

NEW TASKS FOR THE NEW CONGREGATION

Reflections on Congregational Studies

by Jeff Woods

Introduction

The person in the pew, the pastor in the pulpit, the professor in the classroom, and even the prophet on the soapbox all agree that American society and American congregations have changed dramatically in the last generation. Today's congregations now function in a postmodern, posttraditional, multigenerational, multicultural world. Because of these dramatic changes, the congregation in America has received a resurgence of interest from scholars and researchers in recent years. In the last ten years, several key studies of congregations in America have been conducted.¹ Along with quantity, the quality of congregational studies also has increased. Some of the more recent studies have gathered data in new ways, giving the inquirer a glimpse into congregations not previously possible. Today's reader is afforded a new "hole in the fence" by which to view American congregational life.

While the culmination of current research reveals that American congregations have expended much energy in responding to societal changes, it also reveals that the renovation process is far from complete. Perhaps the best news from the research is that there is great consensus over what needs to be done by congregations to respond more fully to the new environmental realities. While no single route, nor even a solitary roadmap, will suffice for today's congregations, the research reveals a cohesiveness about the ideals and tasks toward which today's congregations are leaning. We may be much closer than we think in defining the primary tasks for the 21st century congregation.

Over the next several pages, I will present a summary of key congregational studies sponsored by the Lilly Endowment over the last decade. First, I will present information showing how the surrounding landscape has changed for congregations. Next, I will disclose some of the congregational responses to those changes. The major portion of the article will then focus upon a new set of tasks for today's congregations and identify a set of factors that influence the extent to which individual congregations are able to embrace the trends that are taking place. Finally, I will make a few brief comments about the newly implied role for today's congregational leaders and suggest a focus for future research.

As you read, you will quickly discover that this is an essay rather than merely a summary of the research. While I have sought to present the findings as accurately as I know how, I have drawn conclusions regarding those findings with which you may or may not agree. The purpose of nearly everything I write is simply to promote intelligent discussion. My hope in writing this article is to increase dialogue about United States congregations. If you applaud something I have said, I'm grateful. If you react against something I have said, I will be even more grateful because that response is more likely to prompt additional thought, and perhaps action.

A Different World

Today's congregations function in a very different world than the congregations of the mid 1950's. Those attending worship today live with more available information, more choices, and more uncertainty than their predecessors.

One of the more helpful explanations of societal change is that we now live in a *postmodern* world. Because our customary understanding of the word *modern* is "new" or "different," I admit that it can be very confusing to reverse its usage and suggest that the "modern world" is now the "old way" of doing things. But don't blame me, I didn't coin this one! Here's how it happened. Reacting against the vast and formal structures of kings and churches in the middle ages, eighteenth century *enlightenment* thinkers proposed the notion of the *modern self*. This modern individual was supposedly capable of independently discovering right from wrong and pursuing experiments to test out one's guesses. Writers and thinkers explored the notion of the modern self over the next several centuries, well into the 1900's. The view of the modern self as a self-sufficient, technically-astute, reasoning individual provided insights into the way the world functioned from the time of the Enlightenment until the 20th century. But this understanding of humanity has not been able to explain society in recent years.

While signs of the modern self are still easily identifiable, the limits of individualism and human reason have become so evident that many suggest that the modern self is now on life support. One of the most evident limitations of the modern self as defined by the Enlightenment is in the area of spirituality. "Enlightenment thinkers believed that the truth about God and the world were discoverable by using their rational faculties."² Clearly, reason has its limits in seeking to understand God's will and activity. Patrick Keifert raises the notion of whether or not society ever discovered the ideal enlightenment self. "Such a self does not exist...[and] even if it did, it would not be suitable to the task of selves in our time."³ Many have even proposed that we are now living in a *postmodern* society as evidenced by⁴

- the shift toward images rather than facts
- the emphasis upon experience rather than reason
- the acceptance of competing sources of truth.

Jackson Carroll uses an equally descriptive term, *posttraditional*, to describe other changes in today's society.⁵ He points out that although modernity reacted against the hierarchical structures of the era, modernity was not *antitraditional*. It simply replaced old traditions with new ones. *Postmodernity*, on the other hand, is *detraditional*. The world is moving away from its traditions. Bauman is quoted as saying, "The hub of postmodern life is not identity building, but the avoidance of being fixed."⁶ Traditional views of family, workplace, leisure, and the congregation no longer define our methods. Future congregations may decide to incorporate certain traditions, but the difference is that they will incorporate only those traditions that they *choose* to embrace because of their usefulness, while discarding other traditions possibly passed down from many previous generations. Living in a posttraditional society is particularly difficult for organizations. For many institutions, tradition is the primary guide for action. When it suddenly loses its luster, the institution must redefine or die.

When the foundations of what it means to live as individuals in society begin to shift, it is no wonder that the congregation finds itself struggling to relate to its environment and meet the ever changing needs of its parishioners and constituents. One classic metaphor for the pastor is to operate with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Given the radical changes in society, today's pastor is tempted to add one more item to the list, a padded cell in which to retreat on days off.

While the terms modern, postmodern, and posttraditional explain foundational changes in society, more visible signs of societal change also abound. Unlike our ancestors of just a few generations ago, we now live in a multigenerational society. US life expectancy at the turn of the 20th century was 46. At the turn of the 21st century, it was 77. Designing worship and educational programs for five generations rather than two is infinitely more complicated. In parenting, my wife and I are responsible for only two children. Someone once explained to us that when you add a third child, you shift from *man to man defense* to *zone defense*, which is infinitely more complicated to design and implement effectively! Likewise, the difficulty of congregational programming rises geometrically as each new generational pew is added.

One more descriptor must be added to the list in order to fully make the case for living in a different world, and that is that we also now live in a multicultural, pluralistic society. Warner provides a glimpse into this reality - when he writes:

"There are some 3,500 Catholic parishes today where mass is celebrated in Spanish, and 7,000 Hispanic/Latino Protestant congregations...by actual count in 1988, there were 2018 Korean-American churches, and in 1994 there were an estimated 700 Chinese Protestant churches in the US, ...1000 to 1200 mosques and other Islamic centers, ...1500 to 2000 Buddhist temples and meditation centers, and 400 Hindu temples."⁷

If these numbers of immigrant congregations surprise you, be assured that they are alarmingly low compared to the number of congregations that potentially could exist given our current population matrix. Reluctance in reaching out to immigrant population groups reveals that many have forgotten the adjustments of their ancestors who were once themselves immigrants in a new land.

It is a different world. There is, however, one buoy amidst the sea of change. Even with all of the changes within society and within congregations, the congregation itself is still the primary means of spiritual formation and ministry activity in the United States. For every congregation that closes, another opens its doors. The congregation itself is one of the most enduring institutions in America today. In the last century, the number of congregations has remained amazingly consistent.

For all of the difficulties facing it today, the congregation continues to play a salient role in American society. Nancy Ammerman reflects, "When I consider the rate at which new congregations are formed and the new ways of being a congregation...I come away very encouraged and excited about the important role of congregations in the future of American religion."⁸ The congregation in the United States also has not dramatically altered its set of ideals. The quintessential identity of congregations still lies in its ability to engage people in meaningful worship, develop mature disciples, and share its resources with others. The congregation, its internal culture, and its primary tasks have remained a bedrock of consistency amidst a changing landscape. The external pressures, however, are about to break through the bedrock. In order to respond effectively, congregations must first define the problem at hand.

Redefining the Problem

Within every shifting landscape are those units that survive by their innovation and those other units that die by their stubbornness. The Church is no exception. When highlighting failures in congregational adaptation, most people point first to the example of congregations in mainline denominations. The decline of the most prevalent congregation of the 1950's, the mainline congregation, is well documented. "Newspapers have chronicled the plight of mainline churches for the past twenty-five years. Hardly a month passes without an article on the topic."⁹ The mainlines simply do not have as many people associated with them as they once did. We know this fact statistically, intuitively, and experientially. As I travel among congregations as a judicatory executive within a mainline denomination, I see many building additions to congregational structures built in the 1950's and far fewer built since that golden era. Those who worship in many mainline congregations sit air pocket to air pocket rather than shoulder to shoulder.

What has not been as well documented, however, is the primary reason for the decline. While speculations abound, one factor is clearly more responsible for the decline of the mainlines than any other factor: there are simply fewer people in the pool

from which the mainline congregations have traditionally attracted members. When overlaid with a chart showing the United States birthrate of whites from 1942 to 2000, the chart showing mainline membership change during the same period forms nearly a mirror image.¹⁰ The two charts are offset only slightly by the fact that mainline membership fell ½ to 1 percent below the United States birthrate during the 1970's and has been tracking ½ to 1 percent above that birthrate during the last decade. (still it is not high enough to produce an overall growth rate for mainlines). Birthrate significantly correlates with membership change both at the macro (big picture) level and the micro (individual) level. Analysis within specific denominations also reveals a high correlation between individual membership change and birthrate.

While this piece of information lessens the blow for mainlines, congratulatory remarks do not even loom on a distant horizon. When the birthrates of nonwhites and immigrant growth figures are added to the picture, the picture clearly reveals that there is much work to be done for all congregations in the US, including mainlines. This piece of evidence and other supportive ones, however, serve to redefine the task for the mainline church. The primary task for 21st century congregations is to find creative ways of ministering unto a different world, rather than merely beefing up efforts to reclaim a lost market share. Studies among businesses show that focusing upon a bottom line defined by numbers alone is not an effective long-term strategy.¹¹ The same holds for congregations. Focusing upon numerical growth alone, especially among a homogeneous population, is not an effective long-term prescription for a healthy congregation. Reaching out to an ever-diversifying world now becomes the primary task of US congregations.

Further Evidence of the Problem

Research shows that congregations in this country have not kept pace with a varying world. Today's American congregations, on the whole, reflect a very different population than exists in the United States. Congregations in the United States contain more women (61%) than the general population (51%), more retired people (25%) than the general population (14%), more married people (66%) than the general population (52%), and a greater percentage of educated people (38%) than the general population (23%). The average person in a congregation in this country is also six years older than the average-aged person in the general population.¹²

The United States congregation also is one of the most segregated places in American society. Ninety percent of African-Americans attend predominantly black congregations and at least ninety-five percent of whites attend predominantly white congregations.¹³ "The younger generations [of white leaders after 1964] are less indoctrinated against the Negro than their parents were. But they are also farther away from him, know less about him and, sometimes, get more irritated by what little they see."¹⁴

Selective Signs of Hope

While the overall statistics reveal that the majority of congregations have not responded effectively to their environmental changes, individual signs of hope are appearing in many congregations. Some have altered, added, and even abandoned particular worship practices. Others have chosen to worship in schools, theaters, grocery stores, and laundromats. Congregations have launched a myriad of small groups, and even created new denominations. Although they tend to be smaller, containing only eleven percent of the population, nearly one in five congregations in America is not affiliated with any denomination.¹⁵ Today, only ½ of all worship services begin between 9-11 AM on Sunday morning.¹⁶ While 75% of all congregational worship services include at least some traditional hymn singing, 40% of them also include praise music or choruses.¹⁷ Obviously, some services include both. Approximately one-fourth of the worshipers on any given weekend can also expect to hear an electric guitar and drums as a part of the worship service.¹⁸

While many congregations, through uplifting worship, are reaching out to the multiple generations that exist today, others, led by congregational entrepreneurs, are reaching out to the vast immigrant populations. Many of these efforts are coming from outside the mainstream by people planting new congregations. Although the equivalent replacement of congregations has occurred fairly consistently during the last century, the frequency of the openings and closings has increased dramatically during the last 15 years. Twenty-five percent of today's congregations are less than 15 years old.¹⁹ Many of the newer congregations are more entrepreneurial as evidenced by the fact the newer congregations have higher growth rates, attract a higher percentage of young adults, contain a higher percentage of immigrants, and have more recruitment activities than more established congregations.²⁰ As is typical, those outside of the traditional institution have accepted the challenge of responding to societal changes left unaddressed by the mainstream congregation.

It is simply not fair to site individual closings as evidence that congregations have lost vitality in America. Instead, one must look at the larger religious scene which, in fact, suggests just the opposite. The human capital, while constantly being redistributed among congregations, is not fading away from them. "Just because a given organization declines and dies does not mean that three more have not emerged in its place. People are constantly taking the religious capital they own and reinventing it. Religious vitality is best measured...in terms of the total population of organizations and the overall presence of religious practices rather than at the level of individual organizational health."²¹

A New Set of Tasks for an Old Set of Ideals

Most congregations long for more reliance upon God, more impact from their ministries, more depth from their leaders, and more involvement from their members.

Research reveals some new pathways to achieve those historic ideals. The vast body of research recently conducted on the American congregation has revealed some surprising similarities in its revelations of what is working and what is not working as congregations seek out new ways of embracing their age-old ideals of outreach, education, worship, and meeting the needs of people. In the sections that follow, I will detail five tasks for the 21st century congregation; tasks that will ultimately help them achieve their ideals as they respond to a different world.

1. Build the Relationship

Although 90% of congregations encourage their members to invite someone to worship with them, only 46% of congregational members report doing that in the last year.²² Congregations encourage their members to invite their friends for good reason. It is by far the most effective means of outreach for congregations. This fact is undisputed. No height is left on this learning curve. We have reached the top of the learning curve and can clearly see from the highest vantage point that building relationships is the best means of attracting others to church. While we have reached the top of the learning curve, unfortunately we have far to go along the action curve. We simply are not acting with what we know to be true. This is a knowledge/action gap, not a learning curve gap. Building relationships works; we simply need to go about it with more intentionality.

Congregational participants should not only ask, "Who is my neighbor?" but also, "Who should be my neighbor?" Darrell Guder explains, "No particular culture is ordained to be the normative pattern for all Christian communities...the biblical definition of the church's mission makes plain that the church is essentially multicultural."²³ The current answer to "Who is my neighbor?" seems to be someone of a similar ethnic background and currently in a similar economic situation. But answering the question, "Who should be my neighbor?" draws us toward the other side of the road, challenges us to walk in another person's sandals, and can even place our bones in someone else's furnace!

Congregations, however, have not only failed to lead the way in producing multicultural organizations, they have fallen behind other institutions in building multicultural relationships. In most places, the local Chamber of Commerce will be more ethnically inclusive than the town's congregations. The research of Michael Emerson and Christian Smith has revealed how the church has perpetuated a *racialized* society, "one in which race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships."²⁴

While the solutions must extend into structural alterations as well, establishing multicultural relationships and multicultural congregations will help deter the racialized society that we have built.²⁵ There are a multitude of unfortunate consequences that result from ethnic groups worshipping separately. "Because religion separates social life along racial lines, it reduces opportunities for intergroup relations and social ties, which

leads to differential income, education, residential location, and occupation levels among ethnic groups."²⁶

Whites, who are clearly in the "advantaged position," cannot simply wait for multicultural relationships to drop from the heavens (as much as I believe God would desire that), because it just doesn't happen by accident. Such relationships are formed only with intentionality. Blacks and whites in the United States do not live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same congregations, or even talk about the same TV shows while at work. "Of the twenty most watched television shows among black viewers in the 1995-96 season, only two...were among the top twenty with white viewers."²⁷ For many, "perpetuating the norm" is an unintentional sin of omission rather than a premeditated sin of commission. But it is a sin nevertheless. While there is less active discrimination in the hearts of Americans than there used to be, problems perpetuated by covert racialization have become as great as those caused by overt prejudice. It is time for the church to work toward "right relationships."²⁸ Unintentional sins of omission are still sins if they perpetuate the status quo for the advantaged.

The task of building relationships helps congregations achieve their ideals in a multitude of areas. Building relationships also corrects stereotypes and enhances understanding. It has been shown to do so in multicultural relationships. Building relationships also has been shown to be an excellent tool for enhancing understanding regarding women in ministry. One research study revealed that the more experience that one has had with women in ministry, the more favorable their views of clergywomen.²⁹ Research also shows, "Once in churches for awhile, clergy women tend to be well accepted by their parishioners."³⁰

Building relationships also enhances community ministry. Ammerman writes, "If fellowship practices are portable, then there can be little doubt that charitable practices are almost by definition activities that take place at the intersection of religious and community contexts."³¹ Many congregations make a significant difference in their communities from the established relationships between congregational and community leaders. Community relationships also need to form between those whom the congregation is serving and the servers themselves. Unfortunately, such relationships do not form quickly. Michael Denton reveals how the forming of relationships between those in the pew and those in the streets follows a progression that must first go through the steps of charity, service, and advocacy before reaching the stage of forming friendships. Such tasks are not easy. The further up the ladder, the fewer people get involved in that stage.³²

Building the relationship often is the first step toward building a new authenticity. It is true in sharing one's faith, overcoming racialization, improving attitudes toward women in ministry, and enhancing community ministry. Extending the relationship network of the members is a good place to start for congregations wanting to further their ideals. As relationships between congregational participants and congregational inquirers

are built, often the inquirer sees something in the congregational participant that needs to be explored further. For such exploration, transformational space is required.

2. Create the Space

Research shows that the second major task for the 21st century congregation is to create spaces for people that allow for something "God-authored" to happen in that space. Up until this point, congregations have not created spaces small enough or large enough...large enough to include everyone, small enough to allow for intimacy...big enough for anonymity, small enough for people to be heard. Obviously, the same space cannot provide both. I will first address the problem of "creating space large enough for all."

When space is created for all, God can originate amazing works. Designers of worship merely need to create the space and allow God to transform. Tom Long reveals, "Planners of worship do not *make* worship meaningful; worship is *already* meaningful."³³ Worship is essentially creating a space in which God can transform lives.

Few doubt that God can transform lives if given the opportunity. We now, however, live in a multigenerational, multicultural world. Creating space for all is more difficult in this type of a world, but still no less of a mandate than ever before. People - all people - long for worship - "Human beings hunger for both God and community, or to put it more precisely, we hunger for God *in* community."³⁴

Music is perhaps the best tool that we have for creating space for all. Singing is by far the most prevalent activity in worship, even more prevalent than hearing a sermon.³⁵ If transformational space can become a goal for a congregation, its key objective will normally involve music. Uplifting worship is a key component to growth in every denomination.³⁶ When two worship services in the same congregation differ, music will denote the differences. Music can also pave the way for the ideals of the congregation to take root. For example, because the proponents of the religious Jamaican movement known as the *Rastas* were integrally involved with the evolution of reggae music in the 1970's, the Rastas in less than a decade moved from "outcasts and lunatic fringe to what noted Caribbean commentator Rex Nettleford claimed was the forefront of Jamaican national identity."³⁷ This example shows how new music can not only lead to congregational transformation, but also denominational transformation.

Long suggests, "Worship continues to appeal to many people, and if we could learn to build on its strengths and intrinsic appeal, worship could draw many more."³⁸ United States congregations are now faced with the task of creating worship for the buster and boomer, servant and CEO, native and immigrant, majority and minority. In addition to being an integral factor in building relationships in 21st century congregations, being ethnically inclusive should also be considered when creating spaces. Yet, voluntarily diversifying worship is not an easy task. "When white evangelicals

[approximately ¼ of the church attending population in the United States] spoke of integrating congregations, they meant that their specific congregation ought to be open to all people. They did not mean that they should consider going to a mixed or nonwhite congregation. No one spoke about this possibility. Further, no one spoke of the need for the congregation to adapt or diversify the way it does things to become racially mixed. This means that it must be other people, not them, who would have to make the change."³⁹

While building multicultural relationships that lead to multicultural congregations is clearly the preferred method of creating space for all, some congregations have also chosen to offer spaces for worship and transformation for immigrant populations. Many congregations have created worship space for immigrant groups to meet in their building. How far would your congregation go in order to create transformational space for others? How open is your congregation to this idea? Would your congregation be willing to create space for God's transforming power to work through a group like GANG, which is described below?

"God's Anointed Now Generation creates a Christian image that mimics a Los Angeles Chicano youth gang aesthetic, encoding it within a Christian vernacular. Victory Outreach has its own rap groups that sample rhythms and riffs of popular songs that inscribe Christian lyrics over them. Many members of GANG continue to sport the hairstyles, makeup, and baggy clothes of Los Angeles youth culture, but espouse Christian teachings."⁴⁰

Is your congregational space large enough to accommodate all people?

Many organizational changes are accepted more easily if the leaders can show that the change is actually a return to historical roots rather than a brand new concept. Such a case can easily be made for creating space for immigrant populations. "Denominations were founded upon creating spaces for cultural minorities."⁴¹ Denominations that model the building of multicultural relationships by planting ethnic congregations, and by advocating for ethnic inclusiveness return to their original roots when they do so.

I now direct your thoughts toward creating spaces small enough for God to allow for individual growth and exploration. Research reveals that the best way of creating spaces small enough for transformation is to create multiple small groups. "Congregations that create space for...selves to attend, assert, decide, and act without having it all together, without enjoying self control, self determination, and complete self esteem, thrive in our time."⁴² Research also reveals, however, that only 44% of people attending congregations in the United States participate in a small group of any kind.⁴³ This includes Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, prayer groups, fellowship groups, cell groups, ministry teams, etc. Small groups provide a safe place for people to ask questions, receive instruction, build relationships, and discern God's next steps for

their lives. One of the challenging tasks for today's congregations "involves the creation of social places in which human beings can be known and cared for by persons beyond their families."⁴⁴

Such spaces are critical for inquirers to explore, test, and taste whether or not a particular congregation can meet their needs. Such spaces also are critical for new believers, who have decided to become a part of a new congregation, to grow. If today's congregations are intentional about creating such spaces for inquirers and people new to the congregation, we would expect to find a higher percentage of new members in small groups. Unfortunately, the opposite is true. While one in three worshipers has been attending their congregation for five years or less, this is the same "one-third" least likely to be involved in a small group.⁴⁵ "Time and time again our research at *Church Innovations* shows how thriving congregations that are able to reach the unchurched and genuinely secular, rather than just reintegrate already existing church members from another congregation, use small groups that attend to this profound anxiety and anomie of the postmodern self."⁴⁶ In other words, the people of today, who are less concerned about what a document says than what their friends say and more concerned about experience than personal reasoning, need small group space for exploration of ideas, especially theological ideas.

Some have even suggested that seminaries model the creation of small group space for personal transformation. Guder explains how this might work, "Classrooms would become communities, and the initiates would live in these communities shaped by ecclesiastical practices and disciplines of accountability. The remaining years of preparation would involve the initiate in a close covenant relationship between the theological training school and an actual missional community."⁴⁷

Finally, congregational leaders must create the smallest and deepest spaces of all, individual spaces for their own daily transformation. In a postmodern and posttraditional world where the landscape seems to change with every passing mile marker, the only way for leaders to model peace and contentment while leading change is to be in constant touch with God. "Every one of the exemplary leaders that I have met spends considerable time each day in prayer, reflection, and meditation. This quiet period of the day is when the Spirit seems to speak to them, giving them direction, new ideas, and insights."⁴⁸

Congregations create the space. God provides the change. Congregations must then enable the journey.

3. Enable the Journey

"If young people were more committed, this congregation wouldn't have any problems!" Has that ever been said in your congregation? What it usually means is that one particular generation wants another generation to commit to the same causes and *in*

the same ways as their generation. But, recall that we live in multigenerational, multicultural world, which means that individuals will choose to worship, commit, serve, and even grow spiritually in new ways, not traditional ways. "We need to realize that social capital doesn't depend upon lifelong or even long-term commitments. We need to acknowledge the mobility, flexibility and temporariness of people's commitments today."⁴⁹ The third task for the 21st century congregation is to enable the journey of discipleship to take place in a multitude of ways.

While vacationing the past summer, my family chose to participate in a tourist attraction "human maze." The maze featured several checkpoints that one needed to reach prior to exiting the maze. While I was still searching for the second checkpoint, my son had completed the maze, scaled the observation tower, and spent sufficient time observing so as to re-enter the maze and offer people assistance who simply wished to exit as rapidly as possible. I was grateful for his assistance. The maze serves as metaphor for today's task of discipleship. We must establish clear checkpoints for members that will guide them into maturity, but allow them to journey through the checkpoints in whatever way they choose.

Maturity in conservative Judaism involves keeping 613 commandments. One particular Rabbi's philosophy is, "find one and begin." Someone commenting on this advice added, "Notice that the advice is not to pick whichever ones one chooses to obey, but rather to enter the journey and keep going. The obligation is still total, but the expectations recognize the complex negotiations that make up our everyday lives."⁵⁰ Enabling the journey involves providing the necessary assistance to help someone "keep going."

From the moment a person connects with the congregation, the person should receive the impression of embarking upon a journey. Postmodern people are image-conscious more than fact conscious, thus the journey imagery needs to be established early on. "To make the gathering place one of warmth, accessibility, and hospitality fulfills the 'house' function of worship, but the vital churches do more than this. They also emphasize the 'tent' function of worship by making it clear that the gathering place is not a park but a gateway, not a place to stop but a place to continue the journey."⁵¹ Unfortunately, many have parked their car and kept their tent in the trunk. Research reveals that "the majority of worshipers are attending services but participating in little or nothing else in their congregation. The thin layer of engagement in the total offerings of the congregation means that many worshipers miss out on a variety of opportunities available to them."⁵² In order to meet the needs of a multicultural, multigenerational world, congregations need to offer more than the traditional Sunday school choices. Varied means of enabling the journey might include one to one discipling, short term classes, independent study, online resources, etc.

Not all of the discipleship journey news is discouraging. There is hope. One of the evidences that congregations and denominations are capable of encouraging flexible

forms of spiritual growth is in the area of alternative or optional educational models for laity and potential clergy. In a study of 160 such programs in the United States, Lance Barker and Edmon Martin found great innovation in these programs, reporting that, "We often heard this statement or something similar: We are flying the plane while we are building it." Frequently, the original rationale for a program is superceded by creative thinking in ecclesiology, theology, and the practice of ministry because of the particular 'flight plan' of that program."⁵³ The same level of creativity needs to take place in discipling people on site as it does in off-site programs.

Few congregations would argue with the need to reach out to others and encourage spiritual growth in those who respond. The first three identified tasks revealed subtle shifts in how these ideals are best accomplished. In the next section, we are once again faced with a task that most congregations would readily embrace, namely, doing mission and ministry. Once again, research reveals that the pathway toward that ideal is slightly different for 21st century congregations than for their ancestors. We will discover that congregations that desire to make ministry happen more effectively, would to well to rely more heavily upon God to guide them in that task. The next task reveals that the journeys that we are on, are not our journeys, but rather God's journeys.

4. Seek the Direction

When US congregations exhibit reliance upon God for a sense of direction they accomplish the humanly impossible. When we seek a direction from God, God faithfully supplies a pathway. In Salina, Kansas, through the Land Institute, Wes Jackson and his staff work together to discover native perennial crops suited for their particular environment. They "seek to work in harmony with God and nature rather than assuming that human beings are mechanically in control of nature."⁵⁴ Elsewhere, through Congregation Supported Agriculture projects (CSA's), family farmers supply fresh food to urbanites concerned over the safety of their food supply.⁵⁵ Congregations house the elderly and homeless, feed the hungry, comfort the afflicted and challenge the addicted. One of the members of warehouse 242, a Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, is Ned, a former cocaine and crack addict who was invited in from the sidewalk during their inaugural service.⁵⁶

Through the strength of God and the building of community connections, many congregations have realized that they are able to marshal resources far beyond their own means.⁵⁷ Through community contacts, workplace relationships, and service club memberships, local churches are able to pull together to meet the most difficult problems facing their communities. Long suggests, "We need to join ourselves in community with others to give ourselves away to God, to offer our lives to something larger than ourselves."⁵⁸ As a middle judicatory executive and witness of many congregational stories, I have become convinced that there is something bigger than all of us for all of us as congregational members. While examples abound of congregations leaning in the direction of seeking a mission direction from God, most have not leaned far enough.

The problem is that not enough congregations have sought after a ministry vision large enough to encompass the entire congregation, and for many congregations, seeking a direction from God is not a logical extension of their daily living. Can the congregation reclaim prayer and discernment as the central pieces of input for their corporate decision-making when such practices are clearly not central even among the individual lives of their leaders. One study found that over 50% of pastors practice no regular devotional disciplines.⁵⁹ Less than ½ of the worshipers in US congregations have a devotional time with God either every day or most days.⁶⁰ One-third of congregations have no organized prayer groups.⁶¹

One of the clear differences between Catholic and Protestant congregations in the western hemisphere and their counterparts in the eastern hemisphere is that the eastern congregation relies much more heavily on the Spirit of God for direction. Eastern congregations cite this as one of the primary reasons for their current rapid growth. Donald Miller reveals how the same difference also exists between congregations north and south as well as east and west. "Vital Spirit-filled churches [in developing countries] are characterized by pastors and people who open themselves to the presence of the Holy Spirit for guidance...when people are open to the possibility, the Holy Spirit seems to challenge self-interest and complacency and nudge them into doing the heroic, even the unimaginable...Without this manifestation of the Spirit, we have empty organizational forms."⁶² As evidence shows, congregations choosing to embrace a postmodern world will discover a God ready to supply both direction and resources for mission and ministry. Postmodern research in the physical sciences reveals a world with more gaps, more holes, and more curves than previously thought during the *Enlightenment* period. Even scientists believe that there is room for God in our universe. Can the church come to the same conclusion? Obviously, it can; but can it act upon that conclusion? Can congregations take a leap of faith and *discern* rather than *decide* their next steps?

In no place, at neither the corporate nor the individual level, at neither the congregational nor the denominational arena, in neither the workplace nor the classroom, do we rely heavily enough on the Spirit for direction. Except for their churchgoing activities, many worshipers differ little from their secular counterparts.⁶³ One professor confesses, "We have not seen ourselves as the servants of the people of God as they go about the tough task of attending, asserting, deciding, and acting on the basis of their own theological reflection...We busy ourselves with growing churches, or filling food shelves, or renewing the liturgy, or endowing chairs at seminaries, or any number of good things but ignore the deep and profound spiritual crisis in our midst."⁶⁴

More than anything else, mission -- working toward God-directed purposes -- binds congregations together. The binding power increases as the reliance upon God for their sense of direction increases. Perhaps the congregation's greatest challenge, however, has yet been named. In order to fully embrace a new environment, 21st century

congregations will need to embrace a task never even contemplated before, the task of receiving the cup from someone else.

5. Receive the Cup

"It is more blessed to give than receive" goes the saying. For many, giving is also easier. One of the most difficult tasks for the 21st century congregation in this country will be for it to learn to receive as well as give. The American congregation is more accustomed to cup bearing than cup receiving. Learning to receive the cup from others will be particularly difficult for American Protestant congregations, who now find themselves in a minority position. In 1900, eighty percent of Christians were either Europeans or North Americans. Today, sixty percent of all Christians live in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. "Every movement has its momentum and the movement of Christian growth and renewal has shifted to the Southern Hemisphere. For Christianity in the United States to capture the coattails of that momentum, it will need to learn to receive advice and instruction from others, not an easy task for a nation based upon colonialism.

Unfortunately, colonialism still pervades our perceptions, if not our practices. Many congregational leaders in developing countries (the most rapidly growing areas for Christianity) suspiciously view foreign mission money as an advanced form of colonialism.⁶⁵ At their outset, American congregations quickly developed a sense that they had been ordained to play the cup-bearing role for the world. The Puritans brought to this country the notion that, "God had directly intervened to create a particular people in this place at this time."⁶⁶ Most US congregations have viewed themselves as the primary distributors of the gospel, dispensers of Christian resources, and leaders of their denominations. It may be difficult for the "chosen" to receive the cup of blessing from someone else recognizing that "thoughts of superiority are woven deeply into the consciousness of the U.S. people."⁶⁷

How can the congregation in the United States learn to receive the cup as well as distribute it? Miller suggests that one way of encouraging this would be to ask congregations in this country to form partnerships with congregations in the Southern Hemisphere in order to engage in mutual learning and collaboration.⁶⁸ Such partnerships could enhance the current American understanding of church innovation and vitality. There indeed is much for the American church to learn from others as evidenced by the fact that in recent years, a subtle shift has been occurring in the congregational revitalizations that occur from international mission encounters. Adventures once viewed as taking the gospel to the heathens are now viewed by many as a unique opportunity to learn from others.

Even education within congregations has taken on a cup receiving mentality as it has shifted from a task of teaching to a task of discovery. "The task of the leader... is to harvest the local knowledge that the congregation cannot express or judges to be

unimportant, to bring it to consciousness and give it shape.”⁶⁹ The rise in importance of mentoring and coaching presents further evidence that many congregations are at least leaning toward a more balanced view of giving and receiving. Many congregational leaders have learned to avail themselves of experts in the field. As I worked with a grants distribution committee a couple of years ago, I was amazed at how many sabbatical proposals from pastors detailed extended plans of learning from fellow colleagues in ministry. Gone are the days when the bulk of one’s learning can take place in a formal educational program. The congregational professional must give way to the congregational coach and the entire organization must take on a learning mentality.

While giving something to others naturally produces warm, fuzzy feelings denoting a sense of receiving something amidst the giving process, what is received is normally viewed as something internal rather than external. In order to advance into the next century, American congregations will need to anticipate and expect that they are capable of receiving something external from others as well. To the extent that the next generation of congregational leaders can allow themselves to receive ideas, concepts, and wisdom from others younger in age, international in scope, and deeper in spirituality, they will better be able to embrace the new realities of their different world. This, however, is not the only factor that will influence their potential vitality. I now turn your attention toward several potential factors of influence that will impact a congregation’s ability to embrace the tasks of building relationships, creating space, enabling journeys, seeking direction, and receiving the cup.

Factors of Influence

What will determine how well congregations are able to embrace this new set of tasks uncovered by researchers of congregational life and ministry? As you might expect, researchers have not only uncovered a new set of tasks for the 21st century congregation, they also have uncovered some factors of influence that will determine how congregations react to and are able to embrace this new set of tasks.

1. Willingness to Change

In the early stages of science, people studying the laws of nature believed that every object came to rest as close to the center of the earth as possible. Scientists believed that “being close to the center” was the desired state for all physical objects. Physical scientists now believe that inertia is the desired state, meaning that objects will continue their path unless otherwise directed. Unfortunately, inertia also seems to be the prevailing law of nature for congregations. Many congregations would rather continue a linear path rather than embracing tasks that might draw them closer to their center. People “tending to choose what they already have” is called the status-quo bias.⁷⁰ This phenomenon presents a particular problem for leaders believing that their congregations are in need of change.

While quantitative research shows that 61% of all worshipers report that they are ready for their congregation to try something new,⁷¹ qualitative research reveals that many members will accept the new thing only if it is in their own self-interest or not too different from what they already have. Even though winning the lottery would significantly alter a person's life, many still play anyway. Thus, not all changes bother us, just the changes in which we perceive ourselves as giving something up. Because of this, "change management" often becomes "pain management." The extent to which a congregation can embrace a new set of realities and tasks depends upon its threshold for pain. While openness to dealing with change correlates very highly with church vitality,⁷² conflict inevitably accompanies change. Ammerman emphatically states, "You can't change without undergoing conflict. The congregations that systematically avoid conflict are not going to be able to change."⁷³

Many religious leaders, even if they desire change, feel constrained. Unless their message is in the self-interest of the group, leaders often feel the need to soften and de-emphasize their prophetic voice in favor of meeting the needs of their group.⁷⁴ Leaders of change feel the tension between moving their group or organization so slowly along the change curve that the organization can't even keep up with the evolution of societal advancement and "losing their voice" by advancing too quickly. To the extent that congregations can change in ways that overcome people's nervousness about giving something up or that present the change as having more benefits than losses, they will better be able to embrace new tasks.

2. Theological Thinking

A second determining factor for how well congregations will be able to embrace new tasks relates to their ability to reflect upon problems theologically rather than secularly. The church is like no other organization in that God is the author and sustainer of congregations. Thus, congregations that adhere to the desires and supports of their founder, change more effectively. To the extent that congregations can think theologically, they will better be able to embrace change. Theology simply means "thinking about God." The extent to which a congregation can reflect upon God's desires and pathways will affect its ability to embrace something new. If a congregation can put a new idea or task into a theological context, the members are more likely to be able to accept it. The extent to which the members can view their history and their future as a part of God's story will affect their ability to change. While this paper draws heavily upon the outcomes of research as revealed in numbers, the truth is that narrative is always more powerful than numbers. "Like doctors over a patient, congregational analysts reduce the object of their investigation to technical terms and procedures."⁷⁵ While numbers can help us look in the right direction; stories, dreams and visions allow us to go there. The extent to which congregations can reflect theologically upon the roles that God has played in their existence and understand their identity as a God-given identity will affect their futures.

Theological factors have even been shown to be more powerful than political factors in understanding how a congregation views new opportunities or threats to its ministry. Penny Becker reveals that one of the factors that influences a congregation's response to ministry opportunities, particularly on issues of social inclusion, is whether or not it emphasizes a moral logic of caring or a moral search for truth.⁷⁶ While one might expect conservatives to be the truth-seekers and liberals to be the caregivers, such is not the case. In fact, Becker reports in her research that the caring/truth-seeking factor seldom fell along the liberal/conservative divide. "More important than where the congregation started theologically was its willingness to use the resources of its theological tradition to help it interpret the situation."⁷⁷ Becker explains the need that congregations possess to focus more upon moral matters than political ones. "Congregations are not about organized groups seeking their political interests in instrumental ways. They are about interpreting the requirements for living a faith in ongoing community."⁷⁸

3. Organizational Metaphors

The extent to which a congregation can embrace metaphors that point them toward outsiders rather than insiders also will determine their ability to embrace the new set of tasks identified in this article. Living metaphors, as opposed to mechanistic metaphors, are often more conducive to promoting change. Whether or not congregations view themselves as organisms in an active environment or as "a smooth-running operation" will affect their ability to embrace a new environment. When the members of an organization view the organization as a well-oiled machine, they tend to think in terms of quick-fix changes rather than long-term solutions. Because embracing a new set of tasks requires the highest form of change, known as transformational change,⁷⁹ such an endeavor should be fueled by the most advanced form of language.

One of the reasons that congregations often have known what they should do, but found themselves unable to act, was because they viewed change as an impossibility. Understanding the congregation as an organism moves it in the direction of understanding its own culture. Because a culture is something that has been created by the membership, it can also be re-created by the same people into something new.⁸⁰

The metaphor of family is another commonly used metaphor by congregations. Unfortunately, most congregations have an internal image in mind rather than an external image when thinking of family. While used almost universally by smaller congregations, the family metaphor can limit a congregation desiring to embrace something new by reducing its sense of existence to something private rather than public. The metaphor particularly limits congregations from embracing the new ideals described in this paper because it presents the role of the pastor as one of personal presence and intimacy rather than as one of catalyst for change. While the family metaphor emphasizes relationships, it does not emphasize *new* relationships. It emphasizes space for the existing members rather than space for the newcomer. Keifert emphatically argues, "Congregations, at

their primal best, are not families in any literal sense of the word. They are always more, much more, irreducibly and essentially more."⁸¹

Congregations desiring change will need to embrace a new set of metaphors that focus the attention on those outside rather than inside the congregation. Biblical examples include *witnesses*, *ambassadors*, and *agents of reconciliation*. Parables also compared Jesus' followers to guests at a banquet feast, people searching for what is lost, laborers, and servants as well as living organisms such as trees, lilies, sheep, and seeds. Living metaphors seem to draw the church outward toward serving others. Congregations that are able to embrace new metaphors that help them consider the needs of outsiders will be better able to embrace the tasks defined in this article.

4. Clarity of Purpose

While very few variables actually correlate with church growth, vision and a clear sense of direction are clearly two such variables. The Faith Communities Today (FACT) report concludes, "Both a clear sense of mission and a crisp organizational style have a powerful, positive influence on the capacity of congregations to attract and sustain new members."⁸² Miller adds, "All vital churches [in developing countries] ...are marked by visionary leaders who have communicated their goals to a cadre of committed followers."⁸³ While further research shows that US congregations clearly have distinct world views,⁸⁴ to the extent that they can translate those world views into a clear purpose and vision, they will better be able to embrace a new set of ideals.

Unfortunately, there can be a negative side to clarity of purpose in that it often is achieved by the composition of the membership rather than merely the focus of the membership. The more alike individuals are, the more easily they are able to focus upon the same vision. While these two factors occur together naturally, one of them is usually an unwelcomed and often unrecognized guest. Emphasizing a common purpose is one thing; achieving that common purpose through a common denominator of people is quite another. The natural tendency is to create clarity by internal similarity. Such a strategy, however, will make it more difficult in the long run for a congregation to operate within a multigenerational, multicultural world.

In order for congregations to operate effectively in a multigenerational, multicultural world, they will need to make internal diversity one of their core values. Congregations that do not include diversity as one of their values or goals will naturally become more homogeneous over time. Research shows that those more dissimilar from the group have higher turnover rates than those whose ethnicity, income, and other *sociodemographic* characteristics match those already within the group. This is called the *niche edge effect* and its effects multiply in a world of marketing. "In the deregulated religious marketplace of the United States, the niche overlap effect implies that competition between religious groups drives them to be what they often do not want to be – homogeneous."⁸⁵ Thus, without intentionality toward diversity, congregations that

focus upon clarity of purpose will become more internally similar. Whatever forms of diversity are valued within the congregation, such as ethnic, theological, generational, etc., must be present in both the planning of events as well as the performance of events within the congregation. Worship, programming, and planning must all reflect the diversity valued in the congregation, lest the diversity fade away over time.

5. Leadership

While this paper focuses upon congregations and their ministries, I decided to include a brief section revealing what the research suggests about what type of leader will be needed in congregations that choose to embrace a new set of tasks and reach out to a multigenerational, multicultural world. Many have claimed that organizations, and especially congregations, are in a leadership crisis today. A leadership crisis may result from two primary sources. One type of leadership crisis occurs when there is a disruption of previously performed tasks or services. A second crisis can occur when the environment in which the leader functions changes so dramatically that the old leadership tools no longer work. I believe that we are in a crisis today because congregational leaders are being asked to lead in a different world than their predecessors, not because today's leaders are any less committed or intelligent than before. Any crisis that exists in leadership today does so because previous models of leadership are inappropriate for today's congregational environments.

Because radical change is called for, leaders must be willing to model missional objectives directly. Today's congregational leaders would do well to fashion the way in building relationships, creating space, enabling the journey, seeking the direction, and receiving the cup. It is not enough for leaders to suggest alternative methods for ministries and then stand back and wait for people to sign up. They must embrace the new set of tasks personally. Such actions are usually not without criticism. One local program evaluator speaking about a pastor who leads the way in reaching out to disadvantaged youth asks, "His brand of tough love may be precisely what is required, but are institutions prepared to accept the required risks?"⁸⁶ The beginning stages of organizational change call for prophetic actions and prophetic voices, traits that often run counter-cultural to American society. I am convinced, however, that many of the tasks outlined in this document will not be embraced by worshipers until worship leaders model them first.

Direct involvement is the first but not the last step of leadership. Leaders should also serve as a catalyst for the involvement of others. As soon as the personal ministry involvements of the leaders cause the congregation to stand up and take notice, that notice must be turned into involvement. Long suggests, "A leader should gather the gifts of the congregation."⁸⁷ Leadership among rapidly growing congregations in developing countries involves "helping individuals identify their callings as they commit themselves on a daily basis to discern what the Spirit of God is doing in the world."⁸⁸ Here in America, Ammerman suggests, "The pastor who is a good networker is going to be much

more successful than the pastor who comes in with a pre-established program. The person who can listen to the people – inside and outside the congregation – as they talk about what they need and what they have and then make the connection between the needs and the resources – that is the person who is going to make congregations work.”⁸⁹ Leaders cannot enable a journey unless they can see the entire congregation as being on a journey. To complete a journey, one needs an appropriate set of tools, equipment, and personnel. These can only be gathered by the leader of the group.

The traditional model of organizational leadership places the leaders within the center of a circle, far away from those outside the organization. Congregational leaders of the coming century will learn to embrace a new model of leadership, one that places them both in direct contact with the community and direct contact with the worshipers.⁹⁰ Leaders close enough to see the needs of the outsiders and yet also close enough to know which insider can meet that need will be the ones who lead the way in building relationships with outsiders, in creating space for them to worship, in enabling their journeys to continue, in seeking God’s direction for all, and in still receiving the cup from others.

Conclusion

While congregations in this country are quite different than those of even a generation ago, the good news is that Americans still believe in congregations. For every congregation that closes as a result of housing trends, demographic realities, or even stubbornness, another opens its doors to beckon people toward worship and ministry. The reason for such stability, in terms of the number of congregations in this country, is that congregations still promote something that runs deep in every individual, a desire to connect with their creator and a desire to use that knowledge in ways that benefit all of humanity.

The nature of congregations has changed, but interest in them still runs high. Thus, I believe that we must respond to those interests with boldness. Too much time in the think tank will not serve the needs of those currently inquiring. For all of the changes that have occurred, I believe that we are further along in our understanding of the ideals for the 21st century congregation than many might have thought. The findings of this paper call us toward building new relationships, creating space for God to work, enabling the journeys of the inquirers, seeking a sense of direction together, and receiving the cup from others. New congregations have given rise to a new set of tasks waiting to be embraced and further developed by congregational leaders.

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