



This Is **Not** Business as Usual

If we didn't already know it, September 11 served as a dramatic reminder—congregations are important to us. Whether we wanted a place to cry out in anguish or to say a silent prayer, sacred spaces around the country were there with open doors. Whether we wanted the reassurance of familiar faces or just the presence of other caring people, America's gathered religious communities opened their arms and hearts. Whether we needed assistance or wanted a way to give, those same communities knit together the networks of support that spread aid to the very ends of the earth. While the crowds have disappeared, this event has reminded us that congregational life remains vital to the well-being of individuals and communities.

It also reminds us that vital congregational life takes work. If congregations are to continue to do the work of gathering, worshiping, and serving, they cannot assume that they can carry on with business as usual. Our challenge as church leaders is to help our members to keep God present in the very particular and complicated lives they lead. Sometimes that means calling people to change the patterns of sinful and destructive lives, but sometimes it means getting our own church structures and habits out of the way so that the connections can get made.

Complicated Commitments and Relationships

The key issues I think congregational leaders must face involve the complicated commitments and relationships that characterize our lives together at this point in history. A number of commentators have talked about a decline in "social capital," how we are all "bowling alone" instead of in leagues. Many worry about the fact that we don't seem to be forming life-long, deep commitments of any sort—whether to a service club or to a church or to a marriage. What strikes me, however, is that in

spite of the difficulties posed by mobility and change, people still try to form meaningful commitments. The challenge is to get past wringing our hands over the loss of old ways and get on with the business of meeting people where they now are!

Where are they? Not necessarily in houses 8 blocks from the church that they have lived in all their lives. Even churches in quaint rural settings are likely to find newcomers in their communities these days. Some are urban refugees, while others are Hispanic immigrants working in agribusiness. Even the children of long-time community residents likely work in the city and do not relate to their hometown as earlier generations did. In both rural and urban regions, church members are likely to be scattered over large distances. Few Protestant churches really function as “parishes” these days.

Don't Call It “Shopping”

That means that members come to a particular church not because it is the closest one of their denomination, but because its ministries provide the best place for their needs to be met and their gifts used. Don't call it shopping. You aren't hawking a product. You are engaged in the spiritual task of discernment. Nearly everyone will, at some point in their lives, move; and when they do, they will need to find a new church (at least we hope so.) One of the spiritual tasks of every church is helping members to identify their own gifts and learning how to listen for what God might be calling them toward through the ministry of that congregation. They haven't been there all their lives, and they won't likely stay forever, but at this moment they need to find ways to serve God. Vital congregations will help them make those decisions and call them to deep engagement with the work that will go on even after they leave.

If potential members aren't necessarily in the neighborhood and aren't the extended family of current members, how on earth are churches to find them? While it is still true that many people find a church through a friend or family member, many come through less personal means. Making those connections requires that we get rid of some old prejudices. One of those old ideas says that it is crass for a church to advertise. Bunk!

Advertising and other forms of mass communication are how strangers in a complex society find out about things. Part of being “salt” and “light” is being noticed, and being noticed in our society requires that we explore every means available for communicating who we are and what we—and God—are up to.

Making connections in a complex society also requires that we get over our presumption that it is gauche to talk about religion. So long as “mainline”

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churches were either the prestigious place to join or the settled place full of extended family, unspoken social expectations could be counted on to fill the pews. No need to inquire about the religious needs and commitments of co-workers and friends. But such reticence is now counterproductive. Evangelicals have always known that they would have to break some rules of polite society to get people to think about their eternal destiny. Liberals mostly didn't want to be so pushy. But even liberals are learning how to bring up the subject of faith, how to share the excitement of congregations that offer ways to strengthen that faith.

Golden Rule Christians

The thought of a liberal who knows how to witness to her faith signals another of the churchly roadblocks we need to clear out of the way. It simply won't do anymore to think that the world is divided neatly between evangelicals who preach the gospel but refuse to do anything to make this world a better place and liberals who aren't so sure about God but love to do good works in the world. While there are real differences at the extremes of American church life (and plenty of denominational battles to keep the differences alive), the lived reality of most local churches is a messy—and fruitful—blend of evangelical fervor and social gospel engagement. Most people are what I call “Golden Rule Christians.” They believe the Bible is true, but they insist that the essence of faith is in how it is lived. Meeting these churchgoers at that inter-

section of faith and works is what vital congregations of all theological stripes do best.

Church life is indeed about both faith and works. Once having gathered scattered and mobile people into a congregation, the reason to stay lies in the combination of spiritual and worldly concerns that people bring with them. And one of the most pressing of those spiritual/worldly concerns is family life. People know that children today face myriad stresses and temptations and that the fragile guidance of mothers and fathers may not be enough. They look to churches as a shelter from the storm, but they know that popcorn parties and hayrides are not enough. Vital congregations know that both parents and children need moral and spiritual grounding that can't be taken for granted in the culture. They are facing the challenge of developing and sustaining everyday practices that keep faith alive amidst the chaos. Sustaining families requires serious commitments among children and adults and congregations that are willing to make those commitments possible.

Such congregations will also recognize that “family” is not something that comes in one-size-fits-all. Some families are blended; others have only one parent; and many others consist only of one or more adults. Some families have only one wage-earner, while others have two who are working long hours. Rather than bemoaning the “decline” of the family, we need to help all these families be the caring and committed households God calls them to be.

Old Assumptions

This is something more easily said than done. Really making all kinds of families welcome will require listening for all the ways in which we are making old assumptions. It will also require breaking out of the box of old programming routines. Even St. Paul held worship by the river, preached in the town square, and did home Bible studies. What makes us think scripture dictates Sunday School at 9:30 Sunday, Ladies Aid at 10:00 Thursday, and a Men's Prayer Breakfast at 8:00 Saturday? If no one is showing up at those meetings, it may not be for lack of interest. Vital congregations are finding new times and places to gather and are defining those gatherings around concerns that go beyond age, gender, and marital status. Sometimes the best thing we

can do for families is give them a chance to work and worship together with the diverse other families in their church, experiencing a sort of extended network of aunts and grandpas and sisters and cousins brought together by God's grace rather than by blood ties.

Once brought together, even if temporarily, these networks of spiritual kin can have a powerful impact on their communities. They may pool their resources to create programs that tend to material needs. They may inspire individuals to invest their talents in tutoring or caring for AIDS patients. Or they may channel the limited resources of one church out into the world through local social service agencies, denominations, and even governmental programs. Churches are powerful rallying points and often don't recognize just how much they do until a researcher like me comes along to ask. The continuing challenge, however, is both to make the necessary connections between needs and resources and to sustain the spiritual life that makes engagement in such hard work possible. Churches need to create intentional time and space for work in the larger community to be called forth, recognized and blessed.

Churches are not simply another Kiwanis club, after all. While their role in providing for the community is being newly recognized, we must never forget that our primary task as church leaders is to point to the One who created the world, who makes possible our gathering, and who sustains us in our work in the world. In spite of the complications that make gathering more difficult, God still calls us together.

The most critical work that congregations can do is to speak of God and to teach the rest of us to do so, as well. □



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