

THE LEARNING CONGREGATION

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

How do you move forward when your congregation either needs or chooses to begin something new? Perhaps members of your congregation want to serve the homeless, even though a homeless ministry would be an entirely new endeavor. Maybe you are working on building renovation for the first time in a decade. Perhaps your pastoral staff wants to think more deeply about worship or faith formation. Maybe it is time to address a long-term issue that the congregation has collectively avoided. No one needs help in creating a list of new demands on congregational life. Each can seem as daunting as the beginning of a deep-space mission.

To meet all these challenges, congregations are expected to think and behave in ways that they have not yet learned with knowledge they do not yet hold.

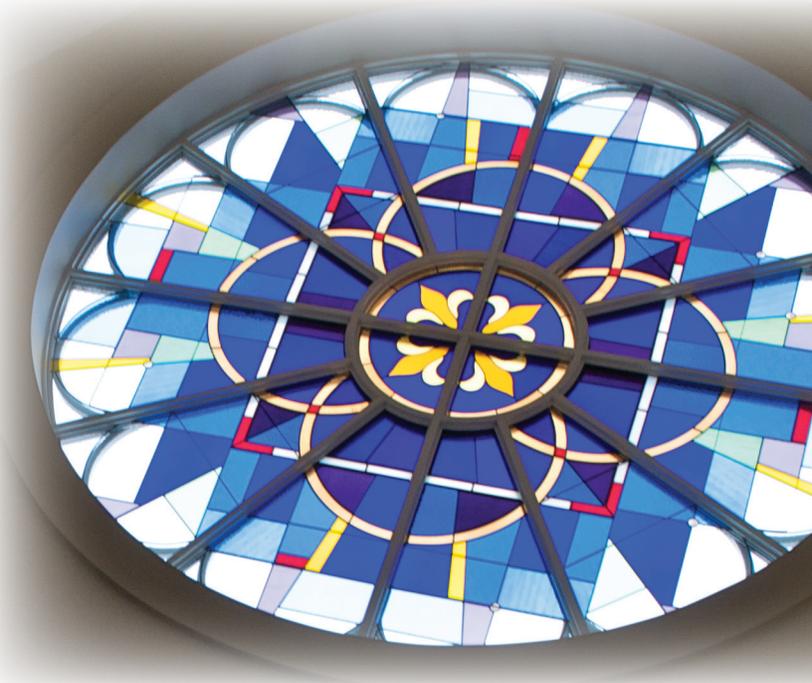
Congregational leaders, staff, members and parishioners need to learn new skills all the time. Such are the demands on congregational life.

Knowing how your congregation learns is essential to embarking on activities you have not previously confronted. How congregations learn is a meta question that shapes the answer to all kinds of specific, missional questions.

Sometimes the learning is full of grace, fun and energy. Sometimes the learning gets stuck.

The Indianapolis Center for Congregations has worked with more than 3,000 Indiana congregations over 15 years. The Center has observed a learning framework used by congregations developing new capacities. The framework includes eight overarching behaviors. The simple behaviors apply to almost any congregational challenge.

The learning framework is part of a deep structure of capacity development taking place in congregations



whose leaders and members are effective at learning new skills. When congregations adopt most, if not all, of the activities that make up the learning framework, they have a high probability of effectively addressing any challenge or opportunity.

The eight behaviors do not come from a psychological framework, though they add to the emotional well-being of a congregation. They do not come from an organizational framework, though the activities strengthen the congregation as a system. The frame is religious in the sense that it reflects a theological anthropology that asserts congregations are basically healthy and able to sustain the learning they need to address significant challenges if given just the right amount of assistance and time. The eight behaviors fortify strengths already present in a congregation while also enhancing the congregation's relationship to its mission.

Here are the eight elements that make up the learning framework that the Center for Congregations has observed:





CONGREGATIONS THAT LEARN WELL LIVE WITHIN A WORLD-VIEW OF THEOLOGICAL COHERENCE. Congregations that are grounded in a lucid theological perspective are more likely to have the maturity to act consistently with their religious claims and commitments. Theological coherence provides opportunity space for God to be noticed during the learning. Cues of theological coherence show up in mission statements. It is supported by adult education. Theological coherence is exhibited informally as part of everyday conversation—prayer during hospital visits, comments in the hallway, Facebook messages and so on. Being able to think clearly about faith and articulate that faith publicly is an aid to congregational learning.

CONGREGATIONS THAT LEARN WELL FIND AND USE OUTSIDE RESOURCES. Congregations learn best about almost any topic when they use an outside resource in juxtaposition with their own ingenuity. The outside resource might be another congregation that has addressed a similar challenge. It might be a book or website about the topic at hand. The outside resource is any helper that encourages leaders to move the group from private opinions to a more comprehensive appraisal of the situation. An outside resource provides new perspective. The congregation's ingenuity makes sure the learning is contextual and relevant to the particular congregation's faith experience.

CONGREGATIONS THAT LEARN WELL REVERSE THE INITIATIVE. Many outside influences affect congregational life. There are voices that tell congregations what they "should" do. Congregations that effectively address their challenges take initiative over what challenges they take on, how they learn, and what works best for them. They learn to act on their challenges and opportunities rather than have those challenges and opportunities impinge on them. Effective congregations become agents of their own existence.

CONGREGATIONS THAT LEARN WELL ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS AND PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING. Congregations learn when congregants do not assume there is a predetermined answer to complex issues. It is obvious but rarely practiced: human beings, including congregants, learn best by asking questions for which they don't know the answer.

CONGREGATIONS LEARN WELL WHEN CLERGY AND LAITY STUDY TOGETHER. In addition to working together, clergy and laity need to learn together. When shared learning takes place, respect and trust grows. Projects maintain their momentum because they are not too dependent on either clergy or laity.

CONGREGATIONS LEARN WELL BY ATTENDING TO RITES OF PASSAGES. When new learning is taking place, it is important for congregations to pay attention to tender and mighty moments of existence: birth, graduation, marriage, divorce, illness, recovery and death. Nothing teaches like life. Attending appropriately to rites of passages is also a way to practice theological coherence.





CONGREGATIONS LEARN WELL WHEN THEY SLOW THINGS

DOWN. Creating a sense of urgency is appropriate when there is an emergency hospital call, a dangerous roof issue, or when the congregation is becoming stagnant. Some congregations need a sense of urgency to consider a new endeavor, but are best served when they use their momentum to discern, not rush to action. Learning requires thoughtfulness which requires time, God's timing. Slowing things down is a way for congregations to allow their thinking to catch up with their praying and their praying to catch up with their thinking.

CONGREGATIONS LEARN WELL WHEN THEY SAY "NO" AND WHEN THEY SAY "YES."

When a congregation takes on a new initiative and the learning that is involved, it is likely that another activity needs to be discarded. Congregations that affirm what matters most, as well as that which matters less, are best able to gain new capacity to address their challenges and opportunities. Congregational capacity is not a zero-sum game — focus is.

Some congregations follow the learning framework naturally. Their leadership is wired to learn in this way,

or they have integrated the behaviors into their life together based on experience. Some congregations need to initiate these learning behaviors.

Congregations, by necessity, learn all the time. Living out a religious sensibility within a community doesn't just happen. New challenges require new capabilities that require learning. Whether for paving the parking lot or training in monastic prayer, adopting these congregational learning behaviors strengthens the possibility of positive outcomes. Your congregation has all kinds of new challenges waiting, and it deserves to learn its lessons well.

RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

For resources on this subject, you're encouraged to check out the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG) at <http://thecrg.org/>.

How Your Congregation Learns 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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