

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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December 2009 - Volume 17, Number 12

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Are We a Leader-Sending Congregation?

“While I was growing up,” a pastor said, “more than a dozen kids from our church entered seminary. In a neighboring congregation—the same size and denomination—not a single person has entered preparation for ministry during the last forty years.”

“Why is that?” his friend asked. “Why do some churches nurture so many future pastors—while others never do?”

Sending-Congregation Character Traits

New research in 434 churches profiles the characteristics of sending congregations.¹ In 35 percent of those congregations, one of their members entered seminary during the past five years. Those sending congregations possess a “culture of calling” that makes them different from the other congregations in seven major ways.

1. Disciple Magnets. Membership size is *not* the driving force behind incubating future pastors. Sending congregations are, on average, slightly larger than non-sending congregations. But the size difference between pastor-producing congregations and no-pastor-produced congregations is not great.

Growth rate is a much more pronounced trait among sending congregations. The average worship attendance in non-sending congregations increased about 3 percent each year. Worship attendance in sending churches grew, on average, more than 10 percent a year!

Another big difference between the two church types: the percentage of worshipers who assert that their congregation is “moving in new directions.”

Growth rate and future-focus illustrate that something remarkable is happening in sending churches. Potential clergy can get the impression that ministry is exciting.

2. Financially Healthy. Non-sending congregations are three times more likely to describe their financial base as “declining.” Forty percent of sending churches describe their financial base as “increasing” and 53 percent of them describe it as “stable.”

More people hear the call to ministry in places where mission resources are readily available. Fewer hear the call in churches that operate in maintenance mode or struggle to soldier on.

3. Relationally Healthy. Non-sending congregations report more than twice as much church conflict that led to a pastor’s departure. Congregations that produce no future ministers also report more conflict that sent members scurrying for the exit.

4. Leader Trainers. Sending congregations create more leadership-development opportunities for *both young people and adults.*

These churches are more likely to involve teens in leading worship services—speaking, Scripture reading, singing, or performing (in 65 percent of sending congregations versus only 49 percent of non-sending congregations). Attendees in these churches more often describe worship as alive and spontaneous.

Sending congregations also offer considerably more religious education for youth, age twelve through eighteen, *and* adults than do non-sending churches. Thus, many adults in these churches hear God’s call to ministry in the second, third, or fourth chapter of their lives.



5. Local Mission Focus. The breadth and depth of sending congregations' local community involvement offers the clearest distinctive trait. Local mission efforts give future ministers first-hand experience with alleviating suffering and social injustice. For example, these congregations are more likely to provide...

- counseling or support groups
- prison or jail ministries
- substance abuse groups
- housing or crisis shelters for senior citizens, the homeless, and youth
- community or neighborhood action groups
- programs for children and youth
- emergency relief
- other welfare, community service, or social activities

In these circumstances, future pastors cannot miss ministry's relevancy to the larger world.

6. Pastor Mentors. Sending-congregation clergy spend significantly more hours every week training people for ministry and mission than do clergy in other churches. Week after week, large numbers of members experience quality interactions with their key clergyperson.

People who seriously consider the call to ministry must identify with the pastor they know. The research points to clergy traits worthy of emulation. If a pastor (a) exudes enthusiasm and satisfaction with ministry, (b) says and shows that ministry gives life meaning and purpose, (c) expresses gratitude for being in ministry, and (d) feels that he or she has accomplished worthwhile things as a result of that ministry—then ministry as a life vocation becomes attractive to others.

Sending-church pastors model Frederick Buechner's portrayal of vocation: "The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."²

7. Theology of Call. Sending congregations cannot be described as theologically conservative, liberal, or even middle of the road. Rather, their theology of vocation expects that God calls everyone, every day, to ministry. "We are a place where people hear God's call" is central to congregational identity.

Members know the church's ministerial lineage—the names and stories of all those who have been sent out, even if they've never personally met them. When these sons and daughters make return visits, they experience a family-reunion-style welcome. The congregation lives the motto, "Once one of us—always one *from* us."

The Bottom Line: In his New Testament letters, the Apostle Paul refers to Timothy, an early church leader, as his "own son in the faith."

As churches increase the number and strength of these seven character traits, they increase the number of son and

daughter "Timothys" they send.

As churches decrease the number and strength of these seven character traits, they decrease the number of son and daughter "Timothys" they send.

Develop Sending-Congregation Traits

Churches of all sizes can teach and practice ministry training. They can provide internships—paid or unpaid—to help people learn what gifts they may have for ministry. One church alleges that it holds the world record for "first sermons" preached in its pulpit. Another congregation proudly upholds its record as the "first church" for more than a dozen of its denomination's most influential leaders. One small church takes pride in its well-earned reputation as an extremely positive setting for a student pastor's "first call" to a congregation.

Churches of all sizes can celebrate a "Call to Ministry Sunday." On this day each year, the congregation honors all of its Timothys, former ministers, missionaries, and current seminarians as local heroes. Clergy can share their call to ministry story. Members can be an ongoing prayer guild for those they sent out for ministry.

Churches of all sizes can set aside annual funds, or establish endowments, for financial assistance to seminary students. Some churches also make funds available for college students who plan to enter seminary. Congregations can develop a relationship with one or more of their denomination's seminaries by inviting faculty to preach or teach in their congregation. These relationships form bridges that make the individual's transition from a nurturing congregation to seminary training seem less formidable.

The Secret—Just Ask

Pastor Lillian Daniel³ tells a story about how a group of investigators searched for a sending church's secret.

The secret turned out to be one character—an elderly church matriarch. She singled out young people she felt had the gifts for ministry. Then, she asked them to consider God's call.

Daniel concludes: "Someone was asking people to consider the call. That's why it was a calling church."

¹ Kevin Spears and Deborah Bruce, based on the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.USCongregations.org). See also "Elements of a Call" (www.thefund.org/programs/congregations).

² Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

³ Lillian Daniel, "Called and Sent Out: Congregations That Nurture Future Ministers," *The Christian Century*, February 21, 2006.