

Arrogant or Authentic: Church Pride in Striving for Change

by

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This Draft: Presentation for RRA 2016 is by Adair Lummis.

Group pride within organizations in working for needed changes is an important factor in actually achieving success, a number of consultants concur. Organizational leaders who are effective “pride builders” can accomplish much in involving members in working together and taking pride in successful steps. Yet is such group pride built on solid foundations - in reality, in the firm convictions of leaders and most members, in the opinions of outsiders? What are the consequences for the organization if these answers indicate a more arrogant (insecure) than authentic pride in the group’s actions? These same assumptions and questions about group pride are also important to congregations.

RATIONALE: Within the last several years, a number of consultants and researchers have published or posted on line affirmations that if leaders and members take real pride in their groups’ goals and their contributions, they will work more effectively together in achieving success. Successfully mobilizing group pride among members of congregations, as a number of researchers and consultants observe, is most often spearheaded by clergy who are self-reliant, assertive and have some clear vision of what might be done to raise congregational vitality and numbers.

However, such clergy should realize vision alone is ineffective without their attention to ensuring support of active members, in taking needed new steps.ⁱ As several consultants put it, clergy need to get employees or key members to make “emotional” commitments to achieving group goals, and be effective “pride builders” who will motivate others to contribute.ⁱⁱ At the same time, consultants warn that any committee or congregation can “pat themselves on the back” too soon or naively. Unrealistic, overly inflated “group pride” can arise either as a way of masking insecurity about how successful the group or congregation is or can be, and to affirm group strength to deter threats or competition from others.ⁱⁱⁱ Unrealistic group pride that includes **arrogance** toward what other groups/congregations are doing or planning, may also impede leaders and members examining the possible need to alter their goals or actions and make changes, and perhaps missing opportunities to establish valuable collaborations with other congregations or community organizations.^{iv}

Are church leaders making **authentic or more arrogant claims** when they select as the statement that “best describes” their congregation as #6: “*We pride ourselves on our embrace of -- and success in -- constantly changing to improve and adapt*”? Actually, this affirmation of “group pride” is fairly rare among leaders of Protestant Oldline and Evangelical congregations. Less than a fifth selected this last

response in suggesting they see view their themselves and other church leaders as relatively successful "pride builders".

TABLE 1. Vitality and Change in Protestant Churches: "Statement that Best Describes Your Congregation"

	ALL	OLDLINE	EVANGELICAL
1. Fine, No need to change	2%	1%	2%
2. Need change, members refuse change	14%	8%	15%
3. Slow change, not fast enough	26%	26%	26%
4. Not much change needed	15%	15%	15%
5. Doing pretty well in making changes	28%	39%	26%
6. Pride ourselves in efforts & success	15%	11%	16%
in constant change	100% (1893)	100% (244)	100% (1849)

Have church leaders making "constant change" to improve resulting in a more healthy church? Two often used measures of a healthy church are high spiritual vitality and numerical growth in church attendance, and are in the FACT survey. High vitality is indicated by proportion of respondents "strongly agreeing" that the congregation is "spiritually vital and alive" (coded yes, no) or has grown in church membership by whether over the last five years there has been an increase in at least 2% in average weekend worship attendance (coded yes, no).

TABLE 2: % = "We Pride Ourselves on our embrace of -- and success in -- constantly changing to improve and adapt."

PROTESTANT CONGREGATIONS	OLDLINE	EVANGELICAL	
Neither Vital nor Growing	33%	49%	31%
Growing but not Vital	28%	22%	28%
Vital but not Growing	14%	20%	14%
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From Table 2, it would seem that leaders who pride themselves and their members in making efforts for positive changes, are not seeing as much spiritual vitality or growth as might be expected. Less than a third of church leaders trying to be effective "pride builders" describe their congregation as both 'vital and growing', and fully a third indicate their congregation neither displays 'high spiritual vitality' nor 'increase in worship attendance.'

Nonetheless, pride may be justified for the other two-fifths (42%) in the fact that their churches at least have high spirituality vitality OR growth in attendance, just not both. Leaders of Evangelical congregations report overall greater success in growth, with likely more positive effects on vitality as well, than those in Oldline congregations

INTERVIEWS with CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

Why are leaders and members who pride themselves on their efforts to change not having success in one or both of these areas? - What is going on here? Who or what events are to blame? Are these leaders making efforts and taking pride in trying to change their churches, making strides nonetheless, sometimes under difficult conditions? Or are congregational leaders arrogantly ignoring some real problems in what they are doing to address weaknesses?

This is the kind of question area that would seem to benefit from discussion with these clergy "pride builders" (or takers) to gather more information: first get more insights about congregations and clergy change efforts; and second to get an idea of what goes through clergy "pride builders" minds as they check off answers on the FACT survey.

A number of clergy in this "Pride Builder" category gave their names and email for further discussion of areas covered in the FACT survey, 13 each of Oldline and Evangelical leaders. By the summer of 2016, 3-4 of the emails no longer worked for locating the person who filled out the questionnaire. In the email letter request letter sent to these leaders (most of whom are clergy), the following sentence was included:

"You are probably aware that there is a limit to what surveys can show about factors involved in vitality and growth for congregations of different types and situations. That is the major reason for this request: Would you be willing to talk with me over the telephone about your congregation and leadership for no more than half an hour.."

Oldline pastors agreed quite readily, not so true of the Evangelical pastors. By early September, eight Oldline leaders had been interviewed along with two Evangelical pastors.

Size of the worship attendance varied among congregations in this interview sample from under 50 to over 1,200. The more persons attending services, the more money often forthcoming in collection plates and tithes and more volunteers likely available, results which further aid in developing programs and paying consultants to assist member increase, heightened vitality and sustained financial health. Church finances are important in present stability and future plans, and so are considered here in looking at the congregational situation of hopeful pride builders.

FOUR CLUSTERS OF CONGREGATIONS IN COMBINATIONS OF VITALITY AND GROWTH

Congregational Leader interviews are discussed in the four clusters of congregations defined by whether they are very vital spirituality and growing in number of attenders:

1. **CONGREGATIONS "NEITHER VITAL NOR GROWING"**

Of the three congregations in this category, two are Oldline churches with women ministers and one Evangelical with a man as pastor. Both Oldline congregations are in different states and denominations, but each well under a 100 attending members. The Evangelical church has nearly 1,500 members.

OLDLINE Churches 1 & 2:

Usually about fifty show up for services presently at these two Oldline churches. When these pastors first came to their congregations about ten-fifteen years ago, they were eager and hopeful to grow their church in vitality and numbers. They both initiated efforts and programs to encourage members to reach out to the surrounding community in social service projects, and invite the

community in for special events. They both initiated efforts for to publicize their congregations as welcoming including gays and lesbians.

Both pastors made some changes in the worship to enliven these services, attract and involve new members. One pastor added a contemporary music worship, a children's song service and hired a children's program director to attract young families in the area. The other pastor added new hymns, used a screen in the service with words to the songs, updated the educational offerings, added some lectures on health and other topics advertised and open to the community.

Both pastors saw their efforts paying off in increased membership... for a while....but then "it stalled" or declined. More people might be attending, but if they were young couples or impoverished, little money was forthcoming for supporting more program staff and activities. Present attenders rarely invited others, and getting and keeping members was nearly totally up to the pastors:

"For vitality in this church, I found we had to keep adding new and different things to keep members' attention. People came in -- but then moved --or came in and had their kids baptized but then did not return."

Both churches could exist financially for at least a decade with somewhat fewer members, even though membership and finances continued a slow decline. These two women pastors did most of the work in developing programs to attract new members and encouraging members to assist in program planning and implementation:

"Many people just come to church for themselves or to interact with their friends...When things get hard, people in the church want to circle the wagon train, and not reach out further to the community."

Each pastor encountered some resistance from those members who liked things "the way they had been." These clergy did get some support from others attending (often the newer members), however, after a decade or more of major efforts to assist the church flourish, but getting bite-back, they are nearly burned out and both decided to leave these congregations.

One pastor became quite ill after a year or more of conflict over a number of disputes, whether and to whom the church should rent space. She is recovering at home before undertaking further ministry elsewhere. The clergywoman explained her leaving as follows:

"There are three or four old-timer members at the church who are bullies. Keeping the bullies in line is more of a headache than I want to continue facing week after week...I am not a forceful person, or a directive-type of leader, more motherly. But I am fed-up with trying to get these people to move."

These pastors indeed tried hard to make positive changes, engage and build pride in their congregations with some success. Yet, in the long run they did not have sustained member engagement in taking responsibility in these efforts.

EVANGELICAL Church 1.

The associate pastor interviewed has been with this church fifteen years. His ministry is mainly focused on evangelism and young adult ministry. He works with the young adults in two groups, the "college segment" (ages 18-23) and the "career segment" (23-29). He is concerned about overall church

membership: even though the church is nearly 1,500 active members now, this is a decrease of over 1,000 from ten years ago; and in the last six years the Sunday school has decreased by 185. "Money is not an immediate concern"; however, despite efforts of the several clergy and staff, decline is still occurring. Decline he attributes to the competition from other recently established churches in the area, fewer young families because of divorce and lower birth rates, along with the fact that the "social benefit" of approval for church going has declined. Decline has made this church:

"s no longer a 'pioneer' in evangelical ministries in the area. It has lost much of its 'pioneer spirit' that so contributed to growth and vitality twenty years ago."

The associate would much like to have a stronger role in leading the church toward great growth and vitality, but the senior pastor who founded the church, now in his mid-seventies:

"...is still very much in charge...The church has no governing body, (the senior pastor) makes all the major church decisions. The church does not use outside consultants. (The senior pastor) is it."

Questions for Reflection

Are these clergy, now or recently a pastor in congregations neither growing nor vital, more authentic or arrogant leaders? These clergy see themselves as authentic leaders in giving their best efforts and engaging others in their congregations to increase vitality and numbers attending, but not getting sufficient support. Likely some in their congregations, however, see them as "arrogant" and not listening to the needs of the people or attending to important church issues. I see them more as "despairing" in trying to figure out what they could do or could have done better -- if indeed anything.

2. CONGREGATIONS GROWING BUT NOT VITAL

Of the two congregations in this group, one is Oldline and the other Evangelical. Both have male pastors, and each have between 150-200 active members.

EVANGELICAL Church 2: Predominantly African-American and Immigrant

This congregation, founded 35 years ago by the current pastor, is located in a very depressed, crime-ridden urban area. The pastor has personally recruited and trained 25 lay leaders for a variety of congregational ministries. He is a leader in cooperative community efforts with other pastors in the city, one of which is an ex-felon programs" that help newly released prisoners with issues and finding work.

The major congregational ministry, however, is the feeding program. The pastor and lay leader team hire "20 employees" at minimum wage to help with the afternoon feeding program during the school week for over 175 children, who are fed daily in shifts under tents on the grounds of the two buildings in different locations owned by the church. The church also provides food to older people who need it and the homeless who walk in to the feeding centers.

The present members include those who have been with the church many years who still live in the vicinity, some younger members whose children go to the local schools, s those who live in shelters or on the street, included recently released felons. There will always be some new people coming in to the congregation, others leaving for better jobs and locations, and some dying, but overall there has been an increase in members over the last five years.

Still, their longstanding church building is really too small for the numbers now attending. The pastor has already acquired a larger building for the church ten miles away in a somewhat better area, but current attenders are resistant to moving. People attending the congregation typically have no cars and public transportation is a cost.

Despite the spirit-filled congregation, the pastor's observation of less than high vitality is likely due to present attenders' upset about the prospect of the congregation moving to another building - not in walking distance, which they may not be able to attend.

OLDLINE Church 3

When pastor came to this church it was in decline. The members were "aging out" and the finances tenuous. Still, he saw a "spark - a chance of changing everything

Indeed, over the four years he has been here, he has changed the church governances, worship and programs. He disbanded the elected board and instead appointed members to two committees,: (1) A six member "Vision Team" who set policy and structures, such as drafting by-laws for congregational approval; and (2) a five member "Permanent Management Team" who manage day-to-day building operations, such as the electricity issues, leaks, and other problems. He added a second lively praise service along with the traditional worship service.

Over the last few years, the worship attendance has grown to between 185 and 200 in worship, and is far more diverse in age. Few young adults attend ever, but currently the church has many more young children and about 40 teenagers, and they get a few new people every year.

For the last seven years, this pastor said he and now the congregation have benefitted from his regular discussions over Skype with an outside congregational consultant. It is very difficult to get members to volunteer for more traditional, routine church tasks, such as worship greeter or coffee hour or grounds cleanup. However; "If there is a new project to be built from the ground up, there would be more volunteers than needed!" Members, further, only want to give money to new projects, not to the annual fund!

So all is not well. Membership growth though "now at a plateau," is running out of room for the members and programs they have, and worried about spending funds for more space. The church is also running out of attenders interested in doing something:

We have some money...and we trying to be nimble and respond in keeping the church on track...but people tend to get worked up about what things cost that they don't understand... I spend a lot of time doing basic communication, so there will be no big point of conflict...We need to move into action, and do less talking and whining about it."

Questions for Reflection:

Growth of these congregations is primarily due to the inspirational, strong leadership of these two pastors, These pastors make all major decisions for their churches, and make efforts to involve and train teams of lay members to take efforts and make some decisions. Still there are difficulties looming, one of which for members in both churches, might be: "After we have made a decision involving big costs to our present church, and our pastor leaves this location, would we be able to follow through sufficiently?"

Are these dedicated pastors perhaps too authoritatively competent in making essential changes themselves, to motivate their members to undertake needed actions for supporting the congregation's future? Considering that question might well be somewhat depressing for both pastor and members!

3. CONGREGATIONS VITAL BUT NOT GROWING

All three congregations in this group are Oldline. The first church, pastored by a man, has worship services attracting nearly 345 attenders. A second church, of 300 members is managed by a lay woman "coordinator" because there is no "settled" pastor. The third church with a woman pastor has 200 members on the books, but attendance is closer to 85, and it will close within another year.

OLDLINE CHURCH 4 - Vital in its liberal, educated membership

The senior pastor on coming to this church twenty years ago, saw great possibilities for growth in part because of its location near a university in a fairly well-to-do community. He embarked on beginning new ministries in the church: helping homeless families, being part of a Head Start program, training and sponsoring Stephen Ministers Christian caregivers. Under his leadership, the church became officially "open and affirming" of gays and lesbians, a "watershed decision" which led to the departure of some members, but motivated others to join.

Members actively involved are predominantly white, college-educated, middle and upper-middle class, varying in age (from young married parents, mid-thirties to mid-forties professionals, and the executive and spouses in the fifty-sixty five group.) The pastor has attracted members through doing a lot with Facebook and web communication, as well as broadcasting his sermons live on the radio, and in writing later on the web. He has tried to add a more contemporary second service on Sundays, which "has raised the hackles" of some longtime senior members and "getting some resistance." One problem with young single adults in this area is that though they will attend services they like, and help out on programs, they do not want to be "members". No regular attendance and no tithes.

He has five fairly well-paid church staff who help manage all these endeavors, including staff follow-up on any new person who visits or asks questions on Facebook. Volunteers among church members are very content that there are "paid others" to do the "dull sounding church work", such as administration, budgets and finances, membership, church facilities and program scheduling and oversight. Lay volunteers, however, are very active in outreach and care ministries. He and others see this as a spiritually vital church.

Still, the church is not growing presently. It is financially stable, however, and with the help of an outside consultant, he hopes pledges will increase. Yet, he has been there twenty years, and may soon retire. What will become of this church when he is no longer present?

OLDLINE CHURCH 5. Vital ministries but no settled pastor - some decline and problems for growth.

For over two decades, this church had a senior pastor who was very active in the surrounding city in advancing civil rights issues, other activities, including publicizing what the church was doing. His efforts were pivotal during this time from 100 to over 700 members. More recently, space became a

problem to the extent they had to run 4 services on Sunday. The church took much of their available funds to build "a beautiful new sanctuary that is large, high and holds everybody."

Then their membership declined. The church now has approximately 300 regular attenders. About two years ago this beloved senior pastor left for another area of the country. Since then the church has had to do with 2 part time interims who also serve churches elsewhere, but also fortunately with the services of a full-time, very competent lay administrator.

This "Congregational Life Coordinator" interviewed who has been with the church over a decade is now the only full-time paid person, although there are a number of part-time staff. She in effect, is running the church. She is very active in organizing programs for attracting new people, outreach ministries, congregational educational programs and events, and the publicizing the church in getting announcements of programs in newsletters and on the web, including a "branding campaign" on their website. She is the person who finds competent lay volunteers and works hard to get new attenders involved in the church.

Membership growth is still a problem. She believes: "If a church is not growing, it is dying." People move in and out, she observes, and "for some people, church is a revolving door." Fewer members also means less income.

She projects, that their biggest block to membership growth is likely financial. Presently, the church has a "*a workable budget, but the church is also understaffed and staff underpaid... To offer the services that we do now for the future, we are going to need more staff.*" This financial and staffing situation may also make it difficult to attract another "settled minister," nearly as good as the last. For such reasons, long-time members are "anxious" about the church's future viability. However, she has faith that because of the underlying vitality of this congregation, all will be well.

OLDLINE CHURCH 6 - Vital, active, but soon closing

For the last ten years, this full-time pastor has been successful in keeping the congregation's viable and membership stable at 200, with now about 85 regular attenders. This is not as true of other five churches of the same denomination in this city, three of which are about to close. But this church has financial problems. When she first came the church endowment was

"a million-two, and we are down to \$700,000....and we cannot sustain this church much longer. We are in a building that is too big for us and not flexible."

The membership presently consists of "*a good number of Baby Boomers, GenX, but very few Millennials - who go off to college and that's it.*" She is actively involved in encouraging ministry teams that members develop carrying out various ministries and projects. Most of those these teams, however, are "*working, so they do not have a lot of time.*" An issue with counting membership is that:

"We have a number of people hanging around here who are not new members for a variety of reasons, but are often active in the congregation.."

This church and another nearby have plans to combine and create a new church in the city, not sure yet where. Some members not happy, saying "*We have a really good church here now - why mess*

with that? I agree with them in many ways, that this is a wonderfully vital church. We are also exhausting our staff and we are running out of money - really fast."

Reflective Questions: Participation in valued ministries by loyal members contributed much to a sense of spiritual vitality in the congregation. Although vital congregations may attract attenders, these often younger persons do not want to be officially "members" and less likely to contribute money on a regular basis. Lively as the church may be for present attenders, this is not always sufficient to attract new members, especially where there are competition from nearby congregations. Present or looming financial problems can reduce funds that might help publicize the church. How long will vitality last if there is further decline? One of these church leaders *"if a church is not growing, it is dying."* Is that statement authentic or arrogant?

4. CONGREGATIONS THAT ARE BOTH VITAL AND GROWING

Both congregations in this group are Oldline, very vital and small but slowly increasing in membership. One church, led by a woman as pastor has grown under her leadership to 200 active members. The second church led by a man as pastor, in another denomination and part of the country, has grown in attendance to 70 official members, but has 112 regular attenders, mainly "Millennials". Both clergy are part-time.

OLDLINE CHURCH 7: Predominantly African-American near University

About ten years ago, this woman who had recently gotten her M.Div. degree came to the area to take an administrative position at the nearby university. She visited this church, saw it was not doing well, just open for a Sunday service. She wanted to give time "to doing something" for this church, and very soon thereafter she became its senior/sole minister. Neither she nor anyone else this church is paid a salary.

Through her efforts the church developed new ways of involving members and area residents on "race, reconciliation, and all of those things". The church building is presently open four days a week. In addition to different types of worship services, Sunday school, and meetings, the church sponsors street programs, programs for the incarcerated, and offers computer classes for members and others interested. These programs have "built up trust" among residents and community leaders, who now *"know we work 'for real' in the community and we are spiritual."* Because those coming are interested *"in church in new ways....and this has become a brand new, multicultural congregation."* Of the 200 members who attend many are African Americans and immigrants from different economic backgrounds.

This church does have present challenges to vitality and growth. They have a building project with which they are going ahead. Still, there are difficulties caused by limited annual income for work that could be done on and by the church. There is some support by the denomination, the university, and other agencies. Every so often there is an all-church meeting to discuss plans, general harmony but always individuals present who want to go in other directions. Another difficulty is that "some who volunteer - all the time - are getting overwhelmed." She added that though many volunteers come forward, alas, they do not have the professional skills to do what is needed.

Though money is an issue for this congregation too in vitality and growth, they push on with what they have.

OLDLINE CHURCH 8: Predominantly Young Adults near a Seminary

The senior pastor has served this congregation for twenty-five years, always part-time. He is more fully employed as a spiritual director at a nearby seminary. The congregational staff include two part-time women pastoral associates, a young man who is the church music liturgical director, another who does music programs for the community, a director for young people's programs, and a church administrator. (Most of these staff are probably current seminarians or recent graduates.) The senior pastor only preaches twice a month; the young pastoral associates or others manage the content of most worship services, and he and others attending "seldom know what to expect. Interesting and exciting."

Of the approximate 112 people attending, most are under 45 and many are young adults under 30. However, there are only 70 official members, many of the millennials attending disdain the "too rigid" idea of being a formal member. Presently, there is no "functioning" board, all decisions are made by majority member agreement. The church does hold membership classes and sign-up for official members.

Without many official members, finances are fine now, but could become a problem. Every year the staff do a stewardship study and drive, explaining to the congregation what budget they must meet and ask for pledges. Further, the church recently sold land it owned "for quite a good sum", and now has money available to expand its church parking space and for various outreach projects. So all is well with the church presently.

True it is small, but also vital and growing - in attenders if not in official members.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION These two congregations, both vital and growing, would seem to benefit from being more family-sized church^v of mainly like-minded staff and members who want to volunteer or work for limited wages in services and programs for attenders, community outreach and spiritual ministries. At the same time, the future existence of the two churches is also somewhat precarious. Or are "family churches" the predominant future of most Oldline congregations?

Without these clergy leaders volunteering substantial time, who could/would take over their roles as effective "pride-builders" with similar knowledge and skills to maintain or expand the high spiritual vitality and numbers attending these congregations presently? Would these congregations be less vital if they actually grew substantially in numbers and diversity of attenders?

Whatever, it does seem that these clergy are more authentic than arrogant, even should they may appear boastful to others at their day jobs, when describing the churches they lead!

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TABLES on FACT 2015 DATA: SAMPLE SELECTION FOR INTERVIEW STUDY

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And: VITALITY AND GROWTH IN THESE PRIDE- FILLED CONGREGATIONS

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ENDNOTE REFERENCES

ⁱ John Dreibelbis and David Gortner (2005) with Episcopal and other Oldline congregations, Dale Galloway (1998) most connected with the Nazarenes, Bill Easum (2000) with UMC, Tim Nichols (2007) with SDA, and Michael Foss (2014) with ELCA.

ⁱⁱ Among others on the importance of this for congregations, are consultants Thomas G. Bandy, David Brubaker, and Charles Arn, who publish books, but whose reports and summaries on this topic are readily available from the internet. Further, consultants for application of group support of changes for any organization are also in books and on the internet. For example, Jon Katzenbach, Laird Post, Jonathan Gruber, Aurelie Viriot, "Motivating Behavior Change"; Strategy& (formerly Booz & Company) 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeanne Bryner, "Group Prides Rooted in Insecurity" Live Science.com, October 2008, reporting on research done by psychologist, Jessica Tracy.

^{iv} Ed Stetzer, "The Problem with Arrogant Pastors and 5 Ways Not to Be One", *Christianity Today*, February, 2013.

^v C. Kirk Hadaway, "Congregational Size and Church Growth in the Episcopal Church."