

Strategic Planning in Congregations

Public Report



Strategic Planning in Congregations is intended to help congregations understand the use of outside consultants to guide strategic planning. With input from six congregations in the midst of strategic planning and planning consultants who utilize differing methodologies, this piece offers a variety of viewpoints that will enhance a congregation's knowledge of the planning process and ways to encourage successful outcomes. Although the congregations in this article bear fictitious names, they are based on the characteristics of the congregations interviewed.

Community Church is a growing faith community on the edge of a major metropolitan area. Attendance has reached the capacity of the facility and staff. Now they ask, “What can we do to accommodate those who want to come to our church?” They engage a strategic planning consultant to help them navigate this complex transition.

Hope Chapel has recently experienced the end of a successful, 30-year pastorate. Following an interim period they call a dynamic young pastor to lead them. Poised on the edge of a new era of ministry and mission, the congregation hires a consultant to help them answer the question, “What do we do now?”

New Beginnings is a new church start with about 50 members. Located in a small Midwestern town, they have been worshipping in a storefront for more than a year. They have purchased property on the edge of town, but momentum for building has come to a standstill along with membership growth. The small group is divided over how much debt they can assume and how large the congregation should be before starting to build. When the pastor learns there are denominational resources to assist the congregation in moving forward, they decide to pursue a strategic planning process.

First Church is an 80-year-old congregation in an established city neighborhood. The current pastor arrived following a difficult pastorate that ended in dismissal and congregational decline. Within a few years of his arrival attendance rebounded by fifty percent and then stalled. Recent financial shortages have become cause for concern. They engaged an outside consultant to help them find a way to thrive, not just to survive.

Whether taking steps to remain vital, address rapid growth or gradual decline, answer the “What next?” of a just-completed building program, navigate a pastoral or staff change, or weather the crucial 40-year mark in the congregation's life cycle, all congregations find themselves in need of strategic planning at some time. In fact, strategic planners interviewed for this inquiry suggest that a regular cycle of strategic planning is essential for vital congregational ministry.

Why Strategic Planning?

The mission of the Center for Congregations is to help Indiana congregations find and use resources to meet their practical challenges and to share the Center's learnings with the wider community. Over the past ten years, strategic planning has emerged as a common challenge for congregations. To learn more about the breadth and depth of strategic planning resources the Center explored the work of strategic planning consultants and the experience of congregations. This report shares those findings.

Many congregations do their own strategic planning, and there are numerous resources to assist them. However, the focus of this report is

on strategic planning which is guided by an outside consultant. It is based on information gleaned from interviews conducted by the Center during 2005 and 2006 with strategic planning consultants and the congregations who engaged them.

While this report does not presume to be comprehensive on the topic of consultant-led strategic planning in congregations, we do believe this study is unique in that it explores current practices based on the self-described work of thirteen consultants and the experience of consultation as described by leadership teams from six Midwest congregations.

Finding Resources

For print, audio-visual, and web-based strategic planning resources visit

Congregational Resource Guide
www.congregationalresources.org

centers that specialize in resources such as
Congregational Resource Center
www.cts.edu/library

Center for Congregations
www.centerforcongregations.org

Methodology

This exploration is called a "resource inquiry" to convey its conversational/narrative nature and to distinguish it from the more formal process of "research."

Thirteen strategic planning consultants with regional or national practices participated in 90-minute telephone interviews during the spring and summer of 2005. They responded to a set of questions designed to elicit descriptions of their process, theoretical and theological foundation, data collection practices, written reports, evaluation, and level of involvement in implementation and follow up. They also answered practical questions about issues such as fees and time frames.

The consultant sampling included Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish men and women, clergy, and lay, some of whom work solely with congregations, others who

divide their work among government, non-profit and jurisdictional entities. A few are relatively new to this work while most have spent a decade or more in the practice. All are witness to ongoing learning as they interact with congregations across the country, each unique in time, place, gifts, and calling.

The congregations interviewed are located within the eight-county metropolitan region which constitutes the the Center for Congregation's Central service area. They represent six denominations: Episcopal Church, USA; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; Roman Catholic; Presbyterian, USA; and United Church of Christ. In each case the pastor and at least one lay leader with experience in the congregation's planning process were interviewed. They participated in 90-minute, on-site interviews during the spring and summer of 2006.

Strategic Planning with a Consultant: One Congregation's Story

The dynamics and outcomes of a congregation's work with a strategic planning consultant are perhaps best conveyed through the story of one congregation. So, the story of Community Church (actually an aggregate of several congregations interviewed) continues....

Finding and hiring a consultant Once the congregation determined that they wanted to bring in an outside consultant, the pastor sought help in identifying potential candidates. A small task force was charged with interviewing and recommending a consultant whose style and process were deemed a good fit for the congregation. Their choice was contracted for a total of six days over a period of 18 months. His fee was \$1200 a day plus expenses.

While Community Church underwent a thorough interview process to identify their consultant, other congregations engaged someone with whom they were already familiar or who was recommended by their denomination. Still others chose consultants for reasons unrelated to their ultimate goal, such as the first one to return their call. Availability and cost also played a role in congregations' final decisions.

Some consultants utilize readiness assessment tools as part of the introductory interview process to help the congregation determine whether there are other issues that need to be addressed before or while embarking on a strategic planning process. The Transforming Church Index is one such tool. (See Resources)

Community Church and the consultant entered into a written agreement which specified time frame, costs, deliverables (written report, for

example), lines of accountability, evaluation, mutual expectations and an exit clause.

Getting to work Once the consultant was engaged, he met with the governing board. With guidance from the consultant, the board chose a group of seven people for the planning team and directed them to serve as liaisons between the consultant, the board and the congregation.

“(Our consultant) talked about how we approach God with empty hands, and we let God speak and fill our hands rather than presenting (God) with our agenda and asking (God) to bless it.”

— Pastor

Led by the Spirit This consultant set the stage for strategic planning by asking, “Where is God leading you?”

Information gathering The planning team used a congregational survey provided by the consultant to garner information on their ministry, membership demographics, level of members' involvement and individuals' impressions about the congregation's ministry.

The information-gathering phase of strategic planning solicits congregational preferences, opinions, demographics, perceived needs, issues, hopes and concerns. This can take the form of written surveys and questionnaires, document reviews, meetings, and individual and small group interviews with staff, core leadership and congregation. One consultant used the information-gathering phase to discover group perceptions about roadblocks and distinct ways of experiencing the same roadblock. “I'm trying to hear how people are framing the issues themselves,” the consultant explained. Another congregation did an environmental scan using Percept data (see Resources) This information educates the consultant, the leadership team, and the congregation and aids in setting direction and agenda for the process.

Environmental scan To engage the planning team in reflection on their ministry and context, the consultant led them through the SWOT Analysis, an environmental scan whereby the group identifies the congregation's internal strengths and weaknesses and its external opportunities and threats.

Identifying the positive core Two weekend retreats were held over six weeks for the planning team and congregational leadership. They engaged in conversations to identify the positive core of the congregation, naming things the congregation does well, recalling times when the congregation was at its best, brainstorming its personal, economic, physical, relational, and institutional assets. They studied scripture and prayed together to discern God's will for the congregation. They crafted a vision statement to capture their sense of what God was calling the congregation to be and do, and a mission statement to name areas of emphasis and approach. This sort of work can also

For a helpful guide to choosing the planning committee, see Gil Rendle and Alice Mann's *Holy Conversations*, page 230 (See Resources)

be done over a series of weekly or monthly meetings and with a combination of planning team, core leadership, and congregation at large.

Communication Regular and various means of communication kept the congregation informed and involved, allowing opportunities for input and feedback at crucial points along the way. These communication methods included newsletter and bulletin articles, pulpit announcements, all-congregation "Town Hall Meetings," bulletin board displays and small group gatherings.

Consensus The consultant facilitated conversations that enabled the congregation to reach consensus on their vision and mission statements. Later, they translated the vision and mission into concrete plans for ministry by asking, "What will the congregation do in order to realize the mission we have claimed?". Consensus was reached and a final plan was presented at a special congregational gathering. Its acceptance was celebrated with a meal and brief dedication.

Transforming Church Index

The Transforming Church Index is an online congregational survey that compares the results to a large national pool of congregations. The cost is about \$450 per congregation. The Transforming Church Index measures five characteristics of a healthy church:

- Healthy (genetic) code – Everything is aligned with their core identity;
- Healthy sense of community – partners in ministry, ministry as way of life;
- Shared leadership – minister is more facilitator than decision maker;
- Outward focus – not just outward but a focused, clear sense of what they will and won't do;
- Capacity to change, reinvent themselves when the 40-year life cycle circles around.

Defining Strategic Planning

Consultants define strategic planning as...

"...A form of planning that addresses the fundamental questions of 'Who are we?' 'Where are we going?' 'What are we all about?'"

"...Helping an organization envision its preferred future and identify the steps required to move in that direction."

"...An ongoing approach of strategic thinking about the future. The one word that sums it up is 'intentionality'."

"...Creating a focus that allows an organization to adapt to any internal or external challenges that may present themselves along the way."

"...A process by which an organization takes a look at itself and its surroundings and tries to align its purpose with those surroundings."

Implementation and follow up Community Church's consultant worked with them to formulate an implementation plan, which would be carried out after the consultant finished his work. Although follow up and implementation were not part of his contract, he remained available for phone conversations as needed.

Most strategic planning consultants' work ends with the adoption of a strategic plan. As with Community Church, the plan generally includes implementation steps outlining what will be done, when, and by whom. The consultant is seldom present to facilitate this phase unless contracted to do so. According to a number of the consultants interviewed, final responsibility for implementation usually rests with the senior minister. Congregational interviewees did not state this conviction.

Evaluation Community Church's consultant used a written evaluation form with the planning team at the close of his work with the congregation.

“A huge part of being of a consultant is to be able to take the reality a congregation already knows and articulate it. He listens, he tells us what he heard, and we say, ‘Ah-ha!’” — Pastor

In our study, formal evaluation tools and processes were not employed by most consultants nor were they requested by the congregation. As one lay leader put it, “We

considered the congregation's adoption of our plan to be a positive evaluation of our work.”

How are they doing? Community Church's vision and mission statements have become standards by which all their planning is measured. If a ministry or program does not align with the

mission, the leadership considers whether it will be eliminated or whether the guiding statement needs to be revisited. Often, it is the statement which stands. For example, when a neighborhood preschool program housed at the church chose not to include limited religious programming, they were asked to relocate. While the decision to ask a long-standing and highly regarded program to find new quarters was painful, the existence of the mission statement gave the congregation the rationale for making their decision. The departure of the school freed up needed space for a growing Christian Education program and helped the school find quarters better suited to its needs.

The congregation is acting on their plan in other ways – they have hired an associate minister to accommodate their growth and purchased adjacent land for more parking. In time they plan to expand their building.

Their vision statement is prominent. It is featured on the church's letterhead, worship bulletins, and monthly newsletter. It is part of leadership retreats, committee meetings and the fall stewardship campaign. It influences the choice of the congregation's annual ministry theme.

More than just a plan for action, this experience gave Community Church a clear sense of identity and focus. It gave them tools and skills – increased their capacity – for thinking and acting strategically long into the future. This is strategic planning at its best.

Vision vs. Mission

The terms “Vision Statement” and “Mission Statement” are often used interchangeably. Here they are used, respectively, to distinguish between a statement describing the ‘Big Picture/hoped-for future’ and the manner in which that future will be manifest in a particular setting.

What We're Learning About Planning Led by Consultants

What makes the process effective?

- Consultant has experience in and respect for congregations. "If you don't have a clear respect for how God has been at work (in a congregation) in the past and is at work in the present, you can't truly help them understand how God is going to work through them in the future," said one consultant;
- Congregational leadership is solidly behind the process;
- Congregation as a whole is kept informed and involved;

"Everybody has something to offer in wisdom and insight, so the idea is to create the environment that everybody's wisdom is respected and shared" — Consultant

- Leadership team is comprised of individuals who can think creatively, can make the time and energy commitments, and can command the respect of the congregation;
- Consultant can

bring relevant information and teaching to the process, although these can also be found in other forms such as books and videos;

- Congregation is not attempting to plan in the midst of a crisis or deep conflict;
- Adept facilitation by the consultant brings skills, processes and tools that help the congregation identify and communicate their convictions about the congregation and its ministry;
- Both congregations and consultants seemed to agree that the conversation about the plan is at least as important as the plan itself.

It seems that many of the factors that make a consultant-led strategic planning process effective would also make a self-led congregational process effective.

Cost in terms of time and money

In 2005, fees charged by strategic planning consultants range from \$700 a day to as much as \$21,000 for a multi-year, multi-week process. A weekend retreat might cost \$2,500-\$3,000. Most consultants offer hourly rates as well. Some require a minimum contract, (for example, two days) on the conviction that they cannot provide useful assistance in less time. Most processes involve a series of congregational/planning team contacts and events over 6-12 months' time.

Motivations for hiring consultant

- As a regular practice in a healthy congregation;
- To address Life Cycle issues (See Resources for George Bullard's *Spiritual Strategic Journey Tutorial* containing the model of the Congregational Life Cycle);
- Staff or lay leadership transition;
- Demographic shifts such as rural areas becoming suburbanized, suburban areas becoming urbanized, urban decay or renewal;
- Congregational merger;
- Issues related to expansion, moving, new construction or remodeling;
- Financial reversal;
- Lack of confidence or skills for congregations to do strategic planning themselves;
- To relieve staff of the facilitation role. One pastor reported bringing in an outside consultant "in order to keep me from controlling the process;"
- Availability of financial support.

"I've got two fears about strategic plans: One is that they are well done and they are never used. The other is that they are well done and always used – missing opportunities because they 'aren't in the plan.'" — Consultant

The role and importance of leadership

Sometimes denominational and congregational policies dictate the roles clergy and laity will play during a strategic planning process. These policies may have to do with the nature of authority and the source of vision/mission. Nevertheless, the buy-in of congregational leadership, both clergy and lay, is essential. The process demands time and energy of staff and leadership. Using an outside consultant can allow the staff to be more involved in the process itself or to remain on the fringes to allow stronger congregational buy-in of the process and outcome.

The value of a positive focus

Focus on what is right or the positive core of the congregation.

“We don’t talk about what’s wrong, we talk about what the strengths are. The assumption that if you find something that is wrong you can fix it to a level of strength is a false assumption,” explained one consultant.

“Congregations soar with their strengths, not by solving their problems,” said another consultant.

Outcome is more than a plan

As experienced by Community Church, the outcome of a strategic planning process is more than a written roadmap to the future. Congregations report benefit from the process in a variety of ways.

- **Enhanced community** as a result of the conversations. “The brainstorming allowed me to connect with individuals I did not normally interact with,” said one lay leader;
- **Increased congregational involvement** “It pulled all these people together, people who ordinarily were on the fringe of participation. They came out of the woodwork and became leaders in one way or another,” reported a lay leader. A pastor described, “I see people engaged in the life of this community, and even if it’s just ticking off items on the list of things they said they were going to do, things are happening that I did not have to direct. ... We are beginning to share the work.”
- **Plans fulfilled** “We have a whole new way of

welcoming people. Lights are coming soon to change the dim lighting in the narthex. We took down the hedge (that blocked the church from the road). We’ve added an alternative worship service, which we are phasing in very slowly. We are upgrading our website,” one lay leader said;

- **Heightened strategic intelligence** as a result of the process. The congregation is able to think strategically about a range of congregational issues and opportunities.

- **Relying on the “plan”** or on the vision/mission for direction and evaluation of programming. “We keep our vision and mission statement in front of us 24/7 and unless our activities and

programs and worship fall under this vision and mission, we ain’t gonna do them,” stated a lay leader;

- **A strong sense of identity** and focus. “We have a road map for the future and a clear articulation of who we are,” said a pastor;

- **Building on the experience** by enriching ministry in ways not anticipated by plan. “(We) started with a need to think about the future, but that initial thought was not as involved and broad as it would become. That’s clearly the work of the Spirit,” stated a pastor.

“In the church there is always more to be done. To be able to look back and say that we have met a goal is great.”

— Pastor

What They’re Saying

“A certain small group does not hold the keys to knowing what God wants us to do. We discern the Spirit as a community.” —Pastor

“I don’t believe we would be here without this (experience). I think we would still be floundering, going thirty different directions.” —Lay leader

“We have a plan. The trick is making it become the natural way we do things around here.” — Pastor

“It’s about being mindful of practical things and how you can be the best stewards of what you have.” —Pastor

“Life seems to get in the way, even when we plan it well.” —Consultant

Observations and Questions

- **The best processes** result in congregational clarity of vision and missional identity. These processes equip leadership to guide and empower the congregation to align their missional identity with the way they live their lives together. They acknowledge there is no “quick fix” or “answer-in-a-box;”
- **The cost** of outside consultants is prohibitive to most congregations. All the congregations we interviewed reported that the availability of significant financial support enabled them to consider hiring their consultants;
- **If the cost** of hiring outside consultants is prohibitive for most congregations, what resources are available to help congregations facilitate their own processes? What is essential in such resources?;
- **Formal evaluation** processes were neither included by consultants as part of the basic contract nor requested by the congregations we interviewed. Evaluation when it occurs is an informal process, generally a kind of backward glance eliciting an emotional response;
- **Assuming effective evaluation** is essential for a learning organization, what are the implications of shortchanging the evaluative opportunities of strategic planning processes?;
- **What elements** in the strategic planning process best equip congregations for implementation?;
- **If it is true** that all congregations, in order to remain healthy, need a regular practice of strategic planning, how can congregations incorporate into their life the necessary work of strategic planning without regularly bringing in an outside consultant?

Resources

The following resources were helpful to consultants and congregations in their strategic planning work.

Organization

Percept
29889 Santa Margarita Parkway
Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688-3629
(800) 442-6277; (949)635-1282; Fax (949) 635-1283

Print

44 Questions for Congregational Self-Appraisal by Lyle Schaller. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998.

Discerning Your Congregation's Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach by Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich Jr. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1996.

Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations by Gil Rendle and Alice Mann. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2003.

Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders by Gil Rendle. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998.

Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change by William Bridges. New York, NY: Perseus Books Group, 2003

Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Changes by Mark Lau Branson.

Herndon VA: Alban Institute, 2004.

Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition by Alice Mann. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001

Thriving Through Ministry Conflict: By Understanding Your Red and Blue Zones by Joseph Jurkowski, et al. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

Twelve Keys for an Effective Church by Kennon Callahan. New York, NY: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Video

Celebrate What's Right With the World by DeWitt Jones. Windsor, CA: DeWitt Jones Productions, 2001.

What Size Should We Be? Visioning the In-Between Church by Alice Mann. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2000.

Web

Spiritual Strategic Journey: Tutorial for Congregational Redevelopment by George Bullard. www.congregationalresources.org/bullard.asp

The Transforming Church Index [formerly the Healthy Church Index], Transforming Church Institute. Glendale, AZ.

ICC staff members Nancy DeMott and Jane Mastin and congregational consultant Marie Fleming contributed to this report.