**Congregational Patterns and Change**

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Congregations have fairly predictable patterns and characteristics.

* They were products of their time and culture, usually initiated as a grassroots movement.
* They change as they go through different stages of development in which different types of leaders emerge. Visionaries are replaced by strategists who are replaced by administrators . . .
* They cannot be sustained without continually involving the people. To survive, a congregation must constantly discern what has to change and what doesn't.

As time goes on and a congregation stabilizes ‘stretch points’ are inevitable.

* Some may feel that the founding values and purposes are being threatened by change.
* There is the inexorable push toward bureaucracy—a feeling that the organization needs to be controlled.
* Older forms and programs are strained and often seen as ineffectual.
* Founders or long time members age and younger and/or newer members are expected to assume leadership. However, long time members often want the newer members to perpetuate their practices and programs and perspectives.
* Newcomers often are not conversant with original values and purposes.
* Different perspectives on the role of leadership in a growing/changing congregation can cause conflict.

If the members of the congregation are unable to deal with the ‘stretch points’ redemptively and productively, negative tendencies may challenge its future.

* The congregation holds together with a certain desperate longing for the past, appealing to memories.
* The congregation experiences an identity crisis (‘institutional burnout’).
* People in power become control-oriented and grow distant from the larger membership.
* Leaders successful in the old ways will resist the new—especially if leader identity is linked to programs or certain organizational practices.
* Insecurity and subtle feelings of failure may emerge.
* The church looks for solutions to its perceived problems in programs.
* Decisions and judgments about people and problems are often based on presumptions and assumptions—especially if communication is inadequate.
* People tend to polarize over issues that are often symptoms of deeper problems.
* The congregation focuses on the immediate—the future seems impossible because the present is overwhelming.
* Energy is required for basic survival; over time, the congregation slips into a coma and dies.

When a congregation confronts a number of these negative tendencies, there are a number of positive behaviors that can help:

* Leaders need to get close to the congregation as never before.
* Wait on God, trust God for a new vision.
* Welcome new people and new voices. This will require stifling the inevitable feelings of threat and jealousy. Much of the impetus for change comes from the fringes; but they are often kept at the fringes because they haven't been around long enough.
* Affirm the worth of those who served in the congregation's programs and ministries for many years.
* Try short-term experiments in ministry and educational forms.
* Cultivate the positive fruit of the Holy Spirit. Be generous, joyful, and so on.
* Increase genuine communication and true dialogue.
* It may be necessary to let some traditions die; others can be resurrected and reinterpreted. New traditions can be created.
* Examine the values expressed in the structures—often they reflect the values of the powerful, or dominant group.
* Help people see where beneficial change is already starting to occur (together seek to identify the apparent movement of the Holy Spirit).
* Be a sensitive change agent . . . not too fast or too slow.
* Don't underestimate the complexity of organizational factors.
* Link change to the values of the organization.
* Value the individual . . . but don't sacrifice the group to appease difficult individuals.
* Form ministry teams. Change the language from program language to team language—or to language that suits your context and vision.
* Train the organization to serve again.