

CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE

Your congregation is a group of people who share religious values, rituals, and experiences, language and beliefs – all of which shape their behaviors and their responses to one another, and to the outside world. Being intentional in learning as much as possible about the culture of your congregation will enable you to create congruent ministries and perhaps avoid unnecessary conflict.

Below are some questions which can assist you in learning more about the culture of your congregation – things perhaps not made evident in the Congregation Profile. Some questions may be answered by observation, others by conversations with members. In seeking answers to these questions, attempt to be as objective as possible – try visualizing the group through the eyes of a newcomer.

Should some answers to these questions raise concerns for you, don't anticipate addressing them all at once; rather, regard such answers as helpful information to keep in mind over the period of settling in to your role as their pastor. Finally, with this information in hand, consider mindfully what you can/cannot, will/won't share about it with this family of God to which you have been called.

Culture of Faith

1. What are the key religious beliefs of this congregation? In this congregation, where does religious authority reside (i.e. Scripture, guidance of the Holy Spirit, the pastor)?
2. Are there any texts, in addition to the Bible, that are important to this congregation? If so, what do they say about it?
3. What religious rituals and traditions does this congregation observe? How often is the Eucharist a part of these traditions?
4. What faith symbols can you see as you look around the church?
5. What are role expectations of members? Of clergy (and clergy family)?
6. Who ministers to the sick and homebound?
7. Which senses are appealed to during worship?
8. How strong are the congregation's ties to the local judicatory? To the national church?
9. Are there denominational resources readily available? Has the denomination developed materials for use in various types of ministry?
10. What types of religious education activities does this congregation offer? Expect?
11. How would you describe this congregation's focus? on the present? future? past?

Social Context

1. What are the existing family structures within the congregation? What implications do they hold for ministry?
2. What does this congregation value (what is considered important to them)?
3. How does the congregation care for its members?
4. How does this congregation care for people outside its own membership?
5. Are there “seating patterns” (families, widows, socio-economic standards)?
6. What are the demographics of this congregation – age, gender, size, gender balance, family constitution?
7. How are children accepted into the worship life of the congregation (“children’s church”, children’s sermons, receiving the Eucharist)? Is there permission for them to behave like children?
8. What are this congregation’s patterns of gathering? Is it open only for Sunday worship? How would you describe relationships between congregation members? Are there any sub-groups?
9. How does the congregation react to those who are “different” from “us”?
10. What are the behavioral norms of this congregation?
11. What rituals does this congregation use to tell of God’s activity? Is experiencing God’s presence dependent more upon the members, or on the pastor/leader?
12. What are the congregation’s spoken and unspoken rules? Which type is more prevalent? (Example – “we care for our own”, “we don’t get involved in personal suffering”, only interact on an ad hoc basis, meetings take place before or after their “official” times)

Ethnicity

1. What cultural groups are represented within this congregation? Within the surrounding neighborhood?
2. How do different cultural groups interact?
3. Are there any cultural issues that should be considered in developing new ministries?
4. What real or imagined barriers stand in the way of participation for all groups?
5. What are the essential “myths” of these people?

6. What ethnic foods are incorporated into fellowship?

Politics & Legal Issues

1. How do external politics affect what happens within this congregation?
2. How do internal politics affect what happens within this congregation?
3. What legal issues would be important for this congregation to consider planning a new ministry?
4. What beliefs/ideas best describe what a “practicing” member should be like?
5. When was the membership roll of congregation members last examined? Cleared?
6. Has the congregation developed and/or implemented risk management policies and procedures? Are they in writing, and where are they located?
7. What “way of life” would be disrupted if changes were to be instituted?
8. What style of leadership is prevalent? hierarchical, patriarchal, or horizontal?
9. Where does ultimate leadership lie? pastor? judicatory leader? council? members? God?

Economics

1. How would you describe the economic status of members of this congregation? What are the socio-economic indicators of the members (clothing, jewelry, cars)? What are the socio-economic indicators of the community around the church?
2. What resources are you aware of both within and outside the faith community?
3. What church activities are given priority in the budget?
4. Are financial issues a concern for this congregation? If so, how would that impact the development of new ministries?
5. Is there one person/group that has a stronger influence on the financial aspects of ministry? How are contributions managed and/or reported? Is the congregation’s budget well organized by business standards, and is it readily available to each member?
6. Is there an endowment fund? What funds are restricted?

Education

1. What role does education have in the life of this congregation?
2. How might new ministries be integrated into the existing patterns of education?
3. What are the educational backgrounds of members of this congregation? How might this shape how ministries should be developed?
4. What educational opportunities are provided in this congregation? How might new ministries be integrated into existing educational offerings? Is integrating new ministries even possible?

Environmental Context

1. Describe the neighborhood of this congregation. How does the neighborhood impact the possibilities and need for outreach ministries?
2. Is the building handicapped accessible? Are hearing assistive devices available? Are there large print worship materials at every service?
3. Are there environmental issues in the church building or neighborhood? Are doorways in and out evident? Does the physical structure have curb appeal? Why not? How can this best be addressed?
4. How is space allocated; is it well maintained? When was the last renovation?
5. Where are phones and first-aid equipment located?
6. Does the congregation take advantage of opportunities for recycling and conservation of paper generated? in the kitchen?

Language

1. What languages are spoken within the congregation?
2. What religious language is used by this congregation?
3. Is this congregation of oral or written tradition? If oral, with whom do you need to talk? If written, what is available that you can read?
4. How is information shared in the congregation (Ex. transparency vs. 'gate-keeping', 'secret meetings')
5. Where are the "grape vines" located?

Technology

1. How is technology used in this congregation?
2. What avenues does this congregation use to distribute information regarding activities or news of the congregation?
3. What images are communicated via bulletin boards, banners, signs, posted announcements?

Climate

1. Of what is this congregation most proud?
2. What do people in your community (non-members) know your congregation for? What's your congregation's reputation like in the neighborhood?
3. What was your predecessor's reputation like in the community? in the congregation? in the local ministerium?
4. In what activities in the community (other than the congregation) are members of your community involved?

RESOURCES

Ammerman, N., [J.W. Carroll](#), [C. Dudley](#) & [W. McKinney](#) (Editors). (1998). Studying Congregations: A New Handbook. Abingdon Press.

Chase-Ziolek, M. (2005) Health, Healing and Wholeness: Engaging Congregations in Ministries of Health. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, pp. 127-130.

Wind, J. (Feb. 1993). Leading Congregations, Discovering Congregational Cultures. *The Christian Century*. The Christian Century Foundation, pp. 105-110.