

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

December 2008 - Volume 16, Number 12

Cynthia Woolever

Does Your Window Limit Your View?

What are our congregation's strengths?

What would we like our congregation to do better?

How you answer these two questions depends on more than observable facts. Your frame of reference—the perspective from which you view your congregation—also influences your answers.

All congregations try to provide (a) engaging worship, (b) care for children and youth, (c) spiritual nurture and development, (d) meaningful participation, (e) service to others, and (f) honor to God.

What happens when something limits achievement of one of those goals? The perspective from which we view the problem often limits our ability to see a better strategy.

Organizational analysts Bolman and Deal¹ recommend that we use four frames to address problems. Each frame has value, but looking through all four frames leads us to better ideas.

1. The Structural Window

“Our committees just don't function! The governing board does everything. We've had the same finance committee chair for twenty years. He vetoes any suggestion for change by saying we don't have the money.”

The structural viewpoint focuses on roles, rules, policies, and procedures. Suggestions that a congregation reorganize, redefine the committee structure, or revise policies come from a structural orientation.

Action Possibilities: A common structural glitch happens when the worship attendance significantly increases or declines and the governance structure no longer fits the membership size.

◆ Should we reduce the number of committees from ten to six and expand the number of ministry teams? (Ministry teams focus on accomplishing a specific ministry but rarely, if ever, hold meetings.) Many people, ages twenty to forty, joyfully work on a ministry team and hate serving on a committee!

◆ Should we shift to quarterly committee meetings in which all committees meet on the same night (thus insuring that no individual serves on more than one committee)?

◆ Should we adhere to three-year term limits for all governing board and committee members?

2. The Human Resource Window

“During the last ten years our elementary Sunday school attendance dropped tragically. When I bring that up in a board meeting, Harry always says, ‘When we had a full-time pastor, the classrooms were full! There's no way to solve that problem!’”

The human resource viewpoint focuses on the time and energy that talented individuals contribute to the congregation's ministry.

Action Possibilities: The professional staff is, indeed, a key human resource. Effective key leaders convince others (because they believe it themselves) that the best years of the congregation lie ahead. They inspire others to take action, respect their ideas, and encourage them to grow in discipleship.

But the majority of U.S. congregations (65 percent) have just one full-time ordained clergy person. Worshipers make up the remaining human resource. Research shows that—on average—four in ten worshipers are actively engaged in their congregation.² This 40 percent serve on committees,



ministry teams, or the governing board; lead or assist in worship; sing in the choir; and serve as Christian education teachers. The other 60 percent only attend worship services. Some people in the active 40 percent burn out from too many responsibilities.

◆ Assuming that our congregation is typical (40 percent of the average worship attendance is active), how many people would be active?

◆ How can we increase that 40 percent active to 50 percent or 60 percent?

◆ To help us exceed that 40 percent active, on what activities should our clergy and staff focus most of their energies?

◆ On what short list of activities should our active members focus their time and talents—so as to make the biggest difference in our congregation and community?

3. The Political Window

“Our church’s big fight started over whether to repair the organ or buy a new one. As usual, a couple of our members insisted on having their way! The other members took sides; then formed verbal battle brigades. A similar fight happens about every ten years.”

The political viewpoint focuses on power relationships among individuals and groups. People who want to fix a problem typically call for conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peacemaking.

Action Possibilities: The root cause of recurring congregational conflicts is usually not bad people but bad administrative habits.

◆ Should we do a better job of giving everyone—at about the same time—all of the information about factors related to financial decisions, staff priorities, programs, and policies?

◆ Should we provide guidelines for conducting meetings in ways that (a) listen to everyone’s views and (b) prevent strong, intimidating personalities from silencing other voices?

4. The Symbolic Window

“Our membership has been declining for years. The new pastor suggested that we relocate to a growing part of town, where most of our members now live. ‘We must not move away from this historic location!’ a prominent member heatedly objects at every opportunity. ‘We’ve been here since 1875! Why move now?’”

From the symbolic perspective a congregation’s identity is tied to its rituals, traditions, cherished values, and artifacts (such as the church building, interior spaces, and location).

Action Possibilities: In the typical U.S. congregation, one in three worshipers joined during the past five years. Fewer than half of these new members originated from a congregation in that denomination. Knowledge of the faith tradition and its powerful symbols is usually limited among

the newest members. Historic worship spaces carry great meaning for older members but much less meaning for newer members.

Among people who view reality from this window, overcoming challenges requires identifying and articulating powerful symbols such as traditional behaviors, sacred objects, and worship space.

◆ Should we improve communication—through new member classes, sermons, and annual lay training—so that we convey the meaning of essential symbols that bind our congregation?

◆ What important symbols should we take when we move to our new building?

Is There a Fifth Window?

Congregations are more than organizations. They also embody the sacred. Our theology (what we believe about God and what God calls us to be and do) should help us to face the challenges we see from the four windows.

Action Possibilities: Theology, not sociology or psychology, is the foundation for church organizations. The four walls—and their four windows—rest on that foundation.

◆ What biblical teachings—such as Jesus’s Great Commandment and Great Commission—provide insights for our church’s challenges?

◆ How do we communicate those biblical teachings to our members?

How Can We Get a Better View?

At a regularly scheduled governing-board meeting, read aloud descriptions of the five windows as you list them on a flip chart. Then, one question at a time, ask each person to share his or her opinion.

1. Which frame of reference do you tend to use when thinking about how to strengthen one of our congregation’s ministries?

2. Looking through all five windows, which action possibilities might strengthen our congregation?

3. What might be our first step in considering each of those action possibilities?

Celebrate the creative results!

¹ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

² Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who’s Going Where and Why* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).