IN THE BEGINNING

"Are you crazy?" I thought. I could not believe what I was hearing.

"Have you tried St. Mark's, and did you say you were living in Falls Church? You ought to try Holy Trinity. It is over on Woodlawn Ave. And do come back and visit us."

It was my first Sunday of pastoral internship and I was standing next to Harold, my supervising pastor. The date was September 2, 1973. We were greeting people following the worship service at a mid-sized congregation near Washington, D.C. The pastor would warmly greet visitors and then invite them to visit other congregations, as well as return again to this one for another visit.

I had been raised in provincial Wisconsin and attended college and seminary in parochial Iowa. Encouraging visitors to attend other congregations had not been part of my experience. It felt akin to treason. I really didn't think much of the incident other than to find confirmation for why the congregation was concerned about whether or not they could afford me; their first intern. What did they expect? Their pastor seemed to be encouraging the visitors to go to other congregations! What if these visitors found another congregation where they were more assertively

pursued? Wouldn't they join that congregation? How would this place ever grow or, simply, survive?

A little over a year and a half later I was installed in my first call. It was to a large, multi-staffed congregation in southern California which boasted of its 1200 plus members, a large congregation for the mid-1970's. The congregation had something for every one: large Sunday school for all ages, choirs, youth programs, senior lunches, women's activities and men's prayer breakfasts. The congregation's ministry included a Christian Day School. The attitude here was completely different from my internship experience. Here visitors were all potential members. If we provided enough opportunities and a great variety of activities surely they would find something that would keep them. But in all honesty many came and did not stay.

The rule of "finders keepers" seemed to be exercised by this congregation. I confess I didn't even think twice about this attitude toward visitors, nor of treating members as consumers rather than disciples, because it seemed most other congregations with which I was familiar operated under this same rule or attitude. In my experience pastors perpetuated, or at least maintained the rule; all, that is, except Harold. This attitude has been greatly re-enforced and systematized since the mid-70s in the "Church Growth" movement. I was schooled in the fundamentals of this movement during this first call following seminary. My take-away from the church growth movement in the 70's is that is was all about number, about members; increase the program options and the congregation will grow.

This book is not another book on growth, becoming a mega-church, or becoming missional. While many clergy and congregations have benefited from the articulation of suggestions, concerns, and ideas of each of these movements over the past 30+ years, personally they have never completely fit me; or maybe it was I who did not fit them. I could not let go of my perception that something deeper was involved in congregational membership, participation, and the willingness to embrace discipleship. Instead of focusing on closing the back door, the concepts on which many of the growth books are based, the suggestion of this book is that congregations open wide the side doors; do as Harold was doing and invite people to find their church home — the place that is right for their spirituality. This work suggests identifying the personality of the congregation is essential to understanding its dynamics. The congregation will be more vital and healthy when its members and leadership foster practices appropriate for the personality and spiritual posture of the congregation. Members and visitors will engage with the congregation whose practices are authentic and from the heart, they will more positively value their membership, deepen their relationships and willingly discover what God is about in their lives. The key to congregational health, and a relational component of clergy wellbeing, lies in the acknowledging and honoring its personality, its spirituality.

I can now admit that I served in my first call for five years feeling like a fish out of water. It was not a relationship that supported or encouraged me to be professionally healthy, and consequently I did not always act professionally. I

became judgmental of their issues and mode of operation, and they in turn were critical not only of my ministry, but of me personally. It took its toll on my spirituality, my relationship with God, and God's people (including my family). Some years later while reflecting on my experience I wrote, "I finally realized why they wanted me to keep coming up with new and creative ideas. My creative ideas helped them to remember why it was that they wanted to keep doing things the same old way." If I went back today, thirty-five years later, I am sure some would still remember negatively the sermon when I..., or that youth program that... My creativity, which I considered one of my greatest gifts, seemed to cause them much pain.

By the time I left that first call I was questioning if I really belonged in the ministry. I couldn't give these people what they seemed to need, and with each critical review they could not give me the affirmation I increasingly craved. I tried to hold on by recognizing and rationalizing that I did have good and meaningful ministry with a number of the members. Yet, I knew that as far as the congregation as a whole was concerned I was not a good match for them and judged not to be a good pastor. They were frustrated, and I was dying.

The call I accepted next was to a small congregation of about 120 people. As I walked onto the property for my first interview, before I ever met a single member, I remember the incredible feeling of coming home. And home it was for over fifteen years. In contrast, my annual review always was full of affirmations. The critiques were always right on target inviting me to continue to grow personally and

professionally, but with a degree of understanding about my lesser developed abilities. My "weaknesses" were not used as a club to make me conform. I never heard a negative thing about my creative approach to sermons, and in fact, was often mistakenly given credit for creative aspects in special worship services actually designed and created by other members. They were proud of and affirmed me for how God had gifted me.

Oh, how I changed simply by moving four hundred miles. But, was it "I" who really changed or was it that this was a different congregation with different values and interests. It had its own personality — a personality with which I could more readily associate and which in turn accepted me, my spirituality and values, and my gifts.

Through simply acknowledging this contrast in experiences, I began to challenge the operational theory of congregations, which I must have picked up by osmosis at seminary. Many pastors, consciously or unconsciously, appear to operate under this theory; congregations are like unformed clay with which it is the pastor's responsibility to do ministry by shaping and forming it for success, primarily by marking it with one's own personality and abilities. If, however, a congregation has its own discernible personality, then everything changes.

New possibilities began to emerge and with them greater challenges. Beginning with my attitude, I must alter my operative expectations of ministry and my behavior toward the congregation's way of functioning. I soon realized that there was nothing so wrong with the first congregation I served and nothing so right

about the second; they were just each different and unique. As I felt healthier in ministry, I was better able to hear the pain of others; of pastors who could not appreciate the congregations they served and of congregations unable to accept their pastor.

In 1984 I trained and became authorized in the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)©.[1] This instrument identifies one's preferences for gathering information, through the five senses or through intuition, and for making decisions, by thinking processes or by feeling (valuing) processes. The instrument further identifies one's primary source of their psychic energy. People preferring extraversion are energized engaging in the outer world of people and things. Those preferring introversion are energized by the thoughts and ideas of the inner world. This system is described further in later chapters of this book.

The new insights into the dynamics of personality preferences enhanced my working with individuals and couples. Within three years of working with individuals, I began to recognize how many of the MBTI © personality patterns were evident in the corporate functioning of congregations. It wasn't long before the experience of my first Sunday on internship came back to me. Was it possible that, although Harold did not articulate it, he knew that for people to become active members they had to sense a strong affirming connection between their personalities and the personality of the congregation? This would not necessarily mean they would be two peas-in-a-pod. Opposites do attract. It could be a place where visitors sensed they would be able to make a difference, their gifts engaged,

or where they sensed their perspectives were needed. Person and congregation would have to understand and appreciate each other through engaging the gifts each brings to the relationship. It has also become evident that while some pastors may recognize this from a parishioner's point of view, as Harold did, they are not able to articulate it from the congregation's perspective — that the congregation also has a set personality. Nor are many clergy able to clearly define the healthy dynamics of personalities in relationship, pastor and congregation. This lack of articulation is rooted primarily in insufficient and underdeveloped concepts and images of the church. While more seminary professors are giving attention to components of congregational identity, healthy practices, missional, theological, etc., little, if any, seminary instructional time is devoted to thinking of congregations as having discernible personalities and what that means for pastor/ congregational working relationships as together they engage in service and mission in the world.

As I pursued these thoughts, or should I say, as they pursued me, my work began with the challenge to identify and name the corporate nature of the congregation I was serving. This work has grown out of the research conducted in pursuit of this initial challenge, "Identifying the Congregation's Corporate Personality." I am indebted to the people of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Cupertino, CA whom I served during the time of developing these insights into operative theory. Their interest in understanding their corporate personality and their encouragement and trust was essential. I have great appreciation for the numerous

other congregations and pastors who have supported this work with their gifts of self-disclosure, skepticism, curiosity and time spent in reviewing and challenging this work. The dissolving of their skepticism into many "a-ha" moments of insights-revealed have been more than encouraging.

The focus of this work is to assist in you in getting to know who the congregation is and learn how to move it to greater health, as it claims its identity, its giftedness for ministry; as it claims its mission in the world. The intent of this work is to be a resource to you — clergy, lay member, judicator leader, seminary professor, student, consultant, coach — as together we work to be more faithful in our discipleship; striving to authentically be the presence of God's love in the world.

Endnotes

1. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and MBTI are registered trademarks of Consulting Psychologist Press, Inc.,Palo Alto, CA.