

When would such a process be helpful?

There are a variety of situations that may cause a congregation and its leaders to want to take stock of the congregation's present circumstances and future plans. Sometimes congregations find themselves in times of rapid growth, which place a strain on facilities and bring newcomers unfamiliar with congregational procedures and traditions. Alternatively, congregations sometimes find themselves in periods of declining membership that cause concerns about vitality, resources, or even the congregation's future survival.

Congregations may also need to take stock whenever they enter a new chapter in their history that may open the door to new ministry opportunities. Such times of transition may occur when a congregation calls a new pastor or other leadership staff member, pays off a debt, receives a bequest, completes a new or additional facility, or experiences (or contemplates) any other significant change in its circumstances.

At such times of change and transition, a congregation must first identify and challenge old assumptions. When things have changed all around, one cannot simply proceed as if no changes had occurred. Yet often congregations are slow to recognize and adjust to change. There's a cliché that "the seven last words of the church" will be "We've never done it that way before." Such a saying may be humorous, but it reflects the truth that organizations tend to resist change until forced to recognize the need for it. A thorough examination of a congregation and the community it serves can assist congregational leaders and members to recognize the new situation in which they find themselves and to adapt to it more quickly and painlessly than waiting for a crisis to thrust the congregation toward change.

Congregational leaders sometimes do sense the changing winds that blow around them and react instinctively. However, leaders should confirm their hunches or suspicions before committing resources to significant new ministries or launching major changes in congregational structures. A process of self-examination can aid leaders in verifying what they already suspect to be true, and assist them in interpreting their ideas to the congregation as a whole. While some congregations may trust their leaders enough to approve a major new expenditure because the pastor "just has a feeling" it will be good, most members will want clear indications of needs, trends, and goals before they are convinced. A process of self-examination can provide objective data for interpretation and communication.

Healthy organizations engage in periodic planning updates or "pulse taking." Just as individuals go to the doctor periodically for a check-up—even when they are feeling well—healthy congregations examine themselves and their surroundings from time to time to see if there are potential problems that can be caught before they become crises, or to consider opportunities that were previously unseen.

Similarly, congregations sometimes discover that their governing documents are out of date and in need of an overhaul. When an overhaul of legal documents, constitutions, or bylaws is called for, it's a good idea to engage in a process of self-evaluation to make sure that new documents reflect current practices and procedures clearly and accurately.

Certainly, every congregation will want to undertake a serious self-study in anticipation of changes in

leadership. When a pastor leaves after a number of years of service, it is vital that the congregation carefully take stock of where it has been, where it is going, and what strengths and leadership qualities the next pastor will need to lead in that direction.

In summary, congregations should look forward to taking a thorough look at themselves and their surroundings whenever they anticipate changes of any kind—whether good or bad—and periodically in-between times of major change, just to avoid being surprised. The old adage that "nothing stays the same except change" fits well with congregations that are vital and alive. Every congregation will want to take a look in the mirror from time to time.