

Here are 5 signs of congregational vitality

BY PETER STEINKE

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If you find the perfect parish, join it right away," a cleric once said. "But remember, once you join it, it will no longer be perfect." Many want to find the perfect congregation but because of human sin and folly, we never will. Still, every congregation can promote its well-being. Take these three examples.

First Church is barely keeping its balance. Membership is static. Financial giving is slightly better than the last two years, but each year it's more difficult to find leaders and workers. A longtime lay leader observes, "More members want the congregation to meet their needs. They are less interested in contributing to something beyond themselves."

Is this a healthy congregation? Or is it showing symptoms of disease?

Trinity Church is bleeding. From the early 1960s to the early 1990s, its membership declined from 1,800 to 1,200. But strangely, its school has maintained steady enrollment figures. At one time, the students were white and primarily from the congregation. Now, 90 percent are non-members, and 80 percent are multicultural.

Many of Trinity's former members moved to suburbs farther from the city. In the next 10 years, Trinity will likely lose another 200 members. "It took us several years to recognize what was happening to our environment," the associate pastor says. "Then we spent several more years making changes. We had to change from simply receiving new members to moving out into the community seeking members."

Is Trinity healthy? Is it possible for a congregation to be vital when it is doing less today than yesterday?

Community Church is thriving. It is only 8 years old and already in its third building program. Staff members bristle with ideas for new programs. Limited space for further expansion may be the only impediment to the church's continued rapid growth. Some members are discussing capping the congregation's membership at about 2,000 unless new property is obtained. Although real estate costs are exploding, another group is aggressively seeking new property to purchase. This group fears a loss of momentum if the congregation fails to relocate. The church staff is divided about which direction to take. The minister of music believes the staff is burdened with too much work and the

congregation with too much debt. "The only limit we face," the minister of evangelism counters, "is ourselves."

Is there potential for disease at Community? Are the emerging differences of opinion symptoms of a deeper disturbance?

To describe healthy congregations, one needs a sense of what health means. For a living organism, health is:

- All the parts working together to maintain the organism's balance and integrity.
- The capacity for life, the ability to respond to a wide assortment of challenges to wholeness--infection, injury, malfunction.
- Not merely absence of disease--health and disease are opposite ends of a continuum.

What makes for the health of an organism offers clues to the health of living organizations like congregations. Some congregations always seem to move toward the positive end of the health/disease continuum. Why? What do they do to promote health?

There are many conditions that contribute to health in congregations. Five central elements are: diversity, purpose, immunity, gratitude and challenge.
5 vital signs

1. Healthy congregations understand diversity.

The New Testament describes the church as a living organism, the "body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). In striking language, this passage says that for the body to be healthy there must be diversity. "If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing?" The body is healthy only if the parts function differently for the benefit of the whole.

So with the church. Individuals' gifts and activities are to contribute to the body's full functioning. In this regard, Community faces a threat. Its primary need is to have all its parts working together. The question is: Can Community reconcile sharp differences about how to handle growth? No congregation can serve two visions. It needs a clear direction.

Shared vision is necessary, but some differences can exist as long as there is loyalty to Christ, the head of the body, and care for each other. Some individuals, however, feel threatened by the disorder differences create. They may confuse unity with sameness. They may even make their experience, perception or way a law for others. But no body can remain healthy if its cells are selfish or not in touch with other cells that are different, or if the body insists that all cells be alike.

Congregations need to learn how to deal with the threat differences arouse. That's a task of healthy living.

2. Healthy congregations are purposeful.

Healthy congregations have clear direction. They keep asking: "What is God calling us to be? What is the meaning of what we do? " They have a working vision which conveys the message that together they can influence their future.

"No battle plan," former Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf says, "has ever survived contact with the enemy." Vision always requires revision. Health is a continuous process, and healthy congregations keep at the work of visioning and "re-visioning."

First is at a plateau. It is not growing, and many of its members do not see a mission beyond serving members' needs. It will not stay healthy if it merely diagnoses its situation. Health is always about attitudes, choices and direction.

Congregations can lose direction and die when they think they are in business for themselves, rather than for the mission of the whole church.

3. Healthy congregations develop "wise blood."

Well before the practice of vaccination, physicians knew that people who had had an infection once recovered more quickly if infected again. These people were said to have "wise blood."

Similarly, healthy congregations develop an immune system. They do not permit pathogens to inflict harm on the community. Mature leadership gives the congregation wise blood. They determine which actions contribute to the congregation's purpose and which are antagonistic to it. If they fail to serve the "immune function," the body becomes infected.

The New Testament letters frequently refer to infections in the church: Members "bite and devour one another" (Galatians 5:15); they are "contentious" (1 Corinthians 11:16); there are "grumblers, malcontents ... bombastic in speech, flattering people to their own advantage" (Jude 16).

Acutely anxious people in the congregation behave like pathogens. They live for themselves rather than for the body. Like pathogens, anxious souls cannot say "no" to themselves. But what caters to their needs is only a fraction of what community means. "Every act of self-control of the Christian," Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "is also a service to the fellowship"--and, we might add, a contributor to its health.

4. Healthy congregations foster gratitude.

Hans Selye, a pioneer in charting the effect of emotional states on physical health, noted that the two emotions most detrimental to health are vengeance and bitterness. Conversely, the most nourishing attitude is gratitude.

Healthy congregations foster a caring spirit and encourage a confident tone. At the heart of their life is the gospel of Christ's steadfast love, given in God's word and the sacraments.

Healthy congregations are spirited. They are graced and gracious, generous with each other and with outsiders. They are communities of thanks and praise. Wholesomeness pervades their gathering and informs their direction.

The leaders of First (page 8) must be careful not to generate a negative tone even though the number of active participants is declining. They need a new confidence, sensing the need to help its membership grow in perspective and in practice. The mood and tone of leadership is important because morale flows down.

5. Healthy congregations grow through challenges.

As a rule, the body flourishes with activity and exercise. Healthy congregations also grow through challenge. They see change as inevitable, manageable and as an opportunity. Thus, they find new ways to use energy. They discover that confronting crises heads off many of their negative effects.

At workshops I conduct, I ask congregational leaders if their congregations are healthier now than five years ago. Usually, two-thirds of the participants say "yes." Their answers are basically alike: We met a challenge; we stretched our resources; we examined what we were doing and changed course; we redefined our problems as opportunities. Health is 10 percent what happens and 90 percent how we respond.

I have seen too many congregations go through "wasted suffering." They learn little from their crises. Instead, they expend their energy silencing the signals of pain, which only risks greater damage. Putting off what is unpleasant, they postpone or completely miss opportunities to heal.

Trinity (page 8) stays healthy--despite declining membership--because it is learning how to respond as its old ways of functioning are challenged. It is adapting in ways that keep its vision in focus. There is little Trinity can do about changes in its environment. But its leaders are specific about their responses to it.

In Trinity's situation, as with all congregations, health is not the meaning of its existence. But it is a means through which it fulfills its purpose. Congregational health is a resource for mission. Healthy congregations become healing communities.