

Building a Healthy Congregation

Rev. Dr. Richard Speck

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The Baptist preacher just finished his sermon for the day and proceeded toward the back of the church for his usual greetings and handshaking as the congregation left the church. After shaking a few adult hands he came upon the seven year old son of one of the Deacons of the church. "Good morning, Jonathan," the preacher said as he reached out to shake Jonathan's hand. As he was doing so he felt something in the palm of Jonathan's hand. "What's this?" the preacher asked. "Money," said Jonathan with a big smile on his face, "It's for you!" "I don't want to take your money, Jonathan," the preacher answered. "I want you to have it," said Jonathan. After a short pause Jonathan continued, "My daddy says you're the poorest preacher we ever had and I want to help you."

I hope that I'll not turn out to be a poor substitute for Josh Snyder. It is good to be back with you on this Sunday. When I was asked to preach for Josh, he asked that I speak with you about what I know that makes for a strong, vibrant and healthy congregation. I see my role as District Executive to share the best practices of congregational life and support the local congregation in fulfilling its mission and vision for affecting the lives of its members and larger community.

A survey was conducted almost ten years ago that lifted up the hallmarks of a strong congregation. A Presbyterian research group looked at thousands of congregations across America to find out what made up a vibrant congregation. The survey has since been repeated twice more. The research that came out of this survey points to some critical components that will help any congregation assess where it is and what it can do to become even more vibrant as a people of faith.

In the report they discussed the hallmarks of a strong congregation. You may ask, what is a strong congregation? Go ahead, I'm waiting. I thought you would never ask.

A strong congregation provides a sense of community. There is a sense of belonging to the group. They found that worshipers in small congregations experience a stronger sense of belonging than do other size congregations. The sense of belonging is strongest in conservative Protestant and historically black congregations. Congregations with more young worshipers have a stronger sense of belonging.

A strong congregation seeks to educate worshipers about the faith. The research shows that congregations strong in caring for children and youth also tend to be places where people are growing spiritually and where they have a common vision about the congregation's future. They invest from the ground up in the faith development of children. They look to the future.

They share their faith with others and are involved in evangelism activities. People are comfortable in talking about faith and inviting others to worship with them. They see a value in reaching the "un-churched" in their community.

A strong congregation serves others. The strongest congregations strike a balance, giving energy to what's happening in the congregation, but also paying attention to what's happening in the world. Some congregations, for example, are located in neighborhoods that are changing demographically. They might ask themselves if they ought to be taking a different approach as well -- maybe trying some new things?

Strong congregations convey the sense that life has meaning. There also seems to be a symbiotic connection between meaningful worship and spiritual growth. In some places, the

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congregation's leaders stress the connection -- that spending more time in private prayer reflection may make worship more meaningful. And worship which soars -- where people feel touched by the presence of the holy -- might make them more interested in focusing on their relationship with God at home as well.

Two years ago the UUA held a gathering of ministers who served growing churches. Out of the twelve ministers invited, four came from the Joseph Priestley District. A DVD was created called "Listening to Experience" and a recent book titled *The Growing Church* expands upon the conversation through nine essays. These ministers were asked to respond to six questions. Here are the questions that were asked:

1. What draws people to the congregation you serve?
2. What is your role as a minister in growing the congregation you serve?
3. How does your congregation help people move inward and outward on their spiritual journey?
4. What needs to be in place, organizationally, institutionally and practically, for a congregation to grow?
5. Within your congregation, what are obstacles or hindrances to growth, and what has helped?
6. What in the larger UU system helps and hinders congregational growth?

How do you think you would have answered these questions here at First Unitarian? They came up with seven principles of vital UU congregations. As I read them, count how many you have.

- 1) The Congregation has a clear and powerful Purpose and Mission
- 2) The Congregation is aware of & responsive to the world around it
- 3) There is vital worship and a vital Sunday experience for all ages
- 4) Church is done well
- 5) The Congregation cultivates religious community
- 6) The Congregation builds skills to lead and nurtures gifts to serve
- 7) Strong ministerial leadership supports the fulfillment of the previous six principles.

Do you see any relationship between what our UU ministers listed and what the Presbyterian research showed? Mission and vision are on both lists. Building a strong community is there. Vital, dynamic worship and religious education show up. Being active in the world trying to make it better is included.

As some of you may know, the Joseph Priestley District has been offering a series of workshops for several years focused on teaching the aspects of healthy leadership in congregations. I first got interested in this area of congregational life when I came to be the District Executive over ten years ago. I attended a training session led by the Rev. Dr. Peter Steinke called Healthy Congregations and became a facilitator of the workshop series.

These workshops enable participants to:

- Gain a renewed sense of purpose and mission
- Cultivate strong leadership capacities to challenge the congregation
- Learn how to develop healthy patterns of living together in community
- Learn to focus on strength, resources, and options for the future
- Boost confidence in responding to challenges and opportunities
- Learn how to lead with calm and thoughtfulness
- Reflect theologically about relationships
- Move the congregation toward healthy functioning

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At the heart of the workshops is the understanding of emotional systems. Emotional systems theory emerged after World War II by Dr. Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist who was working with adolescents who had emotional disturbances. He discovered that if he focused on the relationship of the parents, the problems manifested by the child seemed to lessen. Through his work the concept of emotional family systems was identified and implemented as a modality for therapy.

A rabbi by the name of Edwin Friedman discovered this theory in the 1970s in his work. He was a family therapist as well as leading a congregation. As he understood the theory in a deeper way, he imagined that it might be useful in the interactions with his congregation. He thought of the congregation as an extended family system. After several years of refining his ideas about applying family emotional systems to congregational life, he wrote a seminal book called *From Generation to Generation* which became required reading in the seminary. He began teaching his adaptation of the theory to clergy around the country.

One of the people who studied with Friedman was a Lutheran minister who also was a family counselor. As he began working with congregations as a consultant he saw the need for leaders in congregations to be exposed to the concepts of the theory and show them how to be able to become more effective as leaders and human beings in their relationships at home, work, and church. Peter Steinke has taken the theory and created the workshop series that teaches emotional systems theory in a way adapted to congregational life.

I discovered that using this series assisted leaders in congregations in being more effective in dealing with the anxieties of church life. And I found that the better able the leadership was at controlling their own anxiety, the better able the congregation was at solving its problems without resorting to a major fight that resulted in people leaving the church hurt and angry. Now I'm sure that nothing like that has ever occurred here, has it?

Over the years I became proficient enough and knowledgeable enough to become a facilitator trainer myself and I have been leading the facilitator workshops around the country for others to be able to use this material and I am happy to report that it is having an impact on our faith. I continue to reflect and read about what it means to be an emotional being. I practice being aware of my own sense of anxiety and have developed a way of being aware without being paralyzed by it. This has helped me in dealing with congregations that are highly anxious and contentious.

I have learned that leaders who reflect upon who they are, what they stand for, and how they function in relation to others stand a much better chance of defusing a conflict than those who are not as self-aware. A person who has gained a sense of themselves in this way is called self-differentiated. There are seven strengths of a well self-differentiated leader.

1. Spiritual Grounding: the person acts responsibly and responsively lives in the creator/creature tension. He or she understands the reality of "new creation" where we are constantly growing in our understanding of the universe and our place in it.

2. Manages Own Anxiety: the individual understands anxiety, knows one's own anxiety triggers, and actively takes steps to keep that anxiety (and its temptations) within healthy bounds. The person practices a less anxious presence as a human in their relationships with others.

3. Takes Positions and Stays Connected: the person clarifies what one believes about life, avoids the extremes of fusion and being absorbed into the herd or cut-off and isolated from others. The person deals with the predictable reactivity to effective leadership.

4. Focuses on Presence and Functioning: the individual maintains a research stance and asks lots of questions. They understand reciprocity of interacting with others in a system. The

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person influences the emotional field in four major ways as needed: bringing calmness, focus, change, and challenge to the system.

5. Focuses on Vision and Mission: The person stays on course and has a clear direction for both themselves as well as their congregation. He/she perseveres and uses emotional stamina for the long haul of leadership.

6. Focuses on Strengths: the person celebrates the resources, is open toward the future and moves towards creating a neostasis in the system. They combat mood problems and use conflict for discovery and learning.

7. Challenges Self and Others: the person accepts pain in oneself and in others as part of growth. They practice the art of collaboration and empowerment of others. The individual avoids “taking the temperature” before taking action.

Rev. Dr. Peter Steinke writes: “Congregational leaders are the key stewards of the congregation as a unit in itself. They, by virtue of their positions in the system, can most promote congregational health. More important than any of the conditions congregations face is the capacity of their leaders to make clear and effective responses to the conditions. On what specific items or forces, then, will they need to focus in order to impact the health of their respective congregations? What generally influences congregational health? Seven health promoters do--purpose, appraisal and management of conflict, clarity, mood and tone, mature interaction, healing capacities, and a focus on resources.”

That is all it takes for a congregation to thrive and grow and be attractive to others in the community. Have a solid mission and vision, build strong links between people, do church at the highest level of quality possible, and train mature emotionally healthy leaders. As the hymn says, “we are building a new way” to do church. I hope that leaders from First Unitarian will take advantage of one of the upcoming Healthy Congregations workshops. I have faith in this congregation that your best days are still ahead. Amen.