

# APPLYING POSITIVE DEVIANCE

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

## THE ESSENTIAL IS INVISIBLE

What if there was a way to solve your congregation's most pressing problem? What if an approach exists that will solve something that was intractable, unmovable, resistant to all your efforts? Would you be interested? Or would you be hesitant, possibly suspicious?

There is an approach that can help you solve an arduous challenge, and the solution already exists in your community.

This approach has been used in many spheres of life, including nutrition, health care and education. Yet it hasn't been translated to spiritual life or the flourishing of congregations. This document will introduce you to the untapped approach called positive deviance.

## POSITIVE DEVIANCE

Positive deviance is an approach available to communities that seek to solve obstinate challenges. It is based on the assumption that the solution to intractable problems already exists in the community. However, the solution is hidden. As the fox says in Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, "What is essential is invisible to the eye." The positive deviance approach is designed to make the hidden solution apparent. Positive deviance is predicated on the claim that what your congregation needs already exists among you.

Positive deviance is a positive change approach. Tools associated with Appreciative Inquiry, Asset Mapping, World Café and other such approaches can also be used to augment the positive deviance learning experience. Like these other approaches, positive deviance leverages the strengths of the community.

The positive deviance approach works because within every community there are inevitably a few people who defy the present reality experienced by the majority. These people are positive deviants. Or, as I heard in one group, they are positive defiants. Author Malcolm



Gladwell might call such people "outliers." Indeed, he begins his book by that title with an epigraph which is a definition of the word outlier: "a statistical observation that is markedly different in value from the others in the sample (Gladwell, 2011, p. 3).

Among people facing any particular challenge there are at least a few in the same circumstances whose unique behaviors lead them to function more effectively than others with similar resources and conditions. The positive deviance approach reveals those with the positive behaviors. Participation in the approach leads others to choose, or not choose, to adapt the positive behaviors to their own circumstances.

Scripturally speaking, think of Moses as a positive deviant. Was Ruth a positive deviant? As a widow, she managed to ultimately flourish in a setting where so many others in her state struggled. What would it mean to think of Jesus of Nazareth as a positive deviant? After all, he had solutions that were hereto-



---

IN THE POSITIVE DEVIANCE APPROACH, behavior changes happen first. The behavior changes are then followed by changes in thinking and affect.

---

fore invisible to both the peasant community and the powers that be.

Certain interpretations of Jesus' parables are similar to the positive deviance approach. In this interpretational stream, the parables are representations of everyday life with something askew. That which is askew is often embodied grace or justice represented by a character doing something outside the norm. The "good" Samaritan is such a representation. For Jesus' audience there wasn't such a thing as a "good" Samaritan. Yet, it was the Samaritan who helped the injured traveler out of the ditch. Indeed, the traveler would have been the character in the parable Jesus' original audience would have most likely identified with. The deviant ends up being the rescuer. Recognizing that which is askew as a gift requires a change in perspective, if not behavior, of the listener. It involves an unveiling of something previously hidden.

### ITS OWN SOLUTION

The positive deviance approach asserts that every difficult problem has its own solution. That is, the solution is contained within the dilemma itself. Or, put another way, the solution is contained within the very community that is experiencing the problem. The solution for any intractable problem is particular to the specific context. When the solution comes from the community and not from an outside source, motivation and compliance to try that solution is much higher.

How is positive deviant behavior different from a best practice? A best practice is often described as a widely used standard or generally accepted method. There isn't anything inherently wrong with transferring a best practice to a new situation. But when the challenge is very difficult, the solution is more effective when it is highly contextualized and comes from within the community.

The positive deviance approach includes defining the problem, seeking those within the community that are the positive deviants, sharing with others the particular successful behaviors of the outliers, and then encouraging others in the community to take on these new behaviors.

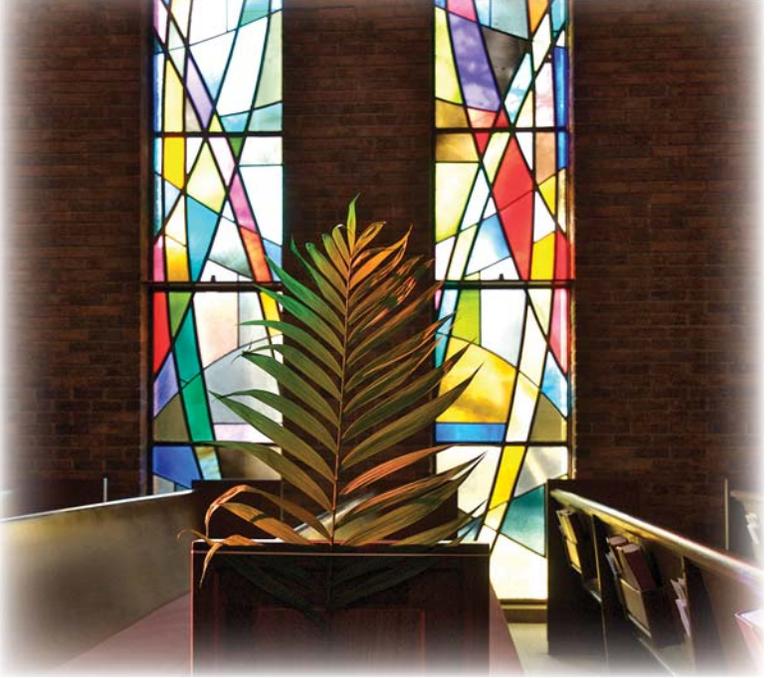
What if such a unique approach was applied to an unsolvable congregation problem? Experienced practitioners of positive deviance clearly state that the approach is not made to address ordinary problems. The challenges need to be inscrutable. Congregations do face perplexing problems. But not every problem is right for a positive deviance approach. It is not made to figure out how to make a better website. It is not a good fit for recruiting members of the worship team. You don't need to apply an entire positive deviance process to figuring out who will cater the fellowship dinner. These issues are important, but they are not intractable.

Positive deviance is an approach designed for that tough challenge you've tried to address, but to no avail. Picture an urban congregation that is down to 30 participants in worship. They can't decide whether to close or keep going. Or another congregation finds its budget being drowned by spending for upkeep of a historical building. Another congregation sits in the midst of a neighborhood where gun violence is up 45% over three years ago. These are challenges that are not easily answered by the latest pre-packaged strategic planning experience. Positive deviance would be a good fit for challenges like these.

### ASSUMPTIONS

Built into the positive deviance approach are particular assumptions about how people learn to try creative solutions. For example, positive deviance is not a top-down approach. The approach is not expert-driven. It is practitioner-based. This approach





does not coerce people to change. It is not a logic model approach in the sense that it does not seek to replicate large-scale cause and effect. It is not a cognitive approach to change. In the positive deviance approach, behavior changes happen first. It is then followed by changes in thinking and affect.

Positive deviance is a developmental behavior process rooted in a particular context. A specific community learns from those that practice effective, life-giving behaviors. The effective, life-giving behaviors create favorable results. Others in that particular community are then free to adapt the unique, constructive behaviors for their own benefit. Therefore, the positive deviance approach encourages people to learn from trial and error, from behaviors, from action steps, not just from book material or from the advice of others who do not share the same experience.

Recall the congregational challenges named a few paragraphs above. By working through the steps of a positive deviance approach, the congregation seeking to address gun violence would find at least one household in the community that has kept its children safe. The positive deviance approach demonstrates that if there are six historic congregation buildings in the same ten-mile area, then at least one of them has a method of working that does not overwhelm their budget. Likewise, the approach would show that in a congregation stressed over the decision to close or not, there would be one person in the congregation with an unexpressed idea that holds a redeemable response, if not a solution, to this almost unsolvable problem.

That is positive deviance. What does it look like in action?

### VIETNAM

The positive deviance story began in 1990. It involved addressing the intractable issue of childhood malnutri-

tion in Vietnam. This story is recounted beautifully in the book *The Power of Positive Deviance* (Pascale, Sternin, Sternin. 2010. Pages 19-52). About 65 percent of all Vietnamese children younger than five years of age suffered from malnutrition. One in five perished. The Vietnamese government provided the opportunity for Save the Children to address childhood malnutrition. Save the Children contracted with Jerry and Monique Sternin to design a program. Previous efforts had not yielded results. Even well run programs provided an influx of resources that disappeared when the project was over. Changes couldn't be sustained. Additionally, the provided solutions came from a source outside of the community. The solutions ultimately didn't translate into success for a small Vietnam village.

The Sternins were given six months to yield great results. They knew typical approaches wouldn't work. They decided to do something that eventually would be key to positive deviance. They searched for people who were the exceptions to the rule, interviewed them and, most importantly, observed how they behaved. They looked for households with flourishing toddlers. These households experienced basically the same conditions of those households with malnourished toddlers.

Visiting the household of a healthy baby, an observer noticed that the parents had tiny shrimps. "What are these?" the observer asked. Sheepishly, the parent



---

“It’s **EASIER TO ACT** your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting”

---

answered, “Food for our baby.” The parents had added the shrimp to the child’s diet along with the greens from sweet potato tops. In the village, such a diet was considered a cultural taboo. But this positive deviant family took the risk because something in their experience told them the food was good for their baby.

As the Sternins’ developed a process to share this and other positive behaviors with the community, more households learned new ways to provide nourishment for their children. An essential teaching strategy was to teach behaviors, what one actually does – step by step. As those who practice the positive deviant model are fond of saying, “It’s easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting” (Pascale, Sternin, Sternin, 2010, p. 38). By mid-1991, 40% of the malnourished children in the region had been completely rehabilitated. An additional 20% had improved measurably. No other intervention had results that were even close.

Since then, the positive deviance approach has been used to address child protection including the restoration of female child soldiers into Sudan, prevention of HIV/AIDS, and much more. It has been used to wipe out MRSA infections in United States hospitals. It has been used to increase school performance of students in New York City. Positive deviance shows that even the most difficult problems have their own solutions. Such solutions may be invisible at first glance. With exploration these life-giving answers are no longer hidden in plain sight.

### A CASE

What does the approach look like? The approach has been described in terms of five D’s (Pascale, Sternin, Sternin. 2010. Pages 202-205).

1. Refine the **Definition** of the problem and desired impact.

2. **Determine** and identify positive deviant individuals or groups.
3. **Discover** the uncommon but effective behaviors and strategies of positive deviants via inquiry, interviews, and storytelling.
4. **Develop** an action plan to encourage all stakeholders to practice these and other positive behaviors in contextually matched ways.
5. **Discern/monitor** the progress and evaluate the results and impact of their work.

In 2012, the Center for Congregations applied the positive deviance approach to the congregational challenge of maintaining satisfactory relationships with those who seek assistance from a local congregation. Approximately 71% of central Indiana congregations offer some kind of assistance for those who request help. These requests might include help with food, a utility bill payment, shelter, medical care and so forth. Sometimes the requests come via email. Sometimes people call the congregation requesting assistance. Frequently, the person seeking help walks into the building.

Such interactions are frequently unsatisfying. In a survey of central Indiana congregations, 61% rank their satisfaction with this work on a scale of one-to-ten as a four or less. There are concerns about limited resources. There is suspicion that the stated need is not truthful or is hiding an unpleasant reality. The congregational representative may feel inadequate in the presence of the one asking for help. As one person said, “I feel like I have nothing to offer, not even myself.”

A group of representatives from eight congregations agreed to try the positive deviance approach to address this issue. The group defined the problem in this way: 71% of central Indiana congregations provide some kind of direct service to people in need. The group seeks to apply the positive deviance approach to



provide more positive experiences for clergy and laity thus increasing their sense of satisfaction.

We considered defining the problem in terms of the impact such assistance has on the recipient. After all, those seeking help are the ones most in need. There must be a parallel experience of dissatisfaction for those seeking assistance. Individuals asking for help experience shame; the sense that not only is there something wrong about their situation, but there is something wrong with them.

We decided against focusing on those receiving help because the congregational representatives constituted the community working on the issue. It would have been disingenuous to work on the behaviors of those receiving assistance with no representatives from that population present. Their presence would have made the project a stronger endeavor, yet it would have required more expertise with positive deviance.

To strengthen the problem **definition**, the group created a normative story together. I started the story. Then I passed the story to others in the room asking them to reflect a typical experience.

*Wanda and William stop at the church's reception desk. William is wearing an Indianapolis Colts t-shirt, and Wanda sports an Indy 500 hat. Their two children are with them — one in a stroller, the other held by William. The family needs help with the water bill and electric bill, says William. The receptionist lets the family know that the church does not help with bills, but she offers to let them speak to the pastor. The pastor is unavailable, so the receptionist calls the office manager. The office manager greets Wanda and William. "How can I help you?" he asks. William tells him that they need help with*

*their water and electric bills, and they are out of diapers. The office manager tells them that he cannot help with the bills, but can provide diapers. Williams says that they really have enough diapers for the week, but that he is worried because their car isn't running and he has no way to get to a job interview on Thursday. The office manager asks William if he can bring the car to the church. William says no, because the battery is dead. Now, the baby in the stroller is crying. "I wish I could be more helpful," the office manager says. William replies, "I understand." The office manager asks if he can help in any other way. William, who now is walking out the door says, "No, thanks anyway. God bless you."*

Establishing a normative group story helped the group define the problem for themselves in plain language. "This is not the way we want these relationships to go," one person said.

This began the effort to **determine** positive deviant groups or individuals. Who in the represented congregations might have had a particularly satisfying connection with someone seeking assistance?

Homework was assigned. The homework was to elicit stories of particularly satisfying encounters. Group members were charged with gathering stories by interviewing clergy and laity, who were the contacts for such assistance. Capturing absorbing stories is not easy. When we ask for a story, we often receive an anecdote, an illustration, a vignette, but not a story. An absorbing story has a beginning, characters, challenge, conflict, movement, a key moment and some kind of resolution. To receive such a story, it is sometimes best not to ask for a story because people will default to telling rather than showing. Sometimes it works best to simply say, "Tell





me about a time when you helped someone in your assistance ministry and it felt good." And then listen.

Discovering positive deviant behaviors means paying attention to particular elements of a story. Think about these elements.

- How does the story begin?
- What was the unease at the beginning?
- Consider a moment when you, the interviewer, thinks darn, or hmm, or aha.
- Reflect on a moment when the teller is revealing a darn, or hmm, or aha.
- Remember links in the story, that is, one part of the story connecting to another part of the story through reappearing imagery or repeated language or patterns of behavior.
- Consider moments when the speaker shows rather than tells.
- Did you find thoughts moving to behavior?
- Remember repeated behaviors.

If you pay attention to these elements you are more likely to hear the behavior that deviates from the norm.

From the stories, the group was able to discover a few clergy and laity who had particularly satisfying ways of relating to those seeking help.

The group shared their stories. Here are four stories in which the congregant offering help reported being satisfied with the connection made to the one seeking help.

*Jack enters the church and asks the receptionist for help. "What kind of help do you want?" the receptionist asks. Jack says that he wants to talk with someone. Since the pastors are busy, one of the secretaries says she will talk with Jack. "Do*

*you want to talk?" she asks. He pauses a long time before he answers. The secretary almost breaks the silence, but decides to wait. He finally says, "Yes, that would be nice." The secretary takes him to the roomy gathering space where they sit together. She says, "Tell me your story." Jack tells her that he lost his job. He is full of shame and frustration. He is embarrassed. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before," he explains. Jack and his family are without shelter. He says he has no hope. The secretary gives him some water. Jack tells her more about the work he used to do and the struggle of figuring out daily where his family will sleep. They talk for 40 minutes. Near the end of the conversation, the secretary asks if he wants a prayer. He agrees. She holds out her hand, and he grasps it. During the prayer, the secretary says she can feel Jack's hand grip go from shame and frustration to just being tired.*

---

*Frank visits the church office to ask for rent assistance. He moved from his neighborhood a few months before because his previous home had been shot up. When he asks for rent assistance, our answer to him is, "No, we don't have rent assistance for you, but we are willing to talk with you about it." Frank says that he had lived in his old neighborhood for 30 years. None of his neighbors, new or old, cared what happened to him. Since leaving the neighborhood, he has stayed with relatives and in motels. He wishes he hadn't moved, but it wasn't safe. Frank is invited to come back and talk more. Not too long after the first conversation, Frank returns. The church representative asks Frank, "What do you love to do?" He answers, "Refinish furniture." The*



---

THE CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS with whom we worked in Indianapolis understood and were excited about both the key principles of the positive deviance model and the work it involved.

---

*church provides him with the tools to refinish a table in the church office. Soon, he presents a table that is shiny and new.*

---

*At the receptionist desk of the congregation is a volunteer. This volunteer is a gentleman who has recently been released from prison. On this day, another gentleman walks into the church and asks for assistance. The receptionist says, "Tell me your story." The man says, "I just was released from prison. I'm looking for a job." The receptionist answers, "Welcome home!"*

---

*Twelve people are in the church chapel. They are there to receive help in getting birth certificates, state identification cards and other kinds of official documents. Before they leave the pastor says, "I would like to offer each of you a blessing. If you are willing, we will do this together. If not, I totally understand, it is okay." The pastor says a few people say they do not desire a blessing. Most do. The pastor asks each person, "What would you like me to pray about?" He then puts his hand on their shoulders and says a personal prayer for each person. At the end of the prayer time, the pastor says, "We need your help. Are you willing to help us? We will be praying for you. Will you pray for our congregation? And I also invite you to come back anytime, or call or email, and tell us how you are doing. This is an open invitation. I hope to hear from you."*

We went deeper into the collected stories, sometimes re-interviewing those with particularly positive or satisfying behaviors.

After further review, the group identified behaviors that produced high satisfaction in the clergy or laity

providing assistance. We **developed** a way of sharing these positive behaviors with others. We circulated a list of the helpful behaviors. We encouraged congregations to experiment with behaviors that made the most sense in their context.

The behaviors included the following:

- One of the most active congregations offering assistance has the following guideline: When one asks for specific help such as "Can you help me with food?" say, "No, but we can talk with you about what's going on if you'd like." This sets boundaries around expectations. It suggests that you are willing to risk a relationship, even if there is no quick fix.
- Offer a glass of water or some specific action of hospitality, such as a comfortable chair, a quiet room, so forth.
- Greet people with friendly words like "We're glad you came by" and "Tell me your name."
- Meet in a place that communicates warmth (not a cold, windowless office).
- Ask open-ended questions. Limit advice giving.
- During the conversation, listen for cues that suggest an opening for suggestions to move people away from isolation back into existing, positive networks.
- Discover the seeker's skills and see if there is a way to put that to use. "What do other people say you do well?" and "What do you enjoy doing?"
- Schedule specific times to concentrate on this ministry and accept appointments for that time frame.
- Offer to provide prayer or a blessing. Make it invitational rather than a requirement.
- Train others to do this. Don't make it a one-person ministry.



- Use touch carefully, professionally, ritually and with permission. For instance, during a blessing, you should ask “May I put my hand on your shoulder?”
- Take enough time to ascertain what social service is the best match for his or her situation. Do not make a fruitless referral.
- Invite people to report back. “Would you come back to tell us how it is going?”
- Slow down the conversation.
- Create safety protocols for the helpers in the congregation – meet in a public space, keep the door open, don’t provide personal contact information, so forth.

- Participants used each other as resources.
- In some cases, increased satisfaction means serving fewer people with handouts and taking more time getting to know the person.
- In some cases, increased satisfaction means including more of the congregation in the practices of help and hospitality.

This is not a list of best practices. That is, they were not tested as valid in many different settings. We learned that these behaviors were helpful in the settings in which they were used.

Our experiment with positive deviance did not follow up with a **design** for long-term evaluation, an essential aspect of positive deviance. Evaluation was lacking in this project. However, after four months in the project each participant ranked the satisfaction level with their church’s help and hospitality ministry. The average rating was seven, higher than the original survey population ranking in which 61% of these congregations rank their satisfaction with this work as a four or less.

Even though there was not a thorough evaluation, participants also reported the following:

- Conversation about offering help and assistance journeyed from complaint to care.
- Several congregations renewed their commitment to this aspect of their life together.
- Almost all of the congregations changed their behaviors so that the interactions were less about “handouts” and more about getting to know the person seeking assistance.

The congregational leaders with whom we worked in Indianapolis understood and were excited about both the key principles of the positive deviance model and the work it involved. They appreciated that the solution already existed in the system, however hidden. They appreciated that the solution was behavior based. They appreciated that the approach was asset based. The group was ready to think of positive deviance as an approach that could be used to solve some other aspect of congregational life.

### YOUR MOST DIFFICULT CHALLENGE

What is the most difficult challenge your congregation faces? Maybe it is an organizational challenge. Too frequently discussions of your church board end in argument. It gets personal. People leave the meeting upset. As a leader, you’ve tried teaching communication skills. That doesn’t work. You’ve tried having supper together before the meeting. That doesn’t help. Last month’s meeting was no better than one a year ago. You are losing sleep. The congregation is stuck.

Or maybe the challenge isn’t an organizational challenge. Maybe it has to do with the neighborhood. There are too many kids from the school across from your congregation’s building who go home from school with no adult to greet them. Your congregation tried opening your building to the students as a place to do homework after the school day. One student showed. You took a group of laity to an after-school meeting about the subject. Sitting in the meeting you



thought, “This is going nowhere.” Your heart is breaking for these kids, but you don’t know what to do.

Maybe your challenge has to do with the lives of people associated with your congregation. You look out on the sanctuary and notice many people missing. You realize that those missing have at least one thing in common. They are taking care of older adult parents. They must be exhausted. How can the congregation help these people with their responsibilities? It is no easy task to feed, bathe and medicate a 90-year-old every day of the week. You ask a parishioner how the congregation can help. She says plainly, “I’m exhausted.” You are not sure what might help.

There is an approach to solving intractable problems that has proven helpful, sometimes life changing, in many different circumstances. It has been applied to many intractable social challenges. It holds potential value for addressing congregational challenges that are organizational, missional, or involving the lives of parishioners. This approach provides a framework for you to trust that, whether the issue is related to relationship dynamics at your board meeting, kids in your community, or something deeply rooted in the lives

of your parishioners, there is an answer present yet invisible already in your midst. The approach is called positive deviance.

#### NOTES

Gladwell, M. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2011.

Pascale, Richard, Jerry Sternin, Monique Sternin. *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World’s Toughest Problems*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2010.

Jerry Sternin and Monique Sternin developed the positive deviance approach. Many have contributed to enhancing the approach including Richard Pascale, Randa Wilkinson and Jon Lloyd.

The eight congregations participating in the Center’s challenge: Broadway United Methodist Church, North United Methodist Church, Roberts Park United Methodist Church, Second Presbyterian Church, John Knox Presbyterian Church, Northminster Presbyterian Church, Zion Evangelical Church and Church at the Crossing, all of Indianapolis.

---

**Applying Positive Deviance** is part of the Compass for Congregations series. It is intended to provide information and ideas about congregational learning and addressing challenges. We hope you find this helpful in your work as a congregation.

Written by Center President Tim Shapiro  
Photography by Chris Minnick

3/2016

