

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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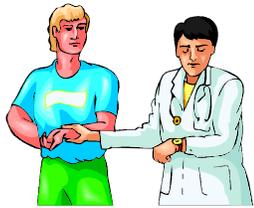
Vital signs

We've all had our pulse and blood pressure checked as signs of our personal physical health, but what vital signs should we be checking to measure the health of our churches? A fascinating new book suggests some answers to that question. As I read it I was mentally saying "Yes! Yes!" to its author on almost every page. Once I started reading it, I didn't stop until I got to the end.



This intriguing book is *Vital Signs: A Pathway to Congregational Wholeness*, by Dan Dick (Discipleship Resources, 2007). Dick is Research Coordinator and Project Manager for the United Methodist Church's General Board of Discipleship. He's reporting on a recent study of more than seven hundred UMC congregations across North America.

Fruitful but challenging practices



Part of what excited me was that this study showed the fruitfulness of some practices that I've long believed were vital but haven't personally seen tried by a congregation. The study showed the importance of church members' reading and discussing serious books about theology and the Bible. It showed the importance of disclosing information openly and fully, even when the information is controversial or delicate. It confirmed that if a congregation starts getting serious about following Jesus, some members will leave but those who stay will help the congregation make a real difference for its members and the wider community.

The study reported in *Vital Signs* found that congregations who took such practices seriously had striking results to show for their efforts, even though getting those results was hard and slow.



Toxic influence? Holy discontent?

In reading the book *Vital Signs*, I kept being a bit unnerved by Dan Dick's mention of people he calls "toxic influencers." Their presence, he finds, contributes to a critical difference between unstable and stable congregations.



Every time he mentioned these people, I wondered, "Am I one of them?" I don't think I am, but I couldn't help wondering. I don't want to be one, because they seem to be a big hindrance to the church. Evidently all of us who are church members need to wonder, and if the shoe fits, we need to wear it and make some changes in our behavior.



Poisoning minds behind the scenes

Toxic influencers, Dick observes, work behind the scenes to poison people's minds against new ideas, change (especially in worship services), innovations, and new people in leadership. Toxic influencers, he explains, have incredible power to undermine the authority of leaders and working groups. They often hold the church hostage through a threat of leaving or withholding money. "Most remarkably," Dick finds, "they are allowed to function this way, often for years, and their behavior is never exposed to the light of day and dealt with. Vital congregations simply refuse to allow such behavior to continue, even to the point of actually asking these toxic influencers to leave the congregation." I've made no threats, and I'm not opposing new ways. In fact, I'm continually advocating new ways, and some of them are the very ways that Dan Dick found most important for creating a vital congregation. Thus I don't think I'm a toxic influencer. Still, I'm sure I could be wrong about that, so I keep wondering.



Discontent that leads to change



I thought about this subject again during a conversation with Dan Dick about what he calls "holy discontent." He sees a big difference between it and toxic influence. In his view, holy discontent can be a motivator for needed change. It can show us burning bushes and promised lands.

Apparently we all need to keep asking ourselves whether our discontent with the church is holy or toxic.

Size doesn't tell the whole story

Growth in numbers, Dan Dick found, is not the only measure of success, nor is it an end in itself. We need to measure quality, not just quantity. “If the true purpose of the church is to serve the needs of the world,” he observes, “then you can never have enough people. But if the purpose of the church is for people to sit in a pew and hear stories about God without any kind of challenge to make a real difference, then one might question the benefit of generating more inert listeners.”



To interpret the results of his study, Dick therefore found that he needed a second set of criteria in addition to size. He began looking at what he calls “the overall stability of the congregation for ongoing mission and ministry.” He looked at what enabled some congregations to survive massive upheaval and disruption without losing momentum.



Four types of congregations

When Dan Dick merged his two sets of criteria, he saw four basic types of congregations.

■ **Vital congregations** are growing and also highly stable. Dick found these were rare in the UMC. Only 9.6% of the congregations he studied fit this description. To his surprise he found that these aren't the churches that get a lot of attention. He suspects that's because their leaders are too busy doing the work of the body of Christ to teach workshops, write books, and host seminars. Yet these are the congregations that have the most to teach us.

■ **Dystrophic congregations** emphasize growth for growth's sake. They show what is called “dystrophy” in a living organism. It is growth that weakens or diseases the organism and ultimately makes survival harder. “Think obesity or cancer,” Dick suggests. Dystrophic congregations, he finds, do a lot of good and reach many people but are very hard to sustain for long periods of time. They experience a huge amount of waste and burnout. 32.6% of the studied congregations were dystrophic.



■ **Retrogressive congregations** are in a period of numeric decline that enables them to become

more active and more effective. Often they have deliberately gotten more serious about membership standards, spiritual formation, or Christian service. As a result, “the more passive members look elsewhere because the church becomes too demanding.” Dan Dick found that 7.1% of the churches he studied were retrogressive. He found that almost every vital congregation in his study had gone through a time of retrogression on the way to becoming vital.



■ **Decaying congregations** are neither growing nor stable. Unfortunately, 50.6% of the UMC congregations in this study were in this category. In Dick's view, these are at the threshold of crisis, whether they admit it or not. They are “in steep decline, deep denial, and dysfunctional stagnation.”

What makes the difference?

Each congregation in Dick's study scored itself on the basis of fifteen criteria to determine its type. Here are some of the main ones.

√ **Core values.** “Perhaps the single greatest challenge to vitality,” Dan Dick observes, “is that it requires us to be Christian. We too often confuse being Christian with being nice.” It involves much more than that, he reminds us, and more than just “believing in Jesus as the Son of God.” (I'm still going to write soon about what some Christians have recently told me it involves, but I found this book so compelling that it sidetracked me temporarily.)



Most Christians, Dick finds, claim to value mercy, acceptance, justice, generosity, and compassion. Yet our behaviors show that our real values are comfort, security, and the preservation of the familiar. Decaying congregations rarely discuss values, but vital congregations discuss them regularly.

√ **Dealing with conflict.** 91% of the decaying congregations experienced some kind of destructive conflict. Much of it reflected a clash of core values. Most decaying congregations, this study found, have no clear process for dealing with conflict and disagreement. Stable congregations, in contrast, address conflict openly, honestly, and with mediation from a non-involved



third party. These congregations name and confront inappropriate behavior, then “gracefully forgive and move on.”



✓ **Dealing with change.** The programs of decaying and dystrophic congregations define who they are. These congregations rarely evaluate their programs, however, and changing them is hard. Their leaders don’t understand change theory or know how to deal with resistance.



✓ **Pastors’ roles.** Full-time pastors of decaying churches work more hours than pastors of vital churches. They attend most meetings and perform most functions. Many say they were never taught management and supervision skills. As a result, the whole church is hurt and the pastors burn out and lose their sense of calling and purpose.

✓ **Organization.** Healthy congregations, Dan Dick finds, organize around priorities. They determine what outcomes they want, analyze what each one will require, and organize in whatever way seems most likely to achieve it. They don’t just look for warm bodies to fill prescribed jobs and committees.

✓ **Education.** In decaying and dystrophic congregations, education equals Sunday School, and its classes offer a hodge-podge of content. The same people may stay in the same class for years. In vital and retrogressive congregations, however, classes are formed around essential content. The best teachers and leaders are recruited to present it, and participants move from class to class.



Members of these healthy congregations spend a lot of time studying not only the Bible but also Christian history, theology, and the writings of the saints and mys-

tics, Dan Dick found. They also study the writings of contemporary, progressive Christian thinkers and scholars. Dick found them reading Marcus Borg, Elaine Pagels, Jim Wallis, Daniel Berigan, Wendell Berry, and Robert Wuthnow, among others. Members of these churches were also well-read in the writings of thinkers outside of the Christian tradition. Groups read and discuss seminary-level materials. “Out-of-the-box” thinking is not unusual in these congregations.



Dan Dick finds that many vital congregations have comprehensive lifelong learning plans based on a core curriculum. They design classes and small groups for teaching it to the whole community of faith. As a result, explains Dick, “participants in these churches develop a shared understanding, a common language, and a unified theological worldview that builds community and strengthens the body of Christ.”



✓ **Sense of identity and purpose.**

For most people in decaying congregations, the church is mainly a place to go for worship or to be with friends. Its purpose is to give them comfort and support and to serve their needs.

✓ **Focus.** Stable congregations, reports Dan Dick, balance an inward and an outward focus. Unstable congregations focus on their own needs, their desires, and their future. Their programs and building improvements mainly aim at increasing the comfort and enjoyment of the current members. Their programs and facilities are designed to bring people to the church, rather than to send members out into the community. These congregations say they want new members, but they really want only people who are just like themselves.

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 14 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states and outside the U.S.—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

√ **Vision.** Decaying congregations spend time developing “vision statements” or “mission statements.” They may put them in the bulletin or on a wall, but few members can say what they are. In vital congregations, Dick finds, vision emerges instead through corporate discernment. Members share their deepest desires and their core values and beliefs. They seek faithful ways to put their gifts to work. The congregation’s vision keeps shifting, growing, and changing. Members can call it to mind because it is the basis for all that they do together.

√ **Recognizing results.** How are lives changed by our worship services? How are attitudes and actions

changed by our Bible studies? How do members think and behave differently after being part of our church? Vital churches, reports Dan Dick, can answer these questions. Decaying churches can’t.

I can’t cover all the criteria Dan Dick discusses in *Vital Signs*, but I hope you’ll read it for yourself and see where your congregation fits in the picture he describes. I suspect that if your congregation did this together it would be the most important thing you’d ever done.



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Anyone can know anything about the church?



In the study of more than seven hundred North American United Methodist congregations Dan Dick describes in his book *Vital Signs*, he found that communication was one of the most important issues in every type of congregation. “In vital churches,” he tells us, “anyone can know anything about the church. When a congregation is a unified body, the whole congregation deals with the most important issues—even cases of financial misappropriation or clergy sexual misconduct.”



“If there are things happening in a congregation that leaders feel should be kept secret,” Dick finds, “it is a reflection on the trust and honesty level of the church environment. Vital congregations do not wait for trust before they share information; they develop a policy of full disclosure as a way to build trust. They also create a wide variety of ways, places, and times where information may be shared and discussed. ... Full disclosure, transparency, open communication—these are cornerstones of the vital church.”

How can we have transparency and yet keep necessary personal information confidential? How can we have open communication but not risk being sued? Such considerations are important, yet leaders sometimes claim them as reasons for secrecy when they’re really coverups for the leaders’ wish to save face or preserve power.