

# **The Congregational Leader: Gospel Shaping The Congregation**

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## **The Context and The Problem**

In the free-market entrepreneurialism of American culture, it is all too easy for congregations abandon their unique identity as manifestations of the Body of Christ and succumb to the temptation to compete with the big business of American religion. In the big business of American religion, congregations become religious franchises marketing their religious services in search of improving their bottom line. The pastor becomes the CEO of a religious business driven by the needs and demands of the market. Leadership and management skills are an essential component of the pastor's portfolio.

In the last generation congregations have been flooded with a plethora of church management studies and programs. Much of it is needed and helpful. Congregations certainly are social organisms of this world or, as Lutherans would say, creatures of God's Law and left-handed kingdom in this world. Of course, they are more than that (more of that below). But in so far as they

are, they too are subject to the principles and dynamics that govern healthy organizations. They too can benefit from learning how these principles and dynamics function in social organisms including everything from a family to a large corporation.

Too often congregations have stuck their heads in the sand. Too often they have been infected with a kind of anti-nomian, other-worldly spirituality which has mistakenly assumed that the congregations are above and beyond such mundane matters. Paying attention to church management and leadership principles are beneath the spiritual mission of the church. Of course, one of the fatal flaws of such anti-nomianism is that God's governance of this creation through God's law cannot be wished away. God's law is going to have its way with us one way or another. Pretending that it is not relevant or doesn't exist within the walls of congregations is naïve and dangerous. As a result congregations have often ignored the wisdom of sound management and leadership principles at their own peril. For example, ignoring the constructive insights of family systems theory or defying the sound strategies of management by objective not only might deprive congregations of the opportunity to be better stewards of their mission but also create unnecessary obstacles to the stewardship of their mission.

Congregations need to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves when it comes to the stewardship of their mission. Being wise as serpents means paying attention to, learning about and putting into use the good gifts of God's creation. And that may include the sound principles of business management and leadership theory. Unfortunately all too often congregations and their leaders in search of some sort of spiritual or doctrinal purity choose to ignore these gifts of God's creation.

Congregations and their leaders also need to be as innocent as doves. As creatures of the Gospel they are as innocent as doves.

But in order to be a successful religious organization it is tempting for congregations to abandon their identity as creatures of the Gospel. Instead they are only interested in being as wise as serpents. This is especially true for Lutherans and other congregations of the old protestant "mainline" that have been suffering institutional losses for at least the last 40 years and are desperate to regain their piece of the pie and once again become a player in American society. We long for the days when congregations were social organizations with social clout and people paid attention to us like they pay attention to Wal-Mart or Microsoft today.

I have also seen far too many cases where such management and leadership theories have literally become "another Gospel." Theology, the gospel and the spiritual life of the congregation are securely bracketed and walled off in prayer groups, Bible studies, or a devotion at the beginning of a meeting where they can be safely contained and have no real affect in the real life of the congregation. We spout how important the Gospel is but when it comes to actually shaping the concrete realities of the church's life and mission, the Gospel is ignored. It is perceived as irrelevant or impractical. When it comes to making the big decisions that affect the real life of the congregation, it is all about management and leadership, which usually is code language for the Law. Manipulation, threat, coercion and the promises of success more often than not are the ways such management and leadership theories manifest themselves. IF we would only adopt this strategy or program, THEN we could increase our market share and grow the ministry (usually in some numerical, quantifiable way). Well meaning leaders of the congregation are not able to resist such temptations.

The challenge before the church and its congregations is enormous. Once we fail to distinguish Law and Gospel, once congregations fail to recognize that they are creatures of both

Law and Gospel, the problems multiply.

Congregations are social organisms of this world subject to and governed by the Law of God. But they are also creatures of the Gospel, created by, subject to and shaped by the Gospel of God. As such they are always “in this world but not of this world.” They are always “out of step” running not only against the grain of this world but also against the Law of God that permeates this world.

Therefore, conflict will always be at the heart of a congregation’s life. Congregations will always be in conflict with their surrounding culture because that culture always lives by the Law and not by the Gospel. The “last word” in the culture must always be Law and justice. The “last word” in the church must always be Gospel and mercy. The two can never be compromised and some how mixed together in some unconflicted “third way.”

The conflict can only be resolved in the proclamation of the Gospel and the repentance and faith it creates.

## **Gospel Shaping Leadership**

The one Gospel and sacraments has the power to “shape” the life of the congregation in special ways that make it different from all other social organizations in this world. Therefore, everything must be ordered in a congregation so that the one Gospel and sacraments can happen.

The Augsburg Confession Article 7 makes this same point. The church is where the Gospel has “the last word.” It is

*“the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for*

*the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel is preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word."*

When a congregation is ordered and structured so that the Gospel can have free course and be unfettered by legalism, amazing things can happen. The Spirit of God shatters our expectations and the congregation can break the stereotype that so many have of congregations: that they are stodgy, boring, unimaginative, self-serving, tradition bound and stifling of any creativity and innovation. Instead I found that a Gospel shaped congregation can be an amazing place of innovation, creativity and risk taking. Gospel shaped congregations can make great sacrifices for the sake of their mission and be places of extraordinary love and compassion.

What follows is very autobiographical. It will present several concrete examples of how I as a leader have attempted to shape congregational life with the Gospel in such a way that keeps Christ at the center and His good word as "the last word" in congregational life.

## **Core Values**

During the course of my ministry there are several distinct core values that have emerged in the congregations where I have served. These values were not legislated or imposed "from above" but emerged spontaneously "from below" over a period of years as I have sought to lead congregations and build communities shaped by the Gospel. When the Gospel of justification by faith alone through grace for the sake of Christ is proclaimed and believed, these core values emerge as "fruits of the Spirit." When the Gospel is at the center of a congregation's life, these core values "make good sense." Even though each congregation is

unique, I would expect that every congregation that is centered in the Gospel would reflect these values in its communal life. As a leader in the church, they have become the core values that have shaped not only my ministry but the ministry of the congregations in which I have served. They have helped me to develop a style of leadership that reinforces and supports the good news of the Gospel of justification by faith.

## 1) Where You “Get To”

This has become the most important core value of my ministry and the congregations where I have served. It more than anything else describes the core of what it means to be an evangelical leader of a congregation. It more than anything else describes what it means to be a congregational leader who is committed to having the Gospel shape the congregation where he/she serves.

If the Gospel is the free offer and promise of the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection to sinners, if the Gospel is the free gift of God’s grace in Christ, if the Gospel is the good news of God’s justification of the ungodly in Jesus Christ, then reception of that free offer and gracious gift is not an obligation but a privilege. The response to such a promise can only be the free consent of faith. The response of the believer to such a gracious offer is not a “gotta” but a “get to.” It is not a duty but an honor. It is not a burden but a joy. It is not slavery but freedom.

If that is the kind of response the proclamation of the Gospel is seeking and if everything in a congregation is ordered and shaped in order to facilitate that message, then everything in the congregation is a “get to.” No arms are to be twisted. No consciences are to be burdened. No commitments are coerced. Everything is to be freely offered and joyously given. Therefore, “Christ Church (where I currently serve) is **Where You**

## Get To!"

But it all begins to make sense when they begin to hear the startling and surprising offer of the Gospel and trust it: "You don't **have to** do anything to be saved, because of what God did for you in Christ. And you **get to** believe that good news. And you **get to** live a new kind of life because you believe that good news."

Initially the critics will think such talk is ridiculous. It seems too loose and too permissive. They argue that you can't run a congregation that way. This is no way to run a business and no way to run a church. In the real world people need to be told that they "gotta" do this or else. They are afraid of such freedom. They don't believe it will work. It seems too risky. How will the congregation ever get the money and volunteers it needs if "a few arms can't be twisted?"

The real root of such fear and timidity is lack of faith in the Gospel. The only way to overcome such fear and timidity is not by scolding or brow beating but by building faith in the Gospel. The only way to build faith in the Gospel is to proclaim the Gospel. You never argue or shame any one into faith. You love them into faith.

But once the critics have been loved into faith, such a message is good news. It is as if a huge burden has been removed. It is as if they have been set free to now support the mission and ministry of their congregation, not begrudgingly or resentfully because they believe they "have to" but willingly and joyfully with more commitment than ever before, . . . because they "get to." Because it is something they truly want to do and hasn't been imposed on them by someone else who knows better than they do, they embrace it with a passion and commitment that previously they didn't think was possible.

## 2) Servant Leadership – The Power of Love

But a congregation is not just another organization in this world under God's "left-handed" regime. What sets a congregation apart and is at the center of its existence is the Gospel, God's "right-handed" regime. The congregation is created, sustained, nurtured and shaped by the Gospel. The Gospel is an entirely different kind of power and authority than the Law. Its gracious offer of God's grace and mercy frees its recipients from preoccupation with themselves. Its gracious offer of freedom requires an entirely different kind of leadership. This is evangelical leadership. It is servant leadership that relies on the power and authority of the Gospel. This is the power of love and not fear or threat. It is leadership that does not coerce or threaten. It does not challenge or demand. Instead it is leadership that reflects the leadership of Christ. It is "cross-shaped" taking the shape and form of a servant. It does not demand the obedience of its subjects. Instead it offers itself in service. It persuades by means of love and compassion. Those who respond to this kind of leadership do so not because they "have to" but because they "Get To."

For example, in the congregation in which I currently serve, according to the constitution I have no vote on the church council. This is very different from the two congregations in which I previously served where the pastor(s) always had a vote. At first I was surprised and uneasy with the arrangement. But now I would have it no other way. Without a vote I am more free to operate by the power of persuasion. I am less likely to succumb to the pressures of power politics. I can be an advocate for patience, compassion and caution as issues are raised, arguments are made and options are considered. I can lobby for building consensus, for listening to different points of view, for loving one another, until ideally the members of the council can be of one mind. When that happens, consensus is achieved.



Votes are unanimous, a “Get To.” No one has to be loser. Everyone is a winner.

### **3) Teach, Teach, Teach . . . Relationships, Relationships, Relationships**

The pastor has primary responsibility to oversee this gospeling of the Gospel in the congregation. The pastor is the primary teacher and theologian of the congregation. There is no aspect of the congregation’s life that is theologically irrelevant. Therefore, every attempt should be made to “teach” the Faith and the Gospel by connecting it to the concrete and specific missional activities of the congregation. Interpreting the most ordinary activities of the congregation in terms of Law and Gospel can be a very effective way of teaching the Faith. In fact, these informal settings in the midst of the struggles of daily life may often be far more effective venues for teaching the Faith than a formal class. This “wording” and “rewording” of daily life in terms of Law and Gospel is a central function of pastoral role in the congregation.

In addition to regularly structured “teaching” in a variety of class or small group situations, the pastor can teach informally in committee meetings, during pastoral visits, youth activities and even through informal conversations during a fellowship event. The fundamental goal is always to make connections between the Faith, especially as it is interpreted through the distinction between Law and Gospel, and the lived experiences of the congregation and its members so that people can not only experience the gracious comfort offered by the Gospel but understand what it means for the shaping of their lives. And with such understanding eventually comes the ability to speak that Gospel to others. They too can help others make theological sense out of their lives. As a result the ministry of the Gospel

is multiplied. It is not the possession of a few experts but of the whole people of God who then can carry that Gospel to the problems and needs of their daily lives. Constant attention to “teaching” in all the varied “relationships” of congregational life can help to make that possible.

Congregational leaders shape the life of their congregation with the power of the Gospel by teaching, teaching, teaching and more teaching. And teaching always means establishing, maintaining and growing relationships with others. Teaching the Gospel always takes place in relationship with someone else, relationships shaped and formed by the love of God in Christ. In short, the pastor cannot be isolated in an office behind a desk. The pastor needs to be with the people in the midst of their daily lives.

Through the Gospel Christ changes not only the relationship between God and us but also our relationships with other human beings. Every and any relationship the pastor has with anyone else is potentially a relationship that Christ can transform. Hence, a congregational leader is always seeking to develop and expand relationships with others in the congregation. A leader values relationships with others. Through such relationships trust can be built between the pastor and the congregation. When such leadership reflects the love of Christ, people begin to trust the leader and realize that the leader’s agenda is not personal success but genuinely caring for them. That trust enables the deepening of relationships and a greater willingness on the part of the people of the congregation to accept the leadership of the pastor in difficult times when problems must be faced and difficult decisions made. When such trust has been established in the complexity of human relationships that fill the life of the congregation, the Good news of the Gospel and can begin to change lives and transform the culture of a congregation.

## 4) Living in a Messy Congregation

Life in a congregation centered in the Gospel will often be messy. Human beings are complex and unpredictable. They are both sinners and saints and will remain so until they breathe their last or Jesus comes again. Add to that the Spirit of God that blows to and fro and cannot be manipulated or controlled and you have the recipe for congregational life that can be wildly unpredictable and chaotic. But it also can be immensely supportive to its members and amazingly creative in its mission.

Precise, careful planning and conscientious, efficient management are important values in a congregation. Every congregational leader ought to want to be an efficient and effective steward of the talents and resources of a congregation. Waste and inefficiency can handicap a congregation's mission and inhibit ministry. But they ought not to have the last word in the life of the congregation. A congregation first and foremost ought to be faithful to the Gospel, to be a sign of God's coming and gracious kingdom in this world, and secondarily competent and efficient. Too often concerns for efficient management, meeting "the bottom line," following the constitution, and "we've never done it this way before" (the notorious *seven last words* of the church) inhibit the congregation's mission and ability to respond to the often unpredictable and surprising opportunities for mission and ministry that can be suddenly appear. Sometimes these legitimate concerns for bottom line efficiency ("If it's not in the budget, we can't do it") or organizational approval ("It's not in the constitution, we can't do it") prevent the congregation from responding to genuine need and new opportunities for service. Such concerns more often reflect a faithless commitment to play it safe rather than trust in God's promises and a willingness to let go of the safety of the past for a future secured only by the promises of God.

People are finicky and unpredictable. Congregations that are dedicated to serving people with gracious promises of God will also be finicky and unpredictable. That will often push congregations to difficult places where ministry may not always be neat and measurable. There is always a narrow line to walk between being institutionally responsible and creatively available. There will always be the tension between the bean counters who want to maintain a balanced budget and the institutional stability of the congregation . . . and innovators who are always pushing the envelope, trying to serve more people, taking new risks and attempting ministries that have never been done before. This tension is healthy and a good sign. It may often mean that a congregation's life is messy and unpredictable, but it is a sign the Gospel is alive and the Spirit of God is "stirring the pot." The bean counters are necessary in order to maintain good stewardship and faithful management of a congregation's resources. The innovators are necessary to prevent a congregation from becoming complacent and to keep it alert to the constantly changing needs of a congregation's ministry context.

Congregational leadership should not be disturbed by such "messy" congregational life. If congregational leadership keeps focused on the Gospel, such tension is inevitable. Such messiness can be expected. It is what congregations "Get To" do when they trust the Gospel. When such messiness is accepted as a fact of life in faithful congregations, congregational leaders do not have to worry about quelling the conflict or resolving the tension but can rejoice that the Gospel is alive and that the people see the tension not as a burden to be fled or a problem to be solved but a blessing to be received, a "Get To" to be enjoyed and part of the ferment that moves a congregation's mission forward.

Congregations have and always will be messy for another reason.

They have and always will be messy concoctions of sinners and saints. And that division runs right straight through the heart of every congregational member. Recognizing the reality of *simul iustus et peccator* can be both humbling and liberating. It reminds every congregational leader that just when you think the Gospel is actually working and things are actually getting better and the congregation is actually growing and its members are actually behaving themselves and success in this world is actually possible, the roof falls in. Just look at Paul's correspondence with the congregations of the New Testament and any sense of accomplishment and progress will be chastened. Life in a Christian congregation will always be messy.

A pastoral colleague now deceased who was my mentor in ministry for many years always reminded me when I came complaining to him about the bad behavior of the people in my congregation, "What else did you expect? They are still sinners." The good news is that they are also saints and their saintliness is not dependent upon their ability to behave or get better but on the mercy of Christ. The only way to deal with sinners is to administer Law and Gospel. Only through the careful administration of Law and Gospel will they repent and trust what they already are by the grace of God. Then, God willing, they might begin once again to live the new life.

This is a daily reality in the life of a congregation. Such conflict is also a reflection of the inescapable reality that every day the sinner dies and the saint rises again. That means that congregational life by definition is messy. Attempts to clean it up by any other means than the appropriate application of Law and Gospel ought to be regarded with great suspicion.

# The Shape of the Gospel In The Life Of The Congregation

I do not presume to be a guru with all the answers. These are not “how to” prescriptions on how to build a congregation. What follows are simply some examples of how I have seen the Gospel shape the congregations where I have served over the past three decades. The list is not inclusive. These are snapshots of how the Gospel has shaped congregational life where this leader has sought (not always faithfully or effectively) to keep the Gospel central to the congregation’s life.

They often emerged from the long and slow process of building consensus through prayer, conversation, trial and error and above all wrestling with these two fundamental questions:

1) “What does the Gospel of Jesus Christ have to do with this? How does this help to **magnify Christ** in such a way that people are **comforted**?

2) How does this **help and serve people**?

The examples which I cite below are all taken from the traditional ministry areas that can be found in most congregations. Not all congregations will be organized in this way or in terms of these categories. But the functions remain the same. Every congregation, if it is truly seeking to carry out its mission, will try to carry out these functions in some capacity.

## ***1) Worship***

Worship is the central activity in the life of the congregation. Nothing builds a sense of community like corporate worship. Through corporate worship congregational leadership and

especially the leadership of the pastor can have the strongest influence on shaping a Gospel grounded and Gospel focused culture in the congregation. Therefore it ought to be done well. Doing it well means not only that it functions well, i.e., exhibits high standards of clear communication, excellent music and an order of service that flows smoothly and is not confusing or disjointed, but also that it “does the Gospel well.”

“Doing the Gospel well” means that the work of Christ is magnified and the comfort and benefits of Christ’s work are offered to sinners. “Doing the Gospel well” means that Christ and his work are never wasted. They are absolutely necessary for the salvation of sinners and the life of the church. When this happens, good news is proclaimed. Consciences are comforted. People are set free. “Doing the Gospel well” is the purpose of all the aspects of worship including preaching, music and liturgy. “Doing the Gospel well” is central to vital worship because it is the Gospel that sustains and nourishes the faith of the gathered community. Without the Gospel the very identity of the community is at risk.

In addition, “doing the Gospel well” in worship will help the congregation’s response to the Gospel in worship be a joyful “get to.” When the “Gospel is done well,” worship is a “get to.” The congregation comes to worship hungering to be fed by the promises of the Gospel knowing that it won’t be disappointed. When worship is a “get to,” the prayers will be heartfelt, the singing enthusiastic, the offerings generous and attendance a high priority among the members because they do not want to miss out on being nourished by the Gospel. And because of the Gospel, the congregation joyfully raises its praise and gratitude to God.

“Doing the Gospel well” means that preaching proclaims Law and Gospel. The sacraments are celebrated frequently because they

are not an “add-on” but essential to sustaining and nourishing faith. In my ministry that has always meant weekly celebration of communion and a systematic effort to increase the use of Baptism as a means to demonstrate, illustrate and proclaim the Gospel in worship. One example has been the quarterly recognition and affirmation of Baptism in worship and the monthly recognition of Baptism birthdays.

Maintaining the basic form and shape of the historic liturgy in worship is an effective tool in “doing the Gospel well.” Even if the preaching was lousy and congregational singing uninspired, the very structure and form of the liturgy still can magnify Christ and offer his benefits to troubled consciences. How many times after “bombing” a sermon does the preacher console himself by uttering “at least there is the liturgy!”

Evangelical freedom also permits flexibility in the liturgy. That might include some of the following: use of drama in a variety of forms to proclaim the sermon and Scripture; children’s messages that are not just moralistic lessons but actually proclaim the Gospel and reinforce the message of the larger service; the use of modern media and technology to enrich the visual experience of the service; music that is diverse and done well reflecting both the tastes and culture of the congregation and those from around the world. But as important as musical taste and style are, word and text must always be the first consideration, because the Gospel is a word that proclaims a message and this message is what is at the center of worship.

## ***2) Stewardship***

There is probably no aspect of congregational life in which the leadership is more tempted to embrace the Law at the expense of the Gospel to shape congregational life than stewardship



That is especially the case in the financial management of a congregation. For a whole host of reasons (too numerous to address here) leaders, when faced with deficits or enormous financial challenges (e.g. a building program, debt reduction, funding of additional staff or programming), will resort to the coercion of the Law instead of the promises of the Gospel to motivate the congregation. Financial support becomes a “have to” instead of a “get to.” People “have to” give their money or the mission will fail. They “have to” give or they aren’t really committed. If they don’t give, they won’t be blessed. If they want to grow in their faith, this is what they must do.

The same temptation is also present when it comes to volunteers and managing “time and talent” of congregational members. Leaders feel they need to be more persuasive. Fearful of what might happen if they don’t have volunteers for the church council or the Sunday School, they resort to all sorts of manipulative tactics including everything from arm twisting to bribery, none of which are “get to’s.”

Evangelical leaders want the Gospel to motivate congregation’s support of its ministry through its offerings of “time, talent and treasure.” Therefore telling the story of Christ and his offer of abundant love is at the center of all stewardship. **Because** of Christ and what he has done for them, **therefore** congregations **get to** give themselves away in service to others. All stewardship begins with that liberating message. That means offerings of time, talent and treasure are “get to’s,” privileges and opportunities.

If people are unwilling to give or feel that they are being coerced, the leader needs to address two things: either 1) the leaders are not “telling the Gospel” and are administering the Law or 2) they have not sufficiently identified and described the “need” so that the potential giver does not understand how

their gifts of time, talent or treasure can help to meet that need.

Often in the church stewardship leaders will speak of the “giver’s need to give” which can be satisfied by giving to the church. This is just another version of the Law. It appeals to the self-interest of sinners. “Give so that you can satisfy YOUR need. And IF you don’t, THEN your need will go unsatisfied, THEN you won’t be happy.” This is quite different from how the Gospel shapes stewardship. The Gospel is not about something the giver has got to do to satisfy his own need. The Gospel begins with GOD satisfying the giver’s needs in Christ. As a consequence of trusting the Gospel, the giver is free from having to satisfy his own needs and instead seeks to satisfy the needs of OTHERS! Generous stewardship is motivated by 1) setting people free from their obsession with self through the proclamation of the Gospel and then 2) informing them of the numerous opportunities present to serve the needs of others. Those needs are represented not only by the needs of the congregation’s mission but by the innumerable needs people encounter in the callings of daily life.

Gospel shaping of the stewardship life of the congregation always does these two things: 1) It proclaims Law and Gospel. Thereby the Gospel is “the last word.” It sets people free to serve. 2) It presents to the congregation needs and opportunities to serve and describes how such service can make a positive difference in people’s lives. The beneficiary in this process is a world in need. The givers may indeed experience blessings and feel good about themselves. They may make a difference in the world. But when that becomes the motivator of the process, it is no longer Gospel. It is the Law. And the Law will either appeal to pride or accuse the conscience for not doing enough. And Christ is wasted and no one is comforted.

Opportunities to give and serve, whether it be gifts of time, talent or treasure, are always presented as privileges and joys, something the giver “gets to” do. If it is not a “get to,” then maybe God doesn’t want it done. Then it won’t be a “fruit of the Spirit” flowing from the free consent of faith. When it comes to recruiting volunteers, never coerce. Always be clear about the need that needs to be met. But also give the potential volunteer the freedom to say “no.” The congregation needs volunteers who “want to” volunteer and do not feel coerced or manipulated. If they do feel coerced or manipulated, they will not be good volunteers. If a leader is unable to recruit volunteers, then maybe it is because the leader has been asking the wrong people and hasn’t yet found the right one. Or (in spite of what the leader wanted and thought was so important) God doesn’t want it done.

This approach toward the financial stewardship of the congregation also calls into question strategies that emphasize the “tithe.” Often the “tithe” has been taught as the Biblically mandated measurement of faithful giving. But a motivational strategy that relies on measuring a certain percentage of giving (10% and beyond) puts the emphasis on the wrong place. (In addition the Biblical case for it is weak.) The Gospel frees the giver from having to measure “how am I doing?” to asking “what can I give to help someone in need?”

If “tithe” talk is to be used at all in the congregation, it ought to be used in a way that does not undermine the good news of the Gospel. “Tithe” could be used as a way of talking about financial support of the congregation, if it is a means to talk about “first fruits” giving or giving that is voluntary, proportionate and systematic. It could be a helpful way to talk about making financial support of the congregation a priority of your life. One “gets to” set aside a percentage of money to support their congregation because he wants to help the needs of

others through the ministry of the congregation. But when it becomes a tool to measure “how am I going?” then it becomes the Law and will create either the pride or despair that the Law always creates.

The use of the “pledge” in financial stewardship also needs to be addressed in the same way. It must be portrayed as a “get to.” One “gets to” pledge to the ministry of the congregation in the same way one “pledges” to exercise every day or be on time to pick up your kids. It is way you “get to” prioritize something that you want to be important in your life.

### **3) *Evangelism***

Evangelism too can be shaped by the good news of the Gospel. Like everything else in a Gospel shaped congregation, it too is a “get to.” It is something congregations “get to” do because of who they are in Jesus Christ. It is so much more than marketing and publicity. It is shaping everything in the congregation’s life with eye toward the stranger and the outsider. Evangelical leaders remind their congregations that everything they do is “for the sake of those not here yet.”

Gospel shaped evangelism is “a no brainer.” It is something that leaders can create in congregations with a Gospel shaped ministry. Congregations that are shaped by the Gospel are freed from worries of self-concern and the anxieties of survival. They are unafraid to practice hospitality to outsiders. They don’t worry about “what this is going to cost.” They are eager to welcome because there is always room for more around Jesus’ table.

Although the primary function of worship is not evangelism, it certainly is a primary point of contact between the congregation and outsiders, especially those who have had some previous

exposure to the Christian faith and congregational life. It is extremely intimidating and highly unlikely that strangers who have had little exposure to the church and the Christian faith are going to wander into worship on a Sunday morning. Nevertheless, church shoppers often may have their first contact with a congregation at Sunday worship and therefore congregations need to be welcoming and hospitable places. That means having worship services that are accessible to the uninitiated. That does not mean that a congregation has to “dumb down in order to reach out.” Worship does not have to be reduced to the lowest common denominator and its message so compromised that the Gospel is lost in sea of banal trivialities and superficial moralisms. But worship ought to be easy to follow and not so difficult and complicated that even the average church goer is going to have to struggle to follow.

Worship ought always to be constructed with an eye to the outsider. Worship may be more accessible if worship folders include most of the liturgy and the use of multiple books is minimized. In some congregations that may mean projecting the liturgy on overhead screens and coupling it with the use of multi-media. In some contexts and depending on how it is done, this use of multi-media may make worship more accessible to outsiders and contribute to the evangelistic outreach of a congregation. In other contexts, it may not.

It continues to be true that most first time visitors to a congregation come because they have been invited by someone they know and trust. That means two things. First, the inviters are so convinced of the value of what is happening in their congregation that they want to invite someone to experience it with them. Second, the inviters are proactive. They won't be shy. They will take the initiative and invite because they are so enthused about what they have been experiencing.

A congregation whose culture is shaped by the Gospel and is free from fear of change will consider such hospitality evangelism a privilege and an opportunity. There will be an interest in publicizing the congregation and its ministry in the community. There will be desire to welcome the community and strangers into its building. There will be a willingness to greet and welcome visitors, to show an interest in them and serving their needs.

But all of this will be a frightening burden and an unsettling threat if people don't feel comfortable with themselves, their faith and the mission of their congregation. The Gospel shapes those kinds of attitudes and makes evangelism a "get to." There may not be people lining up to join the evangelism committee, but there will be a growing number of people who feel so good about their congregation and their faith that they won't consider it a burden to talk about it. It will be natural to invite others to join them in the course of their daily routine whether they are on the evangelism committee or not. An evangelism committee with programs and strategies for publicity, outreach and follow-up with visitors is important. But the most important factor in creating a hospitable and evangelistic congregation is shaping a congregation around the Gospel. It is the Gospel that promises to set people free to welcome and seek out the stranger. Scolding members about lack of growth, their obligation to grow the congregation or their need to show the marks of discipleship and invite the stranger is only running back to the Law. It will create either self-righteous and pushy evangelists or guilty consciences and people who want to have nothing to do with evangelism because they feel so inadequate to the task.

#### **4) *Mission***

Mission is essential to the identity and purpose of every congregation: *Every pastor is a mission director. Every*

*congregation is a mission center. Every member is a missionary.* What drives this mission is making Christ known through the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Without the Gospel of Christ this description of mission could just as easily be a description of a McDonald's hamburger franchise

*Mission* is not just in some distant land to dark skinned people who speak languages we don't understand. *Mission* is what takes place on the doorstep of every congregation. When people leave the narthex and go out into the parking lot of the congregation where I currently serve, they are reminded by a sign overhead that reads, "You are now entering the mission field."

That means that mission could be in some foreign land or in the neighborhoods down the street. Such flexibility is reflected in congregations shaped by the Gospel. In my current congregation that means supporting a significant commitment to our denomination (ELCA) and its outreach. But it also means supporting a multiplicity of missions both local and international outside the ELCA. It is often chaotic and messy.

Gospel shaping leadership encourages such a multifaceted approach to mission. We have sent individuals to Asia on a medical mission to tsunami ravaged areas. We have sent individuals to work at a Christian orphanage in Salem, India. We have welcomed the leader of that mission into our congregation. We have sent individuals on a medical mission to the Amazon valley in Brazil.

Some leaders are concerned that too many such opportunities are too confusing and may create "compassion fatigue." They are concerned that so many opportunities may drain away from the responsibilities "here at home." But if the economy of the kingdom is abundance and the ability of the Holy Spirit to move

the hearts of people is endless, then who are we to say there is not enough to go around. When individuals in the congregation are passionate about certain missions and come forward with their own heartfelt and well-reasoned proposals, what does the leadership think it is going to accomplish by standing in the way? Is it trying to squelch the power of Spirit? As long as the appeals to support such missions are “get to’s” and such appeals are not coercive or manipulative, then leaders are not to worry about things getting too messy or too chaotic. As long as people are willing to offer their support and it is a “get to,” then Gospel shaping leadership ought to not just be “getting out of way” but offering its support and encouragement.

One of the most interesting mission phenomenon that has evolved in the congregation where I now serve is a “mission partnership” with a much smaller, urban, multi-cultural congregation located in a poor African American neighborhood some 30 minutes drive away. I believe that this clearly was a mission partnership that was shaped by the power of the Gospel in each congregation. It is a partnership focused on each congregation sharing its gifts with the other. We share leaders, staff, music, worship styles, vision for mission . . . and money. Members of each congregation have become friends and acquaintances. We worship together a couple of times each year. The pastors meet regularly for mutual support and encouragement.

What is amazing is that there has never been a resolution or vote taken by either congregation to formalize, regulate or legitimize the relationship. It has emerged gradually over the last 8 years as two very different congregations shaped by the same Gospel have discovered this common mission and this common interest in supporting each other. Because this mission partnership was never imposed but has always been a “get to,” an opportunity and privilege, it is a sure sign that it was shaped by the Gospel and empowered by the Holy Spirit.



# Conclusion

Examples from only four areas of congregational life have been cited. The Gospel shapes congregational life in numerous other areas not cited here, including education, social ministry, faith formation, and staff relations. Faithful and effective leadership in such congregations always focuses on the centrality of the Gospel. In those congregations the Gospel of Jesus Christ always has “the last word.” The work of Christ is magnified in such a way that good news and comfort is always offered to the hearers of its message and the recipients of its ministry. Leaders see properly distinguishing Law and Gospel as an essential part of this task. It keeps congregations Christian and the good news . . . good news.

Four core values are essential to Gospel shaping leadership:

- 1) Gospel shaped congregations are always places **“where you get to.”**
- 2) In Gospel shaped congregations leadership is always leadership dedicated to **service and sacrifice.**
- 3) In Gospel shaped congregations leaders are always **teaching** the Gospel and always shaping **personal relationships** with members of the congregation with the Gospel.
- 4) In Gospel shaped congregations **life is always messy.** And that’s OK.

Congregations are first of all called to be faithful and only secondarily to be neat and orderly.

At the heart of vital Christian congregations is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel has the power to shape congregational life in ways that significantly set it apart from life in the world. These Gospel shapes are distinct and unique to the church

and its congregations. These distinctive shapes all point to Christ, the heart of the church, the “last word” in its life, the content of its message and the shape of its mission.

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