

Reflections On Congregational Life  
**GETTING OFF DEAD-CENTER®**

by  
**Peter Rudowski**  
December 2012

**Reflections On Congregational Life is a service of the Southern Ohio Synod, ELCA**

The purpose of church renewal is to motivate a congregation to move off the dead-center of stagnation. There are at least three ways to do this. The first is to encounter a crisis. A congregational crisis is when its building burns to the ground; or, when a large number of members withdraw their membership; or, when there is fierce competition between differing visions.

A second way to renew a congregation is to create a gap between the present and a preferred future through a visioning process. Some congregations are motivated to close the gap by planning and implementing new ministries.

A third way to bring about renewal is to have the Church Council use its time and energy to discuss questions around the nature and ministry of their congregation instead of micro-managing ministry programs. For example, a Council may discuss the four attributes of the church as defined in the Nicene Creed. These four attributes are, the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic in nature and ministry. Such a discussion leads to evaluation of existing ministries and the implementation of new ones. In this edition of Reflections, I will discuss this third option to move off dead-center.

### **The church is ONE**

Ephesians 4:4-6 teaches, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." First Corinthians 12:14-26 describes the church through the metaphor of a human body. The body has feet, hands, ears, eyes, and a sense of smell (nose). While each part of the body is different, they all belong to the one body. Colossians 1:18 states, "He (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church ..."

Questions emerging from the oneness of the church are: How is our congregation one? What parts of the body do we have (worship, spiritual growth, outreach, nurturing of members) and how does each part contribute to the others?

From an organizational point of view, the church being one raises questions about a congregation's administrative structure. For example, is the Council comprised of representatives of each standing committee? If so, does this structure subliminally encourage each member to compete for resources that benefit his or her committee? Or, is the Council comprised of members who do not necessarily serve on a standing committee. Such a Council has the purpose of setting direction for the entire congregation and not micro-managing the work of standing committees.

Discussing the above questions can move a congregation's administrative structure, governance, and decision making off dead-center.

### **The church is HOLY**

One definition of holy is to be set apart to do God's work on earth. John 14:12-14 has Jesus promising that those who believe in him will do even greater works than he did. Acts 1:8 has Jesus sending his disciples to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. In like manner, a congregation's purpose (mission) statement and its vision defines its understanding of God's desire for its ministry. A congregation's purpose and vision set it apart so that it is holy in God's sight.

Congregations need to be intentional in discerning God's purpose for their ministry. It should be noted that a congregation's purpose statement is often similar to neighboring congregations. In contrast, a congregation's vision may be very different than a neighboring congregation's vision. Each congregation has its own unique spiritual gifts to fulfill God's vision for it.

Questions emerging from the holiness of a congregation are: Are we set apart to fulfill the Great Commission; "Go therefore and baptize all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; ..." (Matt. 28:19-20)? Or, are we set apart to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the

stranger, cloth the naked, visit the sick, and go to those who are in prison (Matt 25:31-46)? Or, is the holiness of our congregation to be "... servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries (sacraments) of God" (1 Cor. 4:1)? Does our congregation comprehend that when it fulfills its purpose and vision it is holy?

Members and non-members of a congregation want to be part of a group or community that is unique and makes a difference in its community. Discussions about how God has set apart our congregation to be holy is a motivator for members to move a congregation off dead-center. Such a discussion can also be very attractive to non-members who are willing to be part of such a church.

### **The church is CATHOLIC**

The word catholic means world-wide. Saying the church is catholic means the church does not belong to a particular community, region, or country. The scriptures are catholic from beginning to end. In Genesis 1, God created the heavens and the earth (not the Hebrews or Israel). In Isaiah 55, everyone who is thirsty or without bread is invited to God's feast on Mt. Zion. The prologue to the Gospel According to St. John and John 3:16 proclaim God's care for all of creation.

One of the biggest failings of the church in the last half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries is that it forget it was to be catholic in its ministry portfolio. Two examples make the point. In 1996, Alan Klaas, researcher and author, reported that 99% of the laity and 94% of the clergy did not place evangelism in the top six ministries of their congregation. In addition, 80% of congregations believed their primary purpose was to serve their own members. In 1993, Church Membership Initiative reported that 20% to 30% of congregations wanted to grow and were planning to do so, 30% to 40% said they wanted to grow but had no plans to do so, and 40% of congregations flatly said they did not want to grow.

One way to move a congregation off dead-center is to discuss, implement, and tell stories about one or two community needs and what the congregation is doing to meet those needs. Defining community needs and implementing ministries to meet those needs is part of the visioning process. When serving the larger community is part of the visioning process, the church becomes catholic.

### **The church is APOSTOLIC**

Apostolic means that the church follows the

teachings of the books of the Bible as defined by Athanasius in 367, affirmed by Pope Damasus in 368, and approved in 381 by a Church Council held in Rome.

Apostolic teachings protect Jesus' disciples from heresy. Heresy is teaching a doctrine contrary to the totality of the scriptures. Heresy occurs in three ways: 1. In the re-writing of scripture in order to have scripture affirm a personal belief; i.e., Thomas Jefferson believed the Bible was a book of morals so he eliminated from his Bible texts that were other than moral teachings. 2. When only one side of a scriptural teaching is taught; i.e., prosperity is emphasized as a gift from God but the responsibility of the wealthy toward the poor is never mentioned. 3. When non-biblical teachings have equal or greater value than the scriptures; i.e., the Book of Mormon.

By asserting its belief in the apostolic faith, a congregation connects to its roots. In this connection, a congregation has a basis for its governance, decision making, and the ministries that it delivers. In addition, it is free not to follow the latest fad in theology or church growth.

The Church Council can discuss how the apostolic faith is taught in worship, Sunday School, and mid-week Bible studies. Teaching the apostolic faith can begin by reading a scripture passage and then explaining it. Or, it can take a piece of current literature, like the Code or the Gospel According to Judas, and comparing it to what the scriptures hold to be true.

### **Conclusion**

Congregations get stuck on the dead-center of stagnation when they simply repeat on-going tenured ministries that no longer meet the needs of today's world. One way to move a congregation off dead-center is to set aside one or more Church Council meetings with the sole agenda of discussing the nature and purpose of the church through its four attributes. From this discussion(s), new ministries can be planned and implemented. When this happens, a congregation moves off the dead-center of stagnation.

---

*Peter Rudowski served as a parish pastor for 33 years. In this capacity, he developed knowledge and skills in parish administration and organizational systems. He now serves as a consultant to pastors and congregations. He is also the author of CONNECTING THE DOTS: Ministering To Your Congregation Through Its Organizational System published by Xlibris - order via the internet at xlibris.com He can be contacted for a consultation at: phone 513-791-8920 or e-mail address: prudowski@fuse.net*