality less than whole, less than holy. Indeed, congregations act out and can be hostile, aggressive, passive aggressive, mean-spirited, self-centered, narcissistic, and/or neurotic. So can the clergy. Congregations that have not matured into a state self-differentiation may continue to choose enmeshment or dependency; also true for some clergy. Congregations can corporately manifest just about any social pathology with which an individual might be challenged. They might be unhealthy, dysfunctional and/or stuck in one of the survival modes. I have witnessed a congregation, following the inappropriate behavior and attitudes of its leaders, become verbally abusive and physically threatening to members who objected to decisions made unconstitutionally.

Clergy and judicatory leaders tend to look at the unhealthy congregation much like a person going to the doctor. The doctor has to name the illness before treatment can be given. Few leaders, however, have been trained to diagnose causes of congregational dysfunction. Not having the skills or training to intervene in the pathological patterns in congregations, leaders can get caught up in naming the

illness and then trapped as they fixate on it because either they are ill equipped to address it or their own dysfunction draws them into a co-dependent relationship with the congregation. The focus of one's attention and emotional energy on what or who is unhealthy in the congregation may be reinforcing the problem rather than initiating the necessary work to alleviate it. It is easy to name what we judge to be wrong with the other, but where does that get us? At best it can give one a sense of satisfaction that comes with understanding, at worst, it contributes to self-righteous superiority.

Returning to our doctor analogy, sometimes doctors are unable to name the cause of the illness. It is the present dynamics in the body endangering its life that become the chief and immediate concern. They choose a path of focusing on strengthening the body rather than fixating on the disease. As the body functions according to how it was created it grows in strength, its immune system recovers. In time a strong healthy body will overcome, minimize, or eliminate what is unhealthy. Anxiety is one of the greatest threats to the health of the congregation. Self-differentiation strengthened by honest affirmation is the best option for dealing with the destructive powers of anxiety. Walter Wink, considering the relational process by which congregations can become healthier noted, "It involves accepting and loving its present reality, however corrupt, just as one would any other sinner. Churches are like people: they do not change in order that they might be accepted; they must be accepted in order that they might change."[10]

The pivotal relationship between pastors and congregations hinges on the

ability of the clergy to build a trusting relationship with congregations. Affirming the preferences of the congregation by leading with a focus on the congregation's values, traits, and language is essential. Healthy clergy consciously move away from viewing their own gifts and abilities as the primary ones for accomplishing mission and service in the congregation. They work to help the congregation become self-reliant and confident. The shift is toward seeing the health and vitality of the congregation as dependent on being recognized and valued for who it is (its personality) and having its preferences engaged for and in ministry, what it does (its vocation). Affirming the corporate personality, the collective identity, will lead the congregation into greater self-confidence and trust in their abilities to engage in worship, mission and service. They will increase in the capacity to own their congregational identity while being connected with their clergy and engaged in their social context to fulfill their purpose.

## *Endnotes*

1. Daniel L. Gruder, editor, Missional Church: A Vision for the sending of the church in North America, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988).

2. The Gospel and Our Culture Network is guided by its purpose to provide *useful research* regarding the encounter between the gospel and our culture, and to encourage *local action* for transformation in the life and witness of the church. Their website *www.gocn.org* indicate that they help leaders work together on common local concerns facing congregations representing Christian traditions from Mennonite to Roman Catholic, from Anglican to Southern Baptist.

3. Craig L. Nessan, *Beyond Maintenance To Mission*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999).

4. Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Leadership Network Series, 2009).

5. Alan Hirsch, *Defining Missional: The word is everywhere, but where did it come from and what does it really mean?,* Marshall Shelley, editor-in-chief, Leadership Journal (Fall 2008).

6. Ibid., 20.

7. Edwin H. Freidman, *Generation to Generation, Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, (New York London: The Guilford Press, 1985), 27.

8. Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, (New York, New York, Jason Aronson, Inc, 1978), 362 - 364.

9. Peter L Steinke, *Healthy Congregation, A Systems* Approach*,* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1996, 2006).

10. Wink, 81.