

VIGNETTES OF CONGREGATIONAL PERSONALITIES

There is nothing quite like real situations to emphasize a point. The following vignettes are from my experience of both serving in and consulting with congregations. The unique stories of congregational life give a first clue of the differing personalities of congregations. In its stories and in its corporate life each congregation displays its own unique personality. Clues to each congregation's personality are quite evident to one willing to listen and to observe with healthy emotional objectivity and personal detachment. These true-life stories can create a safe way for others to begin to critically, and gracefully, understand their community of faith. Understanding can become the catalyst for healing, which is essential to move forward in mission.

The intent for sharing these vignettes is to begin to open the consciousness to a realm of considering the presence and power of corporate personalities and how they might be systematically identified. A congregation's corporate personality is the collective manner of functioning by the congregation in ways easily comparable to personalities of individuals. The extent of the corporate personality will become clearer as one works through this book. Hopefully, reading the vignettes will trigger memories of congregational behavior and life, helping you to begin to identify the unique personality of each congregation with which you have associated. May this entire work serve to challenge, inform, and create some "Space for Grace."

VIGNETTE: SERVING OTHERS

The governing board invited me to a special meeting. I was scheduled to report on the progress of the research being conducted on the congregation's corporate personality type. This moderate sized congregation of about two hundred was located in the midst of an urban area. Some would classify it as middle or upper middle class. On the scheduled night the sanctuary and offices were dark as I parked my car on the side street next to the church at the appointed hour. As I approached the fellowship hall, I noticed through the windows, the many lights glowing both up stairs and down. On entering the hall, which one does at split-level, my natural inclination was to go up the stairs. I only climbed a stair or two when the conversation coming from this nicer main hall upstairs informed me a large 12-step program was using it. From previous visits to these facilities, I remembered the small multi-use room downstairs and headed in its direction. A different type of 12-step group occupied this room. I turned to the right, my last available option, and started down the hallway. My pace slowed as my confusion increased. Fortunately it was then that the congregation President met me and indicated she would lead me to the meeting. The President continued down the dimly lit hall. The next classroom on the right was dark and the shadows revealed how it was functioning more for storage than for teaching. We were running out of options as we came to the end of the hall. "This is where we are meeting," she declared as we entered the last room on the left.

The room was, in more ways than one, the last room. It was small and narrow. The eight-foot table filled the available depth of the room and the chairs on either side, pulled away from the table for use, filled the breadth. Council members seemed unfazed by having to move their chairs closer to the table so other members could squeeze by to get around to the other side. Pieces of used furniture, including several over-stuffed chairs, were stored across the width at the far end of the narrow room. I recognized these chairs as it-might-be-too-good-to-discard-and-besides-the-church-could-find-someone-who-needs-it furniture, which members had donated to the church. One council member climbed over one of the old overstuffed chairs to get to his seat for the meeting. The next member simply used one of the overstuffed chairs as his seat.

I was directed to the head of the table, just to the right, inside the door as the last of the committee members were assembling. There was, at most, 20 to 24 inches of clearance from the end of the table to the front wall. This was the allowed space in which I was to operate as I gave my presentation. It was a tight squeeze at best. At first, this position afforded me some security in this strange setting; I was the closest to the door. Soon a different feeling came over me. Since there was not enough room to set up my small easel my chair had to hold the white board I used during my presentations. Because I am right handed, I work better from the right side of the board, now blocking my own exit. Now I felt trapped.

During our time together, it became obvious to me this council was not concerned in the least about the meeting room. It was as if they were pleased to be

able to have a place to gather. They appeared much more interested in being accommodating to groups that needed a place than in their own comfort or in trying to impress any guest. Indeed, their sense of grace with themselves and their facilities was very disarming and I relaxed quite quickly.

One of the stories they told me was of the church painting fund. They had been collecting money to paint the church. While they were yet a couple hundred dollars short they were getting closer to their goal. A single mother came to the church needing assistance with deposit money in order to rent an apartment. So, the Council had approved lending the person the money out of the painting fund. This immediate human need easily took precedent over the physical needs of the buildings. I soon realized this action was indicative of the congregation. It is the way they engage in service and mission. This congregation has its own values and ways of honoring its spirituality, its relationship with God and others. It has its own unique personality.

VIGNETTE: KEEPERS OF TRADITION

In a small city in the midst of an agricultural area was a congregation of about 450 members. By contrast, this governing board met in a room of ample size with tables in neat rows; everything had a place and everything was in its place. The retreat for this governing board was nearing a point on Saturday afternoon when the group would take a break. In the last exercise of the session the members had just identified the congregation as exhibiting qualities and tendencies of being

overtly traditional and committed to the letter of the law. During our break I had a revealing conversation with the Chair of the Board confirming their observation and self-image.

Rules and tradition go together. It is easy for tradition to become the framework of rules, rather than the rules being the support for the tradition upholding the tradition's function to be alive with meaning. In congregations where the tradition is the framework of rules, new programs often meet with resistance because, "We've never done it that way before."

Since I had not seen the sanctuary, the Chair offered to give me the tour. As we walked to the front of the sanctuary, he gave me a brief history. He turned and started back down the center aisle; our break time was about over. I stopped to look around and asked him to tell me about worship. He responded with no preamble, "Well, it's OK. But, you know, the one thing we don't like is when the Pastor comes out on Sunday morning and announces a change in the service from what's printed in the bulletin."

"And if the Pastor, for example, announces a change in the worship service...?" I started to inquire.

"If the Pastor announces the congregation will be singing all the verses of the sermon hymn today instead of just the three scheduled in the bulletin, it bothers the congregation. Yes, they get visibly upset," the Chair of the Board assured me in a matter-of-fact tone, indicating his personal expectation and judgment of any problem being obviously the pastor's fault.

The values of these two congregations are quite different. This congregation, too, has its own unique personality expressed through conscious attempts to function in the “right” way.

VIGNETTE: CREATIVITY

____ This third vignette of congregational life stands in stark contrast to the previous examples. This comes from a congregation of about 100 members. It is a personal experience and is one of the initiating moments of this research and work, this road I now journey. I had been in ministry with this community for about three years. A number of congregational members were gathered for an informal social evening at one member’s home. The conversation of a few people with whom I was talking soon centered on the first years of my ministry with the congregation. The changes taking place, as well as plans for future facility improvements, were highlighted. Then, an adult member, who had joined the congregation at least 12 years prior my arrival, observed rather proudly with a touch of confidence, “Yes, and we all knew things would be different from your very first Sunday with us.”

“My first Sunday?” I questioned, “What did I do to give you that idea?” Before anyone could answer, I, myself, responded with a defensive litany. I recalled how I had tried not to do anything different. “I tried not to change anything.” My mind was racing as I reflected on my initial time with the congregation. At the same time it seemed another part of my brain was recalling, and my words informing them, of the wisdom of Lyle Schaller. I shared with her the suggestion for successfully

entering into congregational my mind attributed to him that new pastors study the congregation for six months to a year to learn why they do the things they do before initiating reforms. “I tried to follow Schaller’s advice! So what did I do in the first worship signaling things were going to change?” I puzzled. “I thought I was doing things the way Pastor Joel did?”

“It was the way you served Communion,” she replied.

“Communion? What was so different with the way I conducted Communion?” My mind flashed to Communion. I observed the sacrament in a rather traditional and orthodox manner. I followed the outline in the bulletins he used and went by the same book. Since my practice was noted as a change, the logical question was how my predecessor had conducted the liturgy? Knowing what I knew of the founding pastor of the congregation, my predecessor, I judged he would probably be at least as traditional as I. I was confused and concerned about what I might have done that was such a departure as to cause at least one member of the congregation to see in it a holy sign that things would be different.

The member calmly pointed out, “Pastor Joel always served communion from the left to the right and you serve communion from the right to the left.”

There was no judgment in her voice. There was no concern of either my predecessor or I being right or wrong. There was only hope for newness and change and nodding agreement from the others present. Serving Holy Communion in the opposite direction was nothing to be judged; rather it was a holy sign; worship and

congregational life would have a welcomed newness, a difference, variety or changeability. This congregation, too, was displaying its unique personality.

VIGNETTE: THE RIGHT WAY

A pastor shared a story centering on the congregation's response to his senior colleague's announced leaving. The senior pastor was a man of vision. He had a gift for seeing what was needed and for designing new programs to meet those needs. While at this congregation he developed a strong stewardship program which was creative, very systematic and an extreme change from the usual method the congregation used to receive annual pledges of financial support. He provided more than the ideas. His energy was the motivating force behind the development, and implementation of this program. He envisioned stewardship education as a year-round program with lifelong learning, which focused on understanding all of creation as blessing and gift. The programs he developed were in contrast to the once-a-year stewardship drive where people were asked to pledge time, talents and financial support — the program which people seemed to resent as “The church just asking for our money again.”

The senior pastor's efforts, creative insights and success with stewardship in this congregation did not go unnoticed. In time, he was asked by the judicatory to take a new position helping other congregations develop stewardship education programs. The current pastor reported the action taken at the very first meeting of the leadership board after the senior pastor announced he would be accepting this

new position. The board voted to abandon the programs the senior pastor had initiated. Before he was even out the door, literally, they voted to revert to doing stewardship the way they had before his tenure and these new programs he initiated. Was this about keeping tradition, or was this action a statement of power and control, or a response to being wounded by one who did not consider them?

REVEALING PERSONALITY

In vignettes like these we see glimpses of the corporate personality type of congregations. One congregation responds to an issue or situation in one way and another reacts in a manner 180 degrees opposite. In principle their responses are neither right nor wrong. There are merely different ways of addressing issues, different values, different spiritual postures, and different patterns of behavior. These patterns, however, are discernible and can be described as personality types.

Which of these congregations displayed attributes with which you would have enjoyed working? Which ones would you find to be a challenge? In these vignettes, which behavioral characteristics would you identify as being similar to those of the congregation with which you are now associated? How might you describe the personality of your congregation? What story captures the essence of the congregation's corporate personality? What health benefits might you envision for yourself and your working relationship with the congregation through developing a deeper understanding of the corporate personality of the congregation?