



Getting Unstuck

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Change is too hard to enact just for the sake of change. But when congregations are faced with new realities, or have to meet important needs of the congregation or community, they become motivated to make difficult changes.

There are great books, on-line resources, and trainings that offer strategies to make these changes. But there are times when congregations try to use these strategies without much success. They get stuck again and again.

When a congregation is stuck, that is a good time to ask someone from outside the congregation, like district staff or a congregational consultant, to help look at the situation with new eyes. I often find, as congregations wrestle with trying to get unstuck, that one of two things is happening. Perhaps the congregation lacks a guiding vision, or there is a tension in the congregation caused by strong opposite needs. Let's examine these one at a time.

First, vision as I am talking about it, is not a creed etched in stone. It is an evolving statement of the congregation's understanding of itself, its deepest reason for being. Without a guiding vision, congregations are more easily blown from one direction to another. The congregation will be better equipped to deal with change, and to apply strategies to make change, if it can answer these questions:

What do we love about our congregation?

What difference do we want to make in our community?

Why do we exist?

When change looms, in the form of big decisions to be made or even in the form of energy that seems to be flagging, it may help to breathe new life into the vision. Making a statement of its highest ideals can ground the congregation in what is most important. Without vision, congregations can get caught in conflicts and indecision that are hard to recover from. Answering the questions about "what we love,"

“what difference we make,” and “why we exist” can go a long way to help congregations build vitality and courage through times of change.

Let’s say a congregation is trying to change how it raises money, but the best techniques for canvassing are just not working. It may be that this particular congregation has learned to see itself as always in crisis—and in the past it may have survived many crises. Fundraising in crisis is very different from fundraising for long, creative vision work, and it is hard to shift from crisis fundraising to funding the vision of the congregation. One thing that can help make this shift is engaging in a process that helps the congregation focus on their vision.

Any congregation can accomplish a great deal with what they have if they believe in their capacity to dream and move forward with that dream, especially if it is based on what they love, what they do well, and how they know they serve the community.

A second thing to think about, when a congregation feels stuck, is possible tension between opposite needs and opinions. As a culture, we have learned to solve problems. We have not been trained to understand how to relate to opposite needs that cannot be solved. Barry Johnson, the author of *Polarity Management*, teaches that instead of trying to solve a polarity, which will keep us stuck, we need to learn to manage it in an ongoing way.

One example of a polarity to be managed is the tension between people who love tradition and those who want change. No congregation can exist without tradition and change, so these two things remain in dynamic tension. Another example is the tension between the rights of the individual and the rights of the community, which is also present as a dynamic in every congregation.

Think about a change you think may be—or should be—on the horizon in your congregation. If there is a problem with that change that comes up again and again, explore the possibility that there is a polarity between two opposites that are equally important and positive. If this is the case, this part of the issue cannot be solved. Trying to solve it will only keep the congregation stuck. It has to be managed so that the people representing the different poles are affirmed in their concerns and their gifts, and are encouraged to move forward together with the strengths of each pole intact—honoring both tradition and change, for instance, or balancing the rights of the individual and the rights of the community.

Let’s say a congregation is having a conversation about whether or not to paint. Well, it is more of a stand-off than a conversation. It’s a stand-off because if the conversation goes to changing the color, a group of people seem to disengage and distance themselves, or if the color is to remain the same, another

group seems to get upset and insist on their own way. And this pattern seems to surface over time around worship, the endowment, and many other things. So the walls remain unpainted unless someone makes the change unilaterally, and then people feel really angry or hurt. Some even leave the congregation.

Probably this has little to do with paint and more to do with whether people feel appreciated or ignored—both those who love the old ways and those who believe it is past time for some change. Each has good reason to believe that if they are ignored, the congregation will run into trouble. The traditionalists have seen how too much change damages things, and the change agents know that hanging too hard onto tradition can stagnate a community.

If this is the case, then there is a conflict between real opposite needs that cannot ever be fixed, but should be managed. Congregational leadership can use this opportunity to engage the congregation in a process in which people hear one another, and learn together to value what is good about both tradition and change. Learning how to do this over time will increase the strength of the whole congregation.

There are lots of good strategies to help congregations increase their health and vitality. But if a congregation seems unable to benefit from those strategies, it may be time to articulate again the congregation's very reason for being, and to check to see if a tough problem is really about the tension between opposite needs.

If this seems to apply to your congregation, it may be a good time to ask for outside help and use this opportunity to deepen the health of your congregation.

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