

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.