

Are We There Yet?
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: “Healthy Congregations” by Peter Steinke

“Ideally, a congregation is mission focused. All churches are mission focused in part; none is totally focused on mission. Even though *mission* is the heart and soul of a congregation, members can never *assume* it is the focus. Mission must be intentionally designed and continually re-designed.”¹

An inexperienced preacher was to hold a graveside burial service at a pauper's cemetery for an indigent man with no family or friends. Not knowing where the cemetery was, he made several wrong turns and got lost. When he eventually arrived an hour late, the hearse was nowhere in sight, the backhoe was next to the open hole, and the workmen were sitting under a tree eating lunch.

The diligent young pastor went to the open grave and found the vault lid already in place. Feeling guilty because of his tardiness, he preached an impassioned and lengthy service, sending the deceased to the great beyond in style.

¹ Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1996), 47.

As he returned to his car, he overheard one of the workman say to the other, "I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years and I ain't never seen anything like that."²

It is too often the case that ministers and their congregations get lost, performing the wrong service for the wrong subject. Several people have asked me "What direction are you taking us in?" I would like to begin to answer that question by reframing it. The real question is "What direction does University Congregational Church choose?" You see, my responsibility is not to tell you where to go. As a congregational minister my responsibility is to facilitate a process that empowers the congregation to define its mission and mission goals. The common reference is "Strategic Planning."

Over a year ago we began a strategic planning process. Ted Blankenship appointed Phil Rhea to head the strategic planning committee. The committee was made up primarily of the presidents of our various boards and councils, as well as at-large members. There were opportunities for our membership to engage the process. Founded on our church covenant we defined the mission of the church and the goals that we want to accomplish in the next three years to fulfill our mission. You

² www.swapmeetdave.com, downloaded 5/27/2009.

should have received the proposed strategic plan in the mail. Following this service you will be given the opportunity to vote on that plan.

Now there are several important principles that everyone needs to understand. The first is that the strategic plan defines the major focus of the Church Council, all of our Boards, church staff, and minister. Now don't get crazy on me. Many roles and responsibilities of the minister, for example, are not in the strategic plan. I am not going to stop preaching because we have decided to make membership growth a priority. We will focus new energy and talent on our new goals. We will be more assertive in our effort to recruit the kind of leadership that we need to accomplish those goals. It also means that we will not assume new goals and tasks for the next three years. One of the greatest ways to bog down a church is to layer social needs upon social problem under the guilt-laden assumption that we have to save the world.

A strategic plan will change the focus of our church council and our boards. Rather than focusing on reports of what was accomplished in the last month, emphasis will shift to the strategies that we need to discharge for the fulfillment of the plan. We will be future oriented.

Please understand that in such a process we may determine that some of the goals that we have set forth are beyond our means, even

within the scope of three years. This can happen for several reasons. The most important is the lack of leadership. We may devise a magnificent plan, provide for generous funding, enjoy the full support of our membership, and offer adequate facilities for the goal. But if we cannot recruit the leadership that the goal requires we will not be able to proceed. Of course the goal may not proceed without funding, support, facilities, and so on. Some goals may need to move into the next three-year plan.

This should tell you that the strategic plan is a living document. Ministry and programs will consistently ask, “Does it reflect our strategic plan?” I know that many organizations and churches develop a strategic plan and within six months know one knows where it is. I once consulted with a congregation that had created a new mission statement, goals, and strategies. When I returned for my third consultation the church was in a big fight about the hiring of a church member to be a well-paid marketing and public relations manager. I asked the obvious question, “Where is that in the strategic plan?” The first thing they had to do was hunt for the plan, which was in a filing cabinet. We walked through the plan and nowhere to be found was the goal of enhanced public relations. The man was released within a week. I know it is a simplistic maxim but I also know how important it is to “Plan the work and work the plan.”

Because a good strategic plan is a working document, please understand that we will begin the process again in about two and a half years. In other words, we will be back with you in 2012 with a new set of goals. Some people ask, “Why don’t we do a five-year plan or a ten-year plan?” Other than very broad and general pointers to the future, I know of few organizations that are planning that far out. The economic and political climate is too volatile to be able to plan effectively for more than three years. I know of some businesses that do not plan more than eighteen months out.

We may also determine in 2012 that we have not fully realized one or more of our goals of 2009 and they may be folded back into the plans of 2012.

Keeping goals and strategies fresh invigorates your minister, staff, church councils and boards. New challenges introduce dynamism and create new opportunities for new members to be meaningfully engaged in the future of the church. This energy is sustained as clergy, staff, and lay leaders change, move away, or die. Newly elected church officers will understand the role they will play in their new office because they know what the strategic plan is and the goals to be accomplished.

Obviously the mission plan that you received and will be asked to affirm does not contain the strategic and tactical steps necessary for full implementation. If you adopt this plan, that will be the first order of business, beginning June 1st.

There are also other technical details that have to be considered. I believe that the chair of the strategic planning committee should have a permanent position on the church council. There are other by-laws questions that need clarification, some of which have nothing to do with the strategic plan. We will hold a congregational meeting to harmonize our bylaws with our planning process.

I have handed out to you a document that shows the distinctions between a mission-focused and a clergy-focused congregation. As we move with purpose toward being a mission-focused congregation I hope you can see the benefits of this program not only for your minister but for the church as well. What the document does not point out is the fact that clergy-focused congregations tend to remain small and their ministers do not last more than a few years.

I want to express my deep appreciation to all of the members of the Strategic Planning committee and the church council for the hours of thought and service they have given to this process. We may not be able

to answer the question, “Are we there yet?” But we can say, “We know where we are going.”

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