

Part 1: The Current Realities of Congregations Facing Sustainability Issues

Describing the characteristics of the congregation

Leaders who regularly work with congregations facing sustainability issues report ten general characteristics of the situation.

1. **Positive seeds of hope** - *in many places there is an acceptance as well as a tenacious hopeful spirit, pushing creativity, and in some instances jump-starting other ministries*
2. **Unhelpful understandings and attitudes** – *often an inward focus, a desire to find fault/blame, polarized thinking, and an attitude of scarcity*
3. **Solutions which seem unrealistic** – *solutions are last-ditch efforts, too little too late, move towards being a club to keep the building open*
4. **Confusing and dangerous for leaders** – *leaders are unprepared for the situation, get caught in the middle, become a lightning rod, deal with informal power structures*
5. **Stuck using old solutions to new challenges** – *there is strong sense of nostalgia and loss, a desire to return to the old ways, stuck in the past*
6. **Unsettled, worried, anxious** – *people are upset, worried, discouraged, anxious, and sometimes angry*
7. **Multiple generations tangible losses** – *the membership and communities have suffered multiple losses – farms, schools, population, financial viability... exhibit the stages of grief*
8. **Aging membership death is on people's minds** – *high average age of membership, missing youth, some want to die before the church closes*
9. **Challenged to acknowledge the situation and take action** – *challenging for people to let go and to change, frozen*
10. **Loss of hope and confidence** – *people are sad, fearful, tired, feeling alone, a sense of hopelessness*

When invited to reflect on these ten characteristics, they notice that the negative far outweighs the positive and that it is a challenge to find the seeds of hope. At the same time, these churches are tenacious. Having been through other challenges, their default is to 'hang in there.' This is a plus but can also contribute to being stuck and not able to let go.

Leaders notice these characteristics remind them of the people of Israel. It is a familiar story. There is hope for a miracle and for someone to parachute in and save them.



Reactions of leaders to the dynamics surrounding these characteristics

Leaders were asked to share their reactions to the congregation's current situation.

- It is easy to get drawn into the negative – all the more important to be grounded in faith practices.
- Requires curiosity – help the congregation try something new and if it doesn't work, be okay with this. Remain steadfast in that Christ's church is not dying.
- It is important to explore particulars, name the demons, be realistic, acknowledge the challenges but with optimism.
- Be ready to manage behaviors that come at you sideways.
- Discover how ritual might be used or fit with the situation – capture both the lament and possibility.
- See hope as a ray of light in the dark but be cautious about presenting hope – acknowledge both the dark and the light.

What is important? What is feasible? Where are our priorities?

While this might be best described as an ongoing conversation, leaders seemed to agree that addressing the current situation could be thought of as moving from an inward focus to an outward focus. Financial challenges appear to be (at least in part) causing the crisis but it is unclear if this is where to focus in order to bring hope. Members would likely say money is most important, but it isn't clear if leadership should address this first.

Leaders acknowledged that there are things which tend to suck up time and are not helpful in addressing the situation. These include old solutions that don't work, a focus on death and the aging congregation, and unfounded hope that everything will return to 'normal.'



Part 2: Desired outcomes for ministry with congregations facing sustainability issues

When we think about congregations facing sustainability issues, we ask for God to help us accomplish the following.

The petitions printed in BOLD represent a summary of the individual petitions listed below each of the yellow boxes

- The GREEN are individual petitions identified as having the highest priority.
- The LIGHT BLUE are individual petitions having a mid-range priority
- The SALMON are individual petitions having a lower priority

Building issues are solved

- Know what to do with building
- De-emphasize the building

Overall confidence in the future based in God’s promises

- See new fruits of the Spirit
- Open to Possible Outcomes
- Future Vision
- Enthusiasm for Gospel
- Be Bold to face the future
- Have faith that God is with us and always doing a new thing
- God's Got Our Back
- Back to the Future

Congregation’s focus expands to include the community

- Growth in personal witness and practice
- Engage Community beyond the Family
- Involvement of the many
- Community needs met
- Increased congregational participation in missional outreach
- Outward Focus
- When we say ALL are welcome it means ALL are welcome.
- Outreach to the community where needs are met
- Service to the community



Honest, realistic, acknowledgement of the current situation

Not fearful of closure (ritual may be important here)
Be honest about the current situation
Realistic Understanding of Current Situation
Be open to acknowledge the situation and listen for God's urging

Connected to wider church ministries

Recognition of wider church
Intentional engagement with the ELCA ministries
LSS
LWR
Disaster Relief
Prioritize generosity
Overflowing generosity of time, talents, and money.
Dollars given towards others

Faithful, capable leadership

Leadership development
All leaders in worship and bible study
Leader development

Members are living out and practicing their faith

Patience with themselves
Genuine Self-Reflection
faithfulness to God's call
People can see God's presence
Excellence in worship
Listen to him.
focus upon Jesus
Love one another
Comfortable praying

Members peacefully working together

Considerate, Compassionate, Respectful Conversation
Cooperation fighting has ceased

