
10. A Practitioner's Perspective

Policy Planning

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An attempt to use the printed word to communicate one's own approach to consultations with congregations resembles the effort to paint a word picture of an individual. Inevitably the word picture will exaggerate certain characteristics, understate others, and perhaps completely miss what some would declare to be the most important features. A photograph may be worth the traditional thousand words, but it too has its shortcomings. Frequently the photograph fails to capture some of the most distinctive personal characteristics of the individual pictured in that photograph. To attempt to present a word picture of oneself is certain to reflect a biased perspective. In other words, this effort to describe what I do in parish consultation does, to some extent, represent reality, but the overlap is less than one hundred percent!

Perhaps the most useful contribution I can make to this discussion is to attempt to identify the seven basic assumptions on which I base my approach to parish consultations and to describe some of the procedures I have found to be useful.

The One Basic Premise

I am overwhelmingly convinced, as the foundation of my approach, that the assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, value system, understanding of contemporary reality, academic preparation, theological stance, age, biases, life experiences, denominational background, and other baggage carried by the consultant constitute the most important single dynamic or variable in determining what happens in a parish consultation. That is the one categorical statement in this chapter.

The concept of a "neutral" or "objective" approach to parish

consultation, therefore, ranks somewhere between an illusion and a deception. Everyone carries baggage that influences that person's methodology and style. Likewise, there are no neutral questions. The choice of the subject matter to be questioned represents the application of a value system. The seven operational assumptions identified here not only are of great importance, in my opinion, but also distinguish my approach from that of other practitioners.

SEVEN OPERATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

The Outside Third Party

Over the past two decades I have become a convert to the value of the "outside third party." The utilization of third parties has been one of the rapidly growing trends in our society during the past four decades. In part, this is a result of our growing affluence. We can now afford the intervention of outsiders. In part this trend reflects the growing specialization of the labor force. Most of all, however, it reflects an appreciation of the potential contributions of the outsider. This pattern can be seen in labor-management relations, in professional sports, in corporate "takeovers," in the practice of medicine, in marriage counseling, in education, in ministerial placement, and in nearly every aspect of American life except, perhaps, the merger of Protestant denominations.

First, and perhaps most important, it means I am very skeptical of the self-study approach in which congregational leaders are expected to analyze their own situation and produce a prescription from their own diagnosis. Self-studies can be useful, but that is a very limited usefulness. The self-study can be a useful beginning point, or a base from which subsequent questions can be derived, but self-study guides suffer an inherent inability to ask the follow-up questions.¹ Self-studies *with a consultant* can be very useful. This also means I have serious reservations about the usefulness of the approach that calls for the congregational leaders

¹A promising new approach that appears to be pioneering new ground is Robert E. Leach and Erwin G. Somogyi, *The Measure of a Church* (Anaheim, Calif.: Presbytery of Los Ranchos, 1980). Their system may overcome many of the shortcomings of the traditional self-study.

to fill out the self-study "notebook" and mail it in for a diagnosis and prescription. I also believe students who are in the classroom with the teacher learn more than the person who takes the same course from the same teacher by correspondence.

Second, by definition, the outside third-party parish consultant is in a position to read the nonverbal communication, to ask the follow-up questions that are occasioned by the responses to the introductory questions, and to explore issues that otherwise might be overlooked. Those follow-up questions cannot be asked by a self-study.

Third, the on-the-scene presence of the outside third party means that the personality, behavior, values, communication skills, attitudes, credibility, and appearance of the parish consultant become extremely influential factors in determining the outcome of a particular parish consultation. The confidence, or the lack of confidence, displayed by congregational leaders toward the consultant will have a great influence on what happens next. The responses by the parish consultant to the advance preparation; the questions asked by the consultant at the early meetings; the insights offered, the personal style, and the openness of the consultant; and the choice of a planning model all combine to influence the response of the parishioners to the consultant.

Finally, a central variable in the usefulness of any outside third party is the quality of the invitation. We will return to this when the discussion moves to procedures.

Internal Dynamics or Community Context

A second operational assumption of mine is that the internal dynamics of congregational life are far more important than the community context. This is most apparent when the consultation includes the subject of numerical growth or decline. I believe that the dynamics of interpersonal and institutional relationships are more revealing than denominational ties, community context, or general statistical data—which really only provide a base for asking more important questions. This assumption distinguishes my perspective from those who place a far greater emphasis on the influence of the community context or those who use a "data-

based" approach to intervention² or those who stress the centrality of the denominational affiliation.

At this point it may be necessary to offer an apology to my friends and mentors who stress the importance of external factors, such as the community context or the denominational affiliation, and to inject an autobiographical reflection.

I came into this vocation after several years of graduate training and professional experience in city and community planning. For several years I placed great emphasis on the community context and conducted an extensive analysis of the demographic, economic, and land use factors that might influence the life, ministry, and outreach of a given congregation. Anyone familiar with my work in the early 1960s will find that an analysis of the community context *always* constituted the initial section of any report I prepared for a church or a group of congregations. I was convinced the community context shaped the life of a parish.

In 1961 and 1962 I began to be more heavily involved with black churches in Akron and Cleveland, Ohio. As I worked with these black churches I gradually began to realize that the history of a particular congregation, the impact of the minister's personality and leadership, race, social class, and other internal considerations were far more important than the community context in shaping the life of a particular congregation. As I reflected on this, I also began to realize the community context usually was an influential factor in the life of a new congregation, whether it be in the inner city or in suburbia, but that as the years passed, the impact of internal factors far exceeded the weight of external conditions.

By the late 1960s I was involved with several churches in Dade County, Florida, some of which were affected by the influx of the political refugees from Cuba. Again, however, I observed that the internal dynamics of a congregation, and especially the attitudes and actions of the leaders, were far more influential than what

²For a contrast between two different approaches see Harry Levinson, *Organizational Diagnosis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 10-11, and Harvey A. Hornstein, et al., *Social Intervention* (New York: Free Press, 1971), pp. 255-56.

was happening in the community around the meeting place. As a result, today I place relatively modest weight on the impact of changes in the community context.

As part of my pilgrimage I have concluded also that the denominational affiliation or the place of a congregation on the theological spectrum is of less importance than I once assumed to be the case. Most of the parish consultations in which I have been involved since 1960 have been with churches from a broad theological spectrum in over three dozen denominational families. I have become convinced that internal factors such as race, social class, national and ethnic background, the attitudes and actions of the leaders, language, and the age of the congregation are more important variables than the particular denominational affiliation of that congregation.

The Wiltshire Church case study illustrates very clearly the central importance of the internal dynamics, most of which are far more influential than either the community context or the denominational affiliation.

The Behavior Setting

A third operational assumption overlaps the second. I have become convinced that the "behavior setting" has a tremendous impact on what does or does not happen in a congregation.³ For example, I have become convinced that the organizational structure, the size of the governing board, the frequency of their meetings, the nature of the room in which they meet, and the choice of who will preside at the meetings of the governing body have a significant impact on what happens in the life of a congregation. The design of the building has a great impact on the degree of "friendliness" displayed by the members. In another setting I have argued that the importance of place may be the most neglected factor in church planning.⁴ This also separates me from many others who do not place an equivalent emphasis on the concept of

³See Roger G. Barker, *Ecological Psychology* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1968), for the summary statement from a pioneer in this field. For suggestions on applications to churches see Lyle E. Schaller, *Effective Church Planning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), pp. 65-92.

⁴Schaller, *Effective Church Planning*, pp. 17-64.

behavior setting. It also means I believe the polity is more influential than the denominational affiliation.

The Classification System

The fourth of these operational assumptions is that the classification system used by the parish consultant is an important factor that will influence the outcome of the consultation. What are the categories you use in studying churches?⁵

The most widely used, and one of the least helpful, classification systems is that of denominational affiliation. From my experience I would rank, in order of usefulness, these classification systems: (1) size as measured by the average attendance at worship and membership attendance patterns, (2) the ideological-behavioral dichotomy,⁶ (3) the internal dynamics, (4) the tenure of today's members, (5) the contemporary role of that parish and the goals evolving out of that role, (6) the age of that institution and especially the length of time it has been meeting in the present building, (7) the age of the members, (8) the community context, (9) the polity, and (10) the tenure of the current pastor and of the past five pastors. It should be noted that only five or six of those ten can be identified through traditional self-study procedures.

In reflecting on the Wiltshire Church as a case study, I found this to be an excellent and provocative presentation. After reading it I had only two reservations. First, the appropriate name would have been "Legion," for there are many churches that resemble this one very closely. Second, I would like to have seen a tabulation of the worship attendance pattern over a period of four consecutive Sundays, including a frequency distribution between those who joined before the arrival of the present senior minister and those who joined following his arrival.

⁵A brief introduction to several classification systems can be found in Lyle E. Schaller, *Activating the Passive Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), pp. 17-39.

⁶For an introduction to the concept that some congregations represent the second of Jesus' two great commandments while others are distinguished by their emphasis on the first of those two commandments, see Roger A. Johnson, *Congregations as Nurturing Communities* (Philadelphia: Division for Parish Services, Lutheran Church in America, 1979).

The Choice of a Planning Model

The fifth of these operational assumptions is that the choice of a planning model is at least as influential in determining the outcome of a parish consultation as the process followed by the consultant.

My own inclinations are that choice of a planning model should be tailored to that particular congregation's unique situation, rather than be standard for all churches. In general, I try to avoid the preoccupation with liabilities that is inherent in the "problem identification and solution" model and try to begin with an emphasis on strengths, resources, and assets by using an "affirm and build" model.⁷ This bias can be built into the questions asked by the consultant. I try to use a planning model that (a) has a strong future-orientation built into it, (b) includes an emphasis on outreach, (c) begins by identifying the distinctive resources, strengths, and assets of that particular congregation, (d) encourages agreement on the definition of contemporary reality as the beginning point for planning for tomorrow, (e) causes people to expand their definition of alternative courses of action, and (f) may challenge some stereotypes that no longer are relevant.

It should be added here that although I used it for several years, partly as a result of my training and experience as a city planner, I no longer am an advocate of the "church and community" planning model that has been the most widely used model for developing self-study guides and manuals. The "outcomes" of that planning model, which often include an excessive emphasis on real estate and/or re-creating the past and/or the fact that the private automobile has brought the demise of the walk-in geographical parish, are not compatible with my own values and goals. I strongly believe that mission and ministry, not real estate or the re-creation of yesterday, are high priorities in church planning.

At this point it may be appropriate to classify my approach, as contrasted to other approaches identified elsewhere in this book. Though I draw from these other disciplines in various ways, I would describe my own approach to parish consultations as that

⁷For a discussion of these two planning models see Lyle E. Schaller, *Effective Church Planning*, pp. 93-122.

of a "policy planner." I draw heavily from that discipline often described as "policy planning" or "policy formation" and especially from public policy theory.

A Mobilization Opportunity

Over the years I gradually have come to believe my sixth assumption, that in most cases a parish consultation can be a significant rallying point for the members. It can be an occasion for mobilizing the leaders, not only for self-examination, but also to look into the future, and it can be an exciting event. Therefore I intentionally try to design the parish consultation to be a mobilizing event. This includes a requirement for some advance preparation, including asking several leaders to identify issues and concerns. It includes the concept of discovery learning. It includes a structured interview schedule that will involve most or all of the leaders on one or more occasions. It also requires building a strong future-orientation into the questions asked.

The Dangers of Dependency

In my own efforts to comprehend reality, I have come to be a reluctant believer in the old adage "Dependency breeds hostility." This seventh operational assumption helps us to understand the attitudes of many widowed persons, of some people toward the proposed leveling-off in federal expenditures, of many Methodist lay leaders toward their denomination's ministerial appointment system, and of many subsidized congregations toward the denominational home mission staff. Perhaps it even sheds light on the attitudes toward the senior minister at Wiltshire Church in the case study. I also am convinced that the outside third-party consultant can cause the client to become excessively dependent on the consultant.

Although I have not been completely successful, I have attempted to reduce the chances for an excessive postconsultation dependency—and that brings us to the congregation-consultant relationship and another set of assumptions.

THE CONGREGATION-CONSULTANT RELATIONSHIP

There are many assumptions I carry into a parish consultation concerning my relationship with that congregation, and it may be

useful to list ten that I have repeatedly utilized.

The first, and by far the most important, is the need for an invitation. I am thoroughly convinced that the chances of an effective and productive relationship will be enhanced if the consultant has a genuine invitation to intervene. There is an ancient adage in adult education circles that applies: "You cannot teach adults anything they do not want to learn."

I seek a five-part invitation consisting of an invitation from the pastor, an invitation from the governing board or congregational planning committee, an "OK" from the denominational executive in the local judicatory, a financial commitment by the congregation that gains the attention of the leaders, and a commitment to do some advance preparation. I want an investment by that parish in the consultation!

Second, in the vast majority of churches I assume we will have to raise the level of congregational self-esteem before we can do any planning, and that is often the theme of the first few hours.

Third, my skills are not in interpersonal relationships. Therefore I do not intentionally become involved in those situations that reflect severe problems of interpersonal relationships between the minister and the members or among the members. Specifically I try to avoid those situations in which the central issue is the retention or dismissal of the pastor. I believe those require the intervention of a denominational staff person.

Fourth, I tend to be fairly directive. I assume the congregation really is not seeking a nondirective, "objective," and neutral parish consultant. I do not agree with that cliché from the 1960s that "the world sets the agenda for the church." I strongly believe the New Testament sets the agenda. I admit I bring an agenda with me.

Most important, I believe every congregation should have a selfconscious and intentional evangelistic dimension, and I try to lift that up. That is a bias I bring with me.

Fifth, I usually begin with a strong emphasis on statistical data from the congregation as the entry point in identifying other factors, rather than beginning with an examination of the community context.

Sixth, I attempt to identify the strengths, gifts, talents, values,

and goals of both the pastor and that congregation and to reinforce them and to build on them. That is my basic approach.

Seventh, I have a strong bias toward long pastorates and seek to encourage long pastorates whenever that appears possible and appropriate—and that includes four out of five consultations.

Eighth, I believe life is increasingly relational and less and less survival goal-oriented. I try to focus on the relational dimensions of parish life rather than to think entirely in functional terms—although the organizational structure of most congregations is designed to encourage an emphasis on functions rather than on relationships.

Ninth, I am inclined to believe most of what I hear in the interviews, and that this information reflects symptoms rather than basic problems or concerns. Therefore, I see myself heavily involved in a diagnostic role. Frequently my major contribution in a parish consultation has been to rewrite the agenda for that parish. This means identifying the “tradeoffs” that many leaders are reluctant to accept. For example, growth usually means change. Or, it is rare to be able to reach and serve all of the youth through a single program.

Tenth, I expect that when I leave I never will return to that congregation. Therefore I try to identify and enlist a group of allies who will feel that they are a part of the consultation and be prepared to take the initiative in the next steps to be taken. I am more concerned with providing those leaders with resources than I am in solving their problems for them. Obviously the pastor will be the chief ally in that coalition on most issues.

The Consultant's Report

I believe a written report or memorandum can be extremely useful. There are many reasons for that. One is that the written word is far more precise than the spoken word. A second is that many oral messages are received that never were sent. A third is that all of us normal people do our best thinking on the way home from the meeting. A fourth is that we all have selective memories. A fifth is that I believe one useful sequence is from symptoms to diagnosis to prescription to action. In many consultations this written report is the new agenda for the deliberations by the lead-

ers of that parish. A sixth is that I believe it is important for the denominational executive in the regional judicatory to be able to read the results. A seventh is that it often helps prevent misunderstandings if everyone receives the same messages in the same words. An eighth is that the written word usually is a more reliable reference point than the oral tradition. A ninth is that if the consultant is invited back to that same congregation, the consultant may want to review the messages left behind from the earlier visit. My standard procedure for parish consultations lasting one day or longer is to provide fifty copies of a written report that usually includes eight to fourteen pages of text. It is hard to lose fifty copies. It also is rare that all fifty will be in use on any given day. I want every person to have access to a copy of that written report. I am opposed to keeping secrets!

Typically the report consists of five sections. The first is a one-page cover letter. The second consists of three to six pages in which I attempt to summarize and interpret the advance preparations—the statistical data—to describe contemporary reality, and to ask questions about what God is calling that congregation to be and to be doing. The third section includes three to perhaps seven or eight policy questions that I have identified. The responses to that new agenda often will determine the future direction and role of that congregation. The fourth section usually consists of two to six pages of specific suggestions and recommendations. Finally, we normally bind into the final report thirty to fifty pages of essays, articles, and other material that elaborate on points raised earlier in the report.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

As was pointed out earlier, we do ask for considerable advance preparation for a parish consultation. This can be summarized in four categories.

First, I ask for a paragraph or two from the minister and from each of several lay leaders in which they identify the most urgent issues and concerns on the agenda. Why do they want an outside third-party parish consultant to intervene?

Second, I ask for considerable statistical data on membership, worship attendance patterns, finances, the age mix and the family

and marital distribution of the members, tenure of the members, and similar factual data.

Third, I ask for this to be mailed early enough so that there will be an opportunity to raise follow-up questions.

Finally, I mail to the people who are planning the consultation some suggestions for the interview schedule. In the typical two-day consultation, for example, I will (a) interview a half-dozen persons on a one-to-one basis, (b) meet with six to eight groups of two or three to seven persons in each group, (c) meet with three to seven functional committees, (d) interview one or two pastors of nearby or similar congregations, (e) spend approximately an hour with professional "outsiders" who are knowledgeable about the community in which the congregation's meeting place is located (planner or realtor or banker, etc.), (g) meet with the "core group" or "executive committee" of the planning committee or governing board on the first day, (h) meet with a larger group (total planning committee or total governing board) near the end of the second day, (i) have a group interview with as many recent new adult members as can be gathered in one group, (j) spend a half hour with the minister's spouse if available and interested, and (k) meet with two ex-members and (l) talk with whoever else is appropriate.

In the typical parish consultation I will meet with thirty-five to fifty individuals, some on two or three or four different occasions, each day that I am on the scene.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

In the typical day in a parish consultation, and the day usually runs from 8:15 in the morning until 9:30 or 10:30 at night, I try to ask several sets of questions of many of the members.

One set is used to identify resources, strengths, and assets. This includes questions such as:

"What does this congregation do best?"

"If you were to brag to a neighbor who just moved in next door about this parish, what would you brag about?"

"Can you point out one area or ministry or one program in which your congregation excels?"

"What does your pastor do best as a minister?"

“As you compare this parish with other congregations with which you are acquainted, how does this one stand out in a very positive way?”

A second set of questions is designed to evoke responses that will help me understand what the members view as contemporary reality.

“Let us assume you wanted something to happen here, a change of some sort. You had about given up on that happening, but then you heard that three or four very influential laypersons had come out strongly in favor of that change. When you heard that, you knew the change you wanted would be implemented. What are the names of the members here who have that kind of influence?”

“Let us assume that a change was being proposed that you opposed, but you assumed it would happen despite your opposition. One day you discovered two members had come out strongly against that change. Now you were relieved, because you were reasonably sure that if they opposed it, the change would not occur. What are the names of those two members who have that kind of influence?”

“What do you see as the most urgent issues facing this congregation today? What do you believe God is calling this congregation to be today?”

“What is your understanding of why this congregation brought me here?”

“What do you believe to be the area of ministry or program that is being neglected today?”

“What is the identity or community image of this congregation that distinguishes it from other churches in town?”

A third set of questions concerns the future:

“Everyone has a favorite wish for their church. What is your number one wish for this congregation?”

“How will this congregation be different in 1990 from what it is today? What changes will the passage of five (ten) years bring?”

“Is the Lord calling this parish to a new role in the years ahead?”

“Do you see a fork in the road approaching, so that if this

congregation takes one fork, the future will be different than if the other fork were to be chosen?"

In addition, I ask people when they joined, why they joined, how the congregation of today differs from when they were new members, how far it is from the meeting place to their place of residence, whether or not they have changed their place of residence since they joined, how family members have responded to this congregation's program, and other questions suited to each individual's identity.

When meeting with program committee members, officers, and other leaders, I also focus on the program area that is within that person's area of responsibility and inquire about the details of that program, projections into the future, and related matters.

When meeting with the pastor, and I usually am able to have an hour with the pastor early in the consultation, I ask a series of questions about that minister's background, previous experience, year of birth, family constellation, and expectations on tenure in this parish. In addition, I ask questions designed to secure an understanding of that pastor's vision of the future for this parish and of how that vision informs that minister's work and shapes the policies that direct congregational life.

I also ask the minister, "What do you do best as a pastor? What does this parish do best in ministry?" If it is a multiple-staff church, I ask each program staff member to identify the strengths of other staff members.

A very important part of that hour is devoted to clarifying in my mind the expectations of that pastor for this parish consultation: "What is your agenda? What do you want to be sure we cover? What are the issues you want to be sure we address?"

If the pastor's spouse is available and interested, I also want a half hour to learn what I can from that person's unique perspective. This can be very valuable!

If the consultation is for a day or longer, I usually am able to arrange a 45- to 60-minute interview with one or more pastors of other congregations (preferably on their own turf). In this interview most of my questions are directed at three general subjects:

"How is your ministry here in this community different from where you were before?"

"Tell me about your parish."

"Tell me what you can about the congregation that has brought me in as a consultant."

Usually I will have several follow-up questions to ask on each response, depending on the content of the response.

These are only examples of a few of the questions I ask in a parish consultation, but they do suggest the flavor, the bias, and the nature of the diagnostic process from my perspective.

SUGGESTIONS FOR RELATED READING

These ten volumes have had a profound impact on my thinking and have influenced my approach to parish consultations. I would especially commend the books by Barker, Bender, Greenleaf, and Levitt to anyone who serves as a parish consultant.

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