



American Baptist Churches USA

Church Renewal & Organizational Development



rEmc-TOPICS

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Book Review



Cracking Your Congregation’s Code: Mapping Your Spiritual DNA to Create Your Future

By Richard Southern & Robert Norton: Jossey-Bass (A Wiley Company) 2001
Reviewed by Wayne Paulsen

Congregations have often used planning processes to aid in providing a direction for the future during times of facility expansion or relocation. Usually those planning processes have focused on raising necessary funds for facility construction and on developing program opportunities made possible by these new facilities. What is relatively new in congregational life is the process of intentional planning for a future that is not centered on facility expansion or relocation. Rather, the focus is often centered on issues of health and vitality in a stagnant or declining setting. Revitalization is a much-needed emphasis in many congregations faced with membership decline, under-utilized facilities, and a “business-as-usual” mindset that is no longer working well.

Southern and Norton have developed a practical and thoughtful plan for helping a congregation face its future based upon its unique values, its purpose or mission, and its discerning sense of the Lord's desire for the future. This plan has been field-tested in mainline congregations located in a variety of settings and has provided a helpful process in "turning around" communities of faith toward lives of health, vitality, and renewed purpose.

The authors provide practical help in enabling a congregation to assess its WelNES systems—welcoming, nurturing, empowering, and serving—and developing changes necessary to strengthen these systems as effective tools in growing a healthy, vital, and effective congregational ministry. The book provides an eight-step process that will enable a congregation to create a map for strategically and faithfully meeting its future.

I have used this book with leadership teams from several congregations over the past two years and have found it to be a helpful tool in enabling a congregation's planning. Just as no congregation is an exact duplicate of another congregation, this planning process uses both common and unique qualities of congregational life to help create a plan to address the special "calling" of each body of faith. Southern and Norton have provided a practical guide for congregational leaders to actually do strategic planning that will produce results as that process is coupled with faith and perseverance.

Leadership teams that have found this process to be most helpful have provided copies of this book for each team member. With prayerful discernment, these leadership teams have found it exciting to move through the steps of creating a map for their future. They have discovered that this is a process that takes time, that does not always develop quickly, and that requires determined effort.

I highly recommend this book as a helpful resource for congregations serious about moving ahead toward greater health and vitality.

Conference Review



Training on Missional Church Planning

(Center for Parish Development)

Reviewed by Marcia Patton

I knew that I needed to pay attention to continuing education needs and I knew that I needed to know more about missional church and what it was we were calling the church to change toward. That's why I signed up for the workshop of the Center for Parish Development this past August. I'll admit that at first (pre-conference materials) I was not sure I'd made the right decision. But I returned home from the 4 ½ day conference with a collection of materials that I know will be used.

I found the Center's materials to be biblically based as they believe in a Bible Study based change process and provide resources for it. Granted the resources probably need "tweaking" for American Baptist Churches but at least you don't have to create them from the ground up.

I was also impressed with the work of the last stage of their process (often given a passing mention), "Embedding a Missional Church Agenda". One tool that aided this was their chart of "classes of organizational change" from tuning to adapting to re-orienting to re-creating. With each change the intensity of the stress increases and the complexity of the management increases. This makes a difference in what the pastors and leaders of the church need to do to aid the church in accepting and truly adopting the changes. It also makes a difference in how and why churches would slip back to old ways or resist the

change altogether. To embed a re-orienting change takes more effort, time and ultimately will also, of course, create more conflict.

As a result of this conference I have more tools to help me work with churches as they seek to transform into missional churches.

Resource Review



Natural Church Development

Reviewed by Don Rasmussen

In my eight years consulting with churches as an executive/area minister, I am often impressed with their commitment to the future and desire to see improvement. But the leaders in a congregation have differing views of what the church needs to do in order to move forward. One might say, "We need a youth director", another, "we need someone to minister more fully to our elders", a third might say, "our parking lot is too small, if only we had..." If only there was a way to help them know, not guess at where they needed to work!

So my ears perked up when I heard Mike Williams talking about this new assessment tool called Natural Church Development. It sounded interesting, but got filed someplace, until National Ministries held a training in NCD in March 2002. I attended and became convinced that NCD was one of the tools I had been seeking.

Christian Schwarz, founder of the NCD Institute in Germany, had noted the differences in churches he attended when his father did supply preaching. Some were lively and welcoming; others were places to which he'd just as soon not return. So he came up with a list of eight quality characteristics of healthy, well-balanced churches.

Based on a sampling of 1000 churches, norms were developed for the 90 question inventory to be used with 30 church leaders to graph how the church stands on each of eight quality characteristics. The characteristics have to do with worship, gifts, leadership, structure, relationships, etc.

Knowing their weakness, the church then goes to work for 8 - 12 months to strengthen that area. The inventory then should be used again to track improvement.

Thus far 16 ABCORI churches have used the survey and they all now know their minimum factor. Some are using the info with more intentionality than others, but one church in Providence that discovered their minimum factor was small groups used the "40 Days of Purpose" program with great success. They intend to use the survey again soon and they're certain that small groups will no longer be their minimum factor.

It stands to reason I suppose that if you work on anything you're bound to show some improvement, and that may be one of the indisputable values of this tool. The website (www.NCD-international.org) claims an 85% improvement rate with churches using the survey more than once. The concept also proposes that churches that grow in health will grow in attendance. The NCD Institute tracks this by asking for attendance statistics on the pastor's survey form.

Running alongside the eight quality characteristics are what Christian Schwartz calls "biotic" principles, a set of mental habits that should be held in mind. These principles will produce faster growth when they're present.

In my view the process can get analytical, complicated and cumbersome, but it doesn't need to. Just helping a church know that this is a means of empirically learning where a church needs to put its effort is a great help. It's up to the church how seriously they take the data. One church that used the survey five years ago learned that their minimum factor was functional structures but they're still operating with the same boards

and committees. Just using the survey is not enough, but it seems to be so for churches that perhaps want to deny their own reality.

Related Statistics – Trends in America



When worshipers were asked, “Does this congregation have a clear vision, goals, or direction for its ministry and mission?” they responded

1. I am not aware of such a vision, goals, or direction.....19%
2. There are ideas but no clear vision, goals, or direction.....10%
3. Yes, but I am not committed to them.....12%
4. Yes, but I am only partly committed to them.....28%
5. Yes, and I am strongly committed to them.....31%

{Source - The International Congregational Life Survey (includes 12,000 congregations and 1.2 million worshipers, May of 2001)}

During the past ten years of research as presented to the Religious Research Association, the following ten factors consistently correlate (as lead or causal indicators) with measures of congregational health and vitality (as lag or dependent variables)

1. Spiritual Growth
2. Meaningful Worship
3. Participation in the congregation
4. Sense of belonging
5. Care for young people
6. Focus on the community
7. Sharing faith with others
8. Welcoming new worshipers
9. Empowering leadership
10. Focused on the future

For Further Study



Congregational Assessment Resources (Demographic Tools)

- Claritas-www.connect.claritas.com (Demographic data & PRIZM lifestyle segmentation reports)
- Percept-www.perceptnet.com (Demographic data & religious preferences reports)
- Census Bureau-www.census.gov (see TIGER mapping service)



Congregational Assessment Resources (Benchmark Tools)

- Natural Church Development (800-253-4276)
- Faith Communities Today (860-509-9543)
- Twelve Keys to an Effective Church (Book by Kennon Callahan)
- The Complete Ministry Audit & Facing Reality (Easum & Bandy)



Consulting Agencies

- Center for Parrish Development (<http://www.missionalchurch.org>)
- The Alban Institute (www.alban.org)