

# GETTING THE HELP YOU DESERVE

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

## AN OVERVIEW

Your congregation is in the midst of new challenges and opportunities all the time. After all, your congregation is made up of dynamic people, ideas, beliefs and so much more. Each season brings new possibilities.

To take advantage of new possibilities, your congregation may need additional help or opportunities to learn about your situation. Thankfully, there is an abundance of help and information available to congregations, and the Center for Congregations can help you get connected. The first step is for you to determine what kind of help your congregation needs.

Here are four lessons I have observed that help congregations get the support they need and deserve.

**Lesson 1:** You are more likely to receive helpful guidance if you accurately describe your challenge. There are many ways a book or a consultant can help you. However, guidance you receive is often most productive when you gain clarity about exactly what your challenge is. You will know you have gained this clarity when you are able to describe the challenge in a sentence or two.

**Lesson 2:** You will benefit from determining whether you need training or education. Training involves teaching someone how to do something that has been taught many times before; like learning how to use worship software. Education involves drawing something new out of you and your colleagues. If your challenge is starting a new worship site and you've never done that before, a simple "how to" book is going to be enough.

**Lesson 3:** The help you seek needs to honor the particularities of your situation. The best help, in whatever form, honors that which is unique about your congregation. There is no other congregation just like yours. The best help allows you to make the best use of that which is particular and special about your faith community.



**Lesson 4:** The most valuable help will focus on changing behavior. Ultimately, taking on something new requires new duties, new actions, and a different way of doing something. It involves thinking and feeling, yes; yet the most powerful help is focused on behavior.

May your new endeavors go well and may you find the help you deserve to make your congregation the best faith community it can be.

*For more information, continue reading this article, which describes the above information in depth. The Center for Congregations also offers education events, free resource consulting and grant initiatives. To learn more, visit our website: [www.centerforcongregations.org/page/what-we-do](http://www.centerforcongregations.org/page/what-we-do).*



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**CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS** have the best chance of solving difficult problems when outside help is used in concert with the congregation's own creativity.

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**W**hat is the most difficult problem your congregation faces? This challenge is probably difficult to talk about. Or maybe it is too easy to discuss, and nothing has been done. It is likely that leaders in your congregation have tried to fix the problem, but the fix hasn't worked and the challenge lingers. In congregations, as in life, there are some problems that just don't go away.

Congregations need help. Congregational leaders need assistance. No one has all the knowledge needed to lead a congregation through every challenge.

Congregations face many kinds of tests. Some are mundane. The roof leaks. The parking lot needs repaving. The microphones don't work well. Some tests are transcendent. How should lives be honored? What is God calling the congregation to do and be? How can generosity be taught? Just as you and I as individuals sometimes face situations for which we are not prepared, your congregational leaders face challenges that are just beyond the grasp of their abilities.

A congregation begins an arts ministry. The congregation has many artists, talented creators of music, paintings and pottery. Yet, the congregation has never had a structured arts ministry. The board sends representatives to three other congregations to learn the particulars of beginning a creative arts program. The board members return from their learning expeditions with new ideas, new questions and two distinct next steps. If they had not sought help, they could still be talking about an arts ministry rather than taking steps to do something.

This need for assistance is not because of an inherent lack on the part of the congregation or some shameful deficiency in the people who lead congregations. Indeed, it may be exactly the opposite. In sports, top performers often have more coaches, trainers, advisors, consultants and managers than the average performers.

Olympic champions have several coaches. The greater your congregation's capacity to act, the more you are likely to take on difficult challenges. The more difficult the challenge or demand, the more inevitable it is that you may need help. In truth, not seeking help is a sign of ineffective leadership.

Organizations such as the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, continuing education offices of seminaries, clergy peer groups and various forms of congregational consulting and coaching were all established with the understanding that congregations face demands that exceed their capacities. Any clergy person who has received good advice from a consultant or has been inspired by a powerful passage in a book knows the redemptive power of receiving help.

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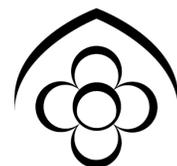
**CONGREGATIONS THAT EFFECTIVELY** reach their goals succinctly express their purposes, often in one sentence.

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### **THE ART OF RECEIVING HELP**

Congregational leaders have the best chance of solving difficult problems when outside help is used in concert with the congregation's own creativity.

The outside resource might be another congregation that has addressed a similar challenge, or it might be a book about the task at hand. The outside resource might be a coach, a consultant or a website – any resource that encourages the leaders to think more accurately and move the group from private opinions to a more comprehensive appraisal of the situation.





What are some of the toughest challenges your congregation faces? This question is asked to a group of clergy. The answers represent many realms of congregational life. One congregation was the victim of fraud by one of its members. “We lost \$250,000. More than that, we lost trust,” leaders reported. Another person says, “Last summer, we experienced four deaths in one week, including the death of a baby and the death of our oldest member. I know we are still grieving.”

A story is told. “When I arrived at the congregation I serve, I learned that the senior pastor was suffering from a mental illness. I was told in no uncertain terms that it was my responsibility to get him help. I was 26 years old and just out of seminary. I told this to a pastoral counselor and the counselor’s response was that I was just buying into the congregation’s anxiety. This remark wasn’t particularly helpful.”

Receiving help for challenges is a craft. It is a faith practice as important as offering help. There are common pitfalls of accepting help. Restrain the sense of inadequacy because you have asked for help. Avoid help that is not wanted. Sidestep assistance that provides too much of what is needed. You can pass up prescribed solutions that do not fit the energy, capacity or commitment of your congregation. If you want your congregation to be less overwhelmed by the demands placed upon it and be more capable at making a difference in this world, it is important to learn how to receive just enough help at the right time and in the right way.

What are characteristics of enough help at the right time and in the right way? Seek help that changes you as a person. The help should allow your congregation to learn new ways to live together. Find help that leaves

you with greater capacity to take new risks. As a recipient of help, you will want to find helpers that fit your context and extend your capacity at least one increment from its current state.

How does one measure one increment? Help that you receive should move you to take an action step for the good of the congregation that you otherwise wouldn’t have taken.

#### FOUR LESSONS

How can you and the congregation you serve receive the help you deserve concerning your most pressing problems? After observing congregations address challenges the last 12 years, I’ve witnessed four lessons related to the effectiveness of receiving help. The four lessons involve gaining clarity about the challenge, discerning whether training or education is needed, finding contextually appropriate help, and having a bias for help that leads to action rather than simply more reflection. What follows is a brief review of these four lessons.

**Lesson 1:** You are more likely to receive helpful guidance if you accurately describe the challenge for which you seek help. Congregations that effectively reach their goals succinctly express their purposes, often in one sentence. The succinct statement might change over time. After all, directions shift. Complexity gives





way to clarity. Paying attention to the heart of the problem and being able to talk about it clearly contributes to success. Sometimes you only need a simple prompt to get clear about the problem. Having a format for which to describe the challenge provides a tool for achieving clarity. The simpler, the better: Our congregation seeks to X in order to Y.

Sometimes describing the challenge accurately requires reframing your interpretation of the situation. One clergy person kept saying to her coach, “I don’t understand why the board isn’t willing to increase the budget for youth ministry.” The coach finally replied, “When you say you don’t understand, could it mean that you just don’t like it?” Realizing the difference between not understanding and not liking led the pastor to spend less time struggling against the opposition and more time articulating clearly her vision for youth ministry. The best helping resources are the ones that help congregational leaders speak clearly about the challenge or opportunity. Achieving clarity includes the process of wondering if there is another interpretation of the situation.

**Lesson 2:** You will benefit from determining whether the challenge merits training or education. Thanks to educator Robert Kegan, author of *In Over Our Heads*, I note that training is an informational stance. It leaves the human form essentially the same. Education is different. It changes the human form. The word education is built out of the Latin verb that means “to lead.” Education leads us from one construction of life to another. This is a transformational experience.

When you made decisions in the past about how to make the best use of outside help, you may not have consciously discerned whether you needed training or education. Yet, intuitively you may have known the right match. Discovering how to use new



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congregational management software requires training. So does constructing a different kind of meeting agenda for a lively exchange of ideas. You learn these things by receiving information. The result is operational improvement. You are improving what you already knew how to do.

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LOOK FOR HELPERS that do more than concentrate on how you feel. Look for helpers that aid you in discerning the relationship between your thinking and your actions.

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Don't confuse help that leads to information with help that is designed for transformation. The latter changes something essential in both you as a leader and in the construct of the congregation. Theologically, such experience is in the land of epiphany, transfiguration and even resurrection. Sometimes education involves disappointment. However, such education helps you become an active agent regarding your congregation's future. The change isn't external, like changing software. The change is within you as a leader. You will notice an internal shift in how you see your congregation in relationship to the wider world.

Sometimes revelations come from those other than the designated authorities and experts. The personnel committee tells a pastor he needs to be more transparent with members. He is open to this counsel. Busy lifestyles leave congregants with a sense of isolation even as they worship God together and pray for one another in small groups. If the clergy person is more open with people, maybe the congregation will follow. He attends a three-day workshop on becoming a more vulnerable leader.

In a break-out session, he shares, "It hasn't worked well for me. Recently I shared with several members that my wife and I were working through a difficult stretch by seeing a therapist. Every time I share this, I get a look as if I'm stranger than John the Baptist. Here I think I'm being vulnerable. Instead, people respond as if I am odd."

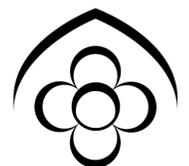
The workshop facilitator began, right in that moment, training the pastor how to share even more openly. The leader displayed a chart on how to use different variations of "I messages."

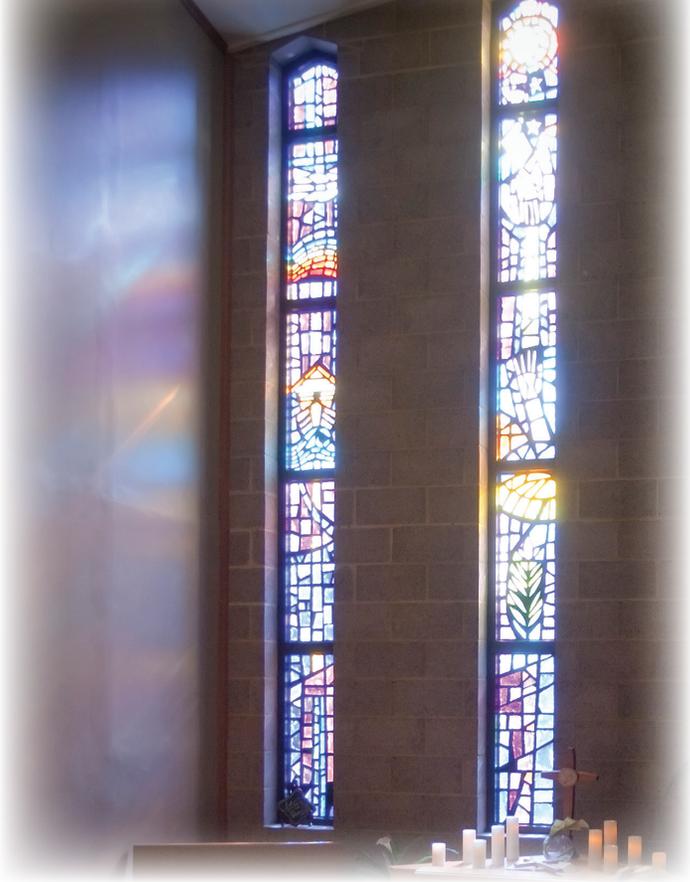
Another person in the group interrupts and asks a question that changes how the pastor views relationships in the congregation. She asks "Do you want to be everyone's friend, or do you want to feel close to people?"

"It was then I realized," the pastor says, "I didn't need training on delivering 'I messages.' I needed a shift in thinking [education]. And, yes, I prefer to feel close to people, because it is emotionally impossible to be everyone's friend. It is amazing how close I feel to a parishioner talking about favorite songs rather than my marital challenges."

The pastor thought he was attending a training on communicating transparency and discovered the benefits of education in managing relationship boundaries. Learning how to manage the difference between being everyone's friend and feeling close to another was a change in form for this pastor. It was sign of receiving something stronger than training. What he received was a new view of his relationship to the challenge.

Look for help that is matched to the type of learning needed. Do you need training? Or do you need education? Both require help and both can be beneficial. There is a difference in what to expect from each. Knowing the difference can lead to welcome epiphanies.





**Lesson 3:** The help you seek needs to honor the particularities of your situation. Several years ago, there was a resource available to congregations that was noted as a best practice and recognized as a best seller. Thousands of copies were purchased to share with governing boards across the United States. The Indianapolis Center for Congregations collected narratives on the impact that this book had on congregations. We found that while many people read the information, almost no congregations had applied any of its assertions. The resource wasn't translatable. The help offered was, at best, inspirational.

The notion of best practices is a misnomer. There may be such a thing as a best practice for a particular situation. Yet, a best practice is rarely translatable to another context without significant adaptations. Because of the particularities of any single congregation, transferring help from one setting to another has limited value. The best resources help you think more clearly about your own situation and are adaptable to a variety of other contexts. Be wary of the expectation that solutions that worked elsewhere will work for you too.

**Lesson 4:** The most effective help you receive as a congregational leader is help that is focused on changing behavior. A problem isn't solved unless there is a conversion experience related to conduct. Talk is helpful, yet the efficacy of conversation is self-limiting over time. If the problem requires education, not just training, or if the challenge requires a contextual adaptation — not just borrowing a best practice — then your attention needs to be drawn sooner rather than later to behavior change. This can be as simple or as complicated as not responding as you typically do in challenging situations.

Look for helpers that do more than concentrate on how you feel. Look for helpers that know how to move you and your congregation from dwelling on how the community has acted in the past. Look for helpers that aid

you in discerning the relationship between your thinking and your actions. Change your thinking, and you are more likely to change your behavior. Paul's ancient wisdom in Romans 12:2 holds: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the activity of God — what is good and acceptable and whole."

The best way to stay conformed, that is, to keep things the way they are, is to focus exclusively on talking about problems rather than thinking through actionable solutions. Seek help that will change behavior. The best help provides specific advice related to strategic acting as much as strategic thinking. This may involve something as specific as learning the right time to say the right word in the right way.

Help for congregations is often too general. Too often it consists of truisms. Be more collaborative. Begin with the end in mind. Strive for transparency. Such non-specific axioms have the effect of telling your congregation to love their neighbors. Love your neighbor. How can one disagree with that? Yet, loving one's neighbor when his dog is barking at 3 a.m. is an irritant that demands a concrete action plan. Seek help that is at least equally focused on strategic acting and strategic thinking.

## A WORLD OF HELP

The most effective support for your congregation will help you clarify your challenge, differentiate between training and educational interventions, focus on your context and help you improve behaviors.

There is a world of help available to congregations. In fact, there is more help available than ever before. The abundance of help is both good news and bad news. The bad news: not all the help is useful, so be discerning. The good news: there are lessons you can apply to be sure the assistance you receive is effective.

## DECIDE ON ACTION

Share this article with your board. Consider the most difficult challenge your congregation is facing. Lead the group to define this challenge clearly. Avoid generalities. Be specific in defining your challenge. To address the problem you've identified, determine whether you need training, education or a combination of both.

Brainstorm a list of outside resources that you will use. If you don't know where to start with outside resources, call the Center for Congregations or visit the Congregational Resource Guide at [www.thecrg.org](http://www.thecrg.org). As you identify and use resources, be sure you adapt them to your situation. Don't let the seduction of a best practice keep you less engaged. Decide on two or three specific actions steps you can take as a result of what you have learned from these resources.

The action of seeking help is an educational experience. Your congregation has challenges. It is your calling to address them, as steward and learner-in-chief of your particular faith community. You and your congregation deserve good help and the best opportunity to address the challenges that are part of living a meaningful life together.

## RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

For resources on this subject, check out the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG) at <http://thecrg.org/>. Suggested CRG search terms: consultants, coaches, facilitator, clergy care.

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**Getting the Help You Deserve** is part of the Compass for Congregations series. It is intended to provide information and ideas about congregational learning. We hope you find this helpful in your work as a congregation.

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Photography by Chris Minnick

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