PASTORAL LEADERSHIP
FOR CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY

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One of the most challenging forms of ministry is to serve as pastor of a long-established congregation of a mainline denomination. A large percentage of these congregations are greatly diminished in strength, which means that the challenge to pastors is to overcome the complacency of members and rekindle the energy that is needed if these churches are to survive and serve another generation. The following scenario is a composite picture of many of these mainstream congregations across the country, especially in urban areas. Although the name First Church is used, actual congregations go by many different names. The analysis and recommendations for pastoral leadership are based on personal observation, sustained conversation with pastors, and on a large body of literature. (Books which have been especially important in my reflections are listed in the bibliographical note at the conclusion of this paper.)

The Current Condition of First Church

In general, First Church is much reduced in strength from its high point in the early 1960s. Attendance at Sunday worship is scarcely half of what it was 20 years ago, and in many congregations has dwindled to about 100. Half of the congregants are 55 and older. The building was constructed for a congregation much stronger than the one now using it. Seating capacity in the worship space is three or four times greater than average attendance and other facilities are also underused for church program. The number in church school is much smaller

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than worship attendance, and the only way of maintaining classes in many of these congregations is to group children in broad age groups such as pre-school, elementary, and youth.

A large percentage of the members once lived in geographical areas close to the church but for several reasons have moved farther away and now commute to the church. For many of these people the church itself is their only continuing link with the geographical community in which the church building is located. There is some degree of social contrast between the community as it was when the congregation was strong and as it is now. Usually, the change has been toward greater cultural diversity and often toward a population that is less established in economic and cultural ways. Population density continues to be as great as before, which means that there are enough people for the congregation to be strong now, but there has been a failure to draw them into the church. The separation between members and community has extended over a generation.

Although many of these congregations have been able to sustain a reasonably constant financial income, the reason has been closely related to inflation and the aging of members. Pre-retirement adults have larger amounts of discretionary income than do younger adults; and inflation keeps dollar amounts reasonably stable even though purchasing power declines. Congregations now are discovering that their financial strength is becoming precarious.

For many congregations the next decade is critical. During the 1990s many of their congregants will become frail adults and quite a number will die. Younger members are too few in number to continue full program or carry the financial burden of maintaining staff and aging buildings. Gradually morale sinks. During this decade institutional collapse is likely for many congregations of this type. These congregations that came to strength during the 1950s are dying during the 1990s.

**Summarizing the Recent Past**

Congregations like First Church reached their period of greatest strength during the years following World War II. The nation’s return to normalcy had two immediate effects: the establishing of new households in the existing residential communities, thus stabilizing social institutions in these neighborhoods; and the baby boom, which increased population and created great pressure upon these older residential areas. Churches grew rapidly, with memberships that were relatively homogeneous and geographically close to the church building. Some denominations grew more rapidly than the population. During these years many congregations entered into building programs based on growth projections de-
veloped during the post-war return to religion.

Then came a slow decline, caused by several factors. One was the growth of suburban communities that provided places for the families, which older neighborhoods could not contain. Usually, the younger, fertile, upwardly mobile families were the ones who moved out, leaving their parents' generation in the old house and at the church. New congregations were established in the new suburbs and many of them also grew significantly. By the mid 1960s the birth rate dropped, especially among members of congregations like First Church. Younger members were less convinced by traditional religious practice than their parents had been; and many became non-observant. Then the older generation began to move too, to live in smaller quarters, to enjoy nicer houses, and to get away from neighborhoods that were changing. Although they continued to attend First Church, the driving distances and the gradual diminishment of energy made the effort increasingly difficult.

The upheavals in American life during the 1960s accelerated the changes in churches, but probably did not cause them. The causes of decline were largely within the life of the congregation and directly connected to the relationship between church life and the immediate community. As people moved away, the approach to church program has changed. In the life history of nearly every congregation, during the early period of establishment and growth, the program of the church was oriented toward the people who lived near by. The church lived in its neighborhood and the people of that vicinity participated in the worship and witness of that church. In a large percentage of these same congregations, however, that close linking of church and community has disappeared. These churches now program for the people who come, no matter how far away they may live and work, rather than for those whose vital life interests are directly connected to the very locale where the congregation's facilities are located. As the congregations have sought to be related to their immediate neighborhood, it has been increasingly as social service agencies rather than as communities where people worship and work together. Thus the connections between members and non-members are institutionalized and separations are made greater.

In recent years a new stabilization has come about. Congregations have accepted the fact that they are much smaller than they once were. Much of the current literature supports this revision of self-understanding for it has been downsizing the meaning of terms like small, medium, and large as used for congregations. Even in these smaller congregations, there are usually enough younger members participating that reduced program can be maintained; and finances are adequate to sustain staff and program now. Many congregations have found ways of using buildings and parking in beneficial ways, and the revenues subsi-
dize program. Some congregations have small endowments that also help them to sustain program and maintain buildings. Yet a growing number of congregations are increasingly vulnerable; one or two major shocks, such as significant building repair, would bring them to the brink of collapse.

**Deeper Explanations**

The sociological factors described above mask even deeper religious and theological factors involved in the decline of congregations like First Church. *The first of these deeper factors is the relocation of the experience of God.* Mainstream Protestantism has inherited a tradition of piety that stressed that God is greatly distant, mysterious, powerful, and unknowable. Worship facilities expressed this theology by emphasizing distance, loftiness, awe. Since 1945, however, a transformation in piety has been taking place. Increasingly God is encountered in one's inner life experience, in inter-personal relationships, and in the unsolvable and unavoidable challenges such as abortion, euthanasia, and changing patterns of sexuality. The older religious practices based on the transcendence of God do not work very well when the immanence of God is the primary mode of religious experience.

This shift in the symbolization of God is especially critical for mainline churches. The American consciousness has long been oriented in two directions—which James Davison Hunter calls the orthodox and progressive. The older, objective symbolization of God is characteristic of orthodox cultural tendencies, whereas the communal and subjective symbolizations of God are characteristic of the progressive cultural tendencies. In the years when most churches were growing, and life was generally improving for everyone in the country, this cultural divide between orthodox and progressive was relatively easily by-passed. In our own time, however, when everyone feels himself or herself to be beleaguered, the older tendencies become more evident. One of the characteristics of those moved by progressive tendencies is that they move out of organized religious communities with relative ease. Thus, their movement toward less specific religious observance heightens the threat to the institutional well being of the very churches that also are sympathetic to progressive tendencies.

*Second, a shift in expressive media has taken place.* The question is this: what kind of music and communicative arts should be used in worship? Over the generations churches have fluctuated in their commitments to high culture and to popular culture. Folk music has been deeply ingrained in Protestant hymnody—as is illustrated by the early American spiritual songs, spirituals that
emerged among African-American Christians, nineteenth century gospel songs, and a continuing stream of composed gospel music. At the same time, churches have recommended and used music that is closely related to the concert hall. Plain song, chorales, Bach, standard hymnody, and a continuing stream of art music have been insisted upon in mainline congregations. For a 50-year period, beginning around 1925, Protestant churches developed this classicist approach to worship, so that services became sacred concerts with liturgical accompaniment (to borrow phrasing of Lawrence Hoffmann). Congregational participation consisted primarily of the personal experience of sublimity with very little corporate activity in singing, praying, or even in receiving communion. Services of this type fostered a sharp distinction between people who appreciated classical culture and music and all of the rest of the people who presumably went to other churches. Worship thus has become a version of high art, like opera, symphony, and theater.

In contrast, worship needs to be festival—a stylized event for the people themselves, in which we are put in touch with what is ultimately important in life and encouraged to practice the attitudes and patterns of relationship that are consistent with our highest values. The expressive arts used in such festivals need to be rooted in the aesthetic experiences of the congregation. The melodies must be singable and memorable, the poetry strong and sayable, the ceremonies expressive and inviting. The rhythm and tempo of services must engage our attention and excite our emotions. The stories that are told—about God, about the world, and about our own lives—must be believable and lead to transformation.

Third, there has been a shift in the experience of what goes wrong in life. The fact that things go wrong is constant; what changes is the way that this wrongness is understood and remedied. The older experience was described as sin and forgiveness. Life falls apart because we do things that break God's law and violate relationships with one another. These fractures have to be forgiven by those who have experienced wrong, and especially by the righteous and merciful God. The classical doctrine of forgiveness that shapes traditional catholic and protestant liturgies is based upon this interpretation of what goes wrong in life. Many people still experience their troubles this way.

For a growing number of people, however, what is wrong in life is experienced as powerlessness and alienation. The idea of sin does not illuminate our distress, but the idea of being alone in a world where everything and everyone is looking some other way does express our consciousness of what happens. In order for theology and worship to be helpful to people, the doctrine enshrined in teaching and ceremony has to help us overcome estrangement. Some of the writ-
ings on worship today emphasize that community is a central factor in liturgies that people willingly attend. Here we meet God within the community’s life. Here our loneliness and alienation are overcome. Here we find life reestablished on a basis that makes sense with our experience.

The fourth explanation of the distress at First Church is confusion concerning the story of who we are. The worshiping community functions, in part, as the way for groups of people to express who they are in distinction from other groups. In an earlier period of American history, to use one example, German Lutherans and Norwegian Lutherans maintained their distinctive cultures in their churches long after these cultures disappeared in other aspects of their American life. In a broader sense, churches provide the ongoing story of cultural self-understanding. For a long time, most white Protestants in the United States believed two things about their place in God's plans for the world: this nation is especially blessed by God, much as Israel was favored by God in the Old Testament; this blessing inspires and necessitates the active work by Christians to extend God's love and justice around the world.

In mainline Protestant churches, this story of who we are is no longer held with the confidence that has previously existed. Our position is similar to that of Reform Jews. For generations, in Europe and the United States, many Jews believed themselves to be thoroughly integrated into the economic and cultural elites of their respective nations, especially Germany and the United States. The prayer books that were developed during these years expressed this sense of confidence in time—now as the messianic age. Then came the terrors of the holocaust, World War II, and the later resurgence of tension between racial and ethnic groups. The world that people experienced was greatly different from the one expressed so confidently in their liberal liturgies. So too in mainline Protestant churches. No longer can we see America as the holy commonwealth of God, a nation already just and humane, already expressing the good life that God wants for all, already representing to the nations the selflessness that should mark all international relations.

But who are we? What is the story of historical identity before God that should be expressed in the prayers, sermons, and hymns in Sunday worship? This we do not now know. As a result, our worship seems unrelated to ordinary citizenship. It is a disembodied ceremony for people who are not sure where their homeland is. Some mainline congregations continue to thrive while retaining a liturgical style that is similar to the one described above. The classicist approach still has drawing power for a portion of the population. If carefully planned, skillfully executed, and well supported by other aspects of congrega-
tional life, a few congregations will continue their strength with worship that is sacred concert with liturgical accompaniment.

In certain locations, a modified form of the classicist approach continues to work. These locations are newer suburbs, with homogeneous, upwardly mobile, well employed, and well-educated populations. Even in these communities, however, the classicist approach is usually moderated. The music draws upon the classical repertoire, but chooses compositions that are dramatic and warm rather than cerebral and distant. The liturgical style is direct and personal, and the services encourage people to relate to one another on a friendly basis. The preaching concentrates upon the puzzles, dilemmas, and pressures that people feel in their relations with one another. Church program emphasizes children’s activities.

Many of the people who can no longer make things work at old First Church become members of these new suburban congregations and find that they can once again work effectively. Even suburban congregations, however, can fail. Location is critically important to the growth of these modified mainline congregations; but significant success comes only if leaders have already begun to reshape the message and liturgical character of these churches.

**Course of Action for First Church**

At First Church, however, the old ways have not been working for a generation; and the continuing life of the congregation depends upon major changes in worship, program, and mission. The pastor is the one person who must take the lead in bringing about change. It is difficult for pastors to do this work, however. Congregations are closely bounded systems that are highly efficient in bringing everyone into conformity with existing norms and patterns. Pastors with great rapport for their congregations are likely to give close attention to what the people believe and how they relate to one another. This capacity to identify with their people makes these pastors all the more susceptible to the socializing factors in congregational life. Thus, they are likely to be absorbed by the long-standing attitudes and practices of the congregation—the very attitudes and practices which have led to the church’s decline. It is important, therefore, that pastors recognize this danger and work hard to retain the perspective from the outside that they brought with them as they began their pastorate. Only as they do so can they lead the congregation to reconstruct its life for the future.

The goal is to recreate the congregation, beginning with the continuing membership, but grafting in new constituencies. The recreated congregation should continue as wide a geographical spread as possible, but even greater at-
tention should be given to becoming reestablished in its immediate neighborhoods. The emerging congregation will necessarily be made up of several groupings, each one large enough to function as a largely self-contained unit, closely-knit internally and only partially connected to the other groupings within the congregation.

The central focus for the transformation of First Church is worship, primarily the services on Sunday. Churches are collections of people who come together to worship God, who in their worship are bound up into meaningful human communities. Other aspects of church life and program, including the nurture of members and service to the wider community, grow out of the central life of worship and community before God. Even as significant attention is given to the reconstituting of worship, the shape of congregational life and program must also be reformed.

Three strategic objectives can be proposed. All three are necessary. If only the first is done, and that is what pastors tend to do, the trajectory toward death will continue unabated. If only the second is done, the existing congregation will likely collapse before the new can be born. If both of these objectives are successful, then the third becomes increasingly necessary.

The first strategic objective is to confirm the existing congregation, which includes at least four kinds of activity. First, every effort must be devoted to providing worship that has recognizable connections to the long tradition of the congregation, but which is pointed toward significant change. The liturgical form and aesthetic materials must encourage enthusiastic participation by the people who already are members and must be inviting to others who are attracted to visit. The theological content of preaching and prayers must proclaim the love of God and neighbor in ways that are convincing to congregants. The services of worship must build towards the realization of the new community in Christ.

Second, church program must generate activity in the locales where current members live, but which also ties them in with the Sunday assembly at the church. Examples of this dispersed activity are home Bible studies, occasional social gatherings, neighborhood service projects, and personal care of one another. The tie-in with the church on Sunday can be through such methods as training for group leadership, forums on citywide and broader issues and concerns, and the lifting to God of the activities that are done in the neighborhoods. Preaching and the celebration of baptism and the Lord’s supper, along with congregational song and prayers, all done in the church, will shape and inspire the activities done in the several communities of the congregation.

Third, the existing congregation is confirmed by pastoral care in critical
moments such as illness, relocation, and death. The pastor needs to be directly involved in the full range of pastoral care. In addition, a core of members of the congregation must become assistants to the pastor, skilled in and committed to a spiritual leadership in church, home, and hospital.

Fourth, the constituency of similar people must be enlarged. The evangelistic task is helped by the items discussed above. As congregants scattered over the city become active witnesses where they live and work—witnesses to the love of Christ and to the importance of their church—then other people are likely to be drawn to First Church from those same neighborhoods and work places. Evangelism is the systematic process of nurturing inquirers and of incorporating them into the community of faith. If the prospects arise from the renewed activity of current members, then the resultant new members of the church are likely to be similar in their orientations and expectations.

The second strategic objective is to generate new constituencies who will become the congregation during the decade of the 1990s. Each of these new constituencies will have characteristics that distinguish it from other groups within the congregation—such factors as age, geographical location, race, life style, and language. As much as possible these constituencies and the continuing body of the church should have points of contact, including worship, service to the community, and program within the congregation. Yet, each constituency will also have its own life, work, and worship that will have very little contact with corresponding aspects of other groupings within the congregation. Thus, the reconstituted and revitalized congregation will consist of cells, each of which may have as many as 200 members. They will use the same building, contribute to the same treasury, participate in the one governing process, and share one pastoral team. Yet each one will also develop in its own unique way, thus becoming the focal point for continued evangelization of people of its own kind. The congregation is united in its life before God and diversified in its practical life in the world.

It is difficult to describe how this second strategic objective can be accomplished. Several factors are clear. First, the pastor and congregational leaders must be committed to identifying and attracting new constituencies. Second, the development will ordinarily be one new group at a time. As each group becomes established, then it is possible to work toward establishing another. Third, an important focal point for these new constituencies is worship. To attract some new constituencies, the most important programmatic development will be the creation of services of worship that are fitted to their expectations. Thus, a congregation needs to anticipate the probability of developing a second service, and then others, as time goes on. Worship services come into existence before the fact
of congregational growth as much as after the fact. New services are themselves part of the strategy for calling a new congregation into being.

_The third strategic objective is to redistribute power in the congregation_, thus making possible the continuation of growth into the longer future. Power is understood in two ways. Formal power is the control of money, program, use of facilities, and membership. Ordinarily, this power is exercised through the official processes of the congregation. Informal power is the more subtle process of determining what kind of church the congregation really is and who really belongs. This power is expressed through some of the official actions taken; but the more important expressions of informal power take place in the informal system of congregational communication and maintenance.

At the beginning of a period of growth, power ordinarily is vested with the group of older persons who were prominent during the previous pastorate. Even when they are not in key positions of leadership and program responsibility, they control the flow of money and the informal system of communication throughout the congregation. As new members come into the church, they may become prominent in the program areas, but they probably do not yet exercise power. Initially the pastor negotiates between the two groups, and does much to maintain a reasonable degree of harmony and common purpose between them. If the pastor leaves before the main transmission of power has taken place, then the older policies and attitudes are likely to revert into place and the new ones will disappear. As the new program and possibilities disappear, so do many of the new members. The congregation tends to revert back to its former character.

One presupposition is that a significant number of new people come into the picture, become active in the program, and begin carrying their weight in the financial side of congregational life. They need to develop a sense of commitment to the congregation as it is coming to be; and they need to find their full place in its life. It is easy for them to be squeezed out, however.

A second presupposition is that a significant group of people understand the transformation that is occurring and are ready to support it with their time and other resources. The pastor and this leadership group need to be on close working terms. The critical period in this transition, say Logan and George, is the sixth year of a pastorate. At that point there should be as many new members in the active core of the congregation as there are older members. Power is being transmitted. Sometimes there is struggle and pastors do not survive. If they survive this period, however, they can likely continue many more years.

The congregation that emerges from this course of action is a comprehensive church. The movement is toward diversity rather than toward integration. No
longer is the goal that of bringing everyone into the existing consensus; instead it is to help different groups within the congregation develop their ways of understanding the congregation's mission for the world and for the future. Old First Church becomes young again not by the gradual mutations from within but by the deliberate cross breeding that comes as pastor and congregational leaders work out new ways for the congregation to gather the world around itself.

**Conclusion**

The scenario described above has been presented in analytical fashion, but it is rooted in the observation of living congregations. One recently published book provides case histories of some of the churches that have found their own ways to move through this period of reconstructing their life cycle (see *Good News for Growing Churches* in the bibliographical note that follows). This book also illustrates the fact that several types of pastoral leadership can be used for the renewal of existing congregations. The writers make it clear that demographics may create difficulties for some congregations but that in most places demographics still make possible the recovery of strength in congregations that for a generation have declined. All this is very hope producing.

Pastoral leadership is crucial if these congregations are to go forward, for these leaders from the outside bring vision and leadership. They generate within their constituencies a positive way of looking toward the future. Pastors provide a personal link between the various constituencies of a congregation, especially when some of these human groupings are newly created. In order to do their work of leadership, pastors need a group within the congregation with whom they can share their vision and work to develop congregational life consistent with that vision. This nerve center of leaders helps the pastors shape the new directions for the congregation to move. A board of elders may be the group to function this way; or there may be a pastor’s cabinet or advisory committee that shares in the planning. As the dreams of the pastor and the dreams of the people come together, the congregation has the chance of moving forward toward a new future.

Congregations like those described in this paper look back upon a strong history. They are living in an uncertain and fearful present. The critical issue is what they expect of the future. Do the people of the congregation believe that God is at work in their life? Can they dare believe that God is willing to lead them toward a new future, one different from the past, but one inspired by the gospel and adapted to the new needs of the community? Although we ought not forget the past, we need to focus primarily upon the future. Hope is stronger
than memory. If we look forward rather than backward, then we can be confident that God will lead us to new life.

Bibliographical Note


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