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2014 - The Book of Exodus

Growing Congregational Health for Teens to Thrive

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Outcome: Each participant will be invited into a vision of the church as a grace-transformed ecosystem and given tools for strengthening specific practices that enhance that vision of the church.

Opening and Welcome

1. The grace-transformed church (10:15 – 11:30)

- a. Introduction
- b. Discussion in small groups: What are your longings for your congregation? Where have you seen the power of grace in your congregation?
- c. The role of the spirit/culture in the ecosystem
 - Moralistic faith formation (MTD) vs. the transforming power of grace (Laura)
 - The power of confessing sin in corporate worship (Syd)
 - Working towards transforming the spirit in the ecosystem – worksheet
 - Unspoken assumptions in our congregations. -- worksheet
 - *Discussion in small groups:* How is this evidenced in your congregation?
- d. A time to grieve -- Psalm 13

2. Pillars of faith formation (11:30 – 12:15)

These function as pillars that permeate all faith formation/ discipling activities/practices.

1. Begin with discernment - prayer (Laura)
2. Story-telling as an indicator of healthy relationality (Syd) -- worksheet
3. The Psalms point us to a more holistic faith formation (Laura)
4. The four circles of worship: solitude, small group, congregation, festival (Syd) – worksheet
5. Forming and equipping healthy staff ministries and lay leaders (Laura)

Lunch

3. Specific practices (1:30 – 3:30)

a. Huddle Group I (1:45-2:20) – worksheet

Youth Group (and other teen-focused activities)	Worship	
Communion Practices	Baptismal Practices	Milestones
Service Activities	Story-telling	Leadership Development
Family Discipleship	Growing an Intergenerational Culture	

- b.*** Regroup and refocus
- c.*** Huddle Group II (2:30 – 3:10)
- d.*** Debrief and close (3:10- 3:30)

The communal spirit (ethos/posture) that lives within the “garden”

Almost all the epistles in the New Testament (including the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3), begin by naming the spirit or heartbeat that lives within the specific body being addressed, often focusing on God’s faithfulness embodied in that community. Examples include the hard work and perseverance of the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:2), the material poverty but spiritual riches of the church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:9), and the determination of the church of Pergamum to hold true to the name of Christ despite great persecution.

Congregations on the road of transformation exhibit characteristics like these as part of the heartbeat of their community:

1. *Grateful trust* that God is working in its midst, active in all ages, and guiding the leaders, especially when the body is fearful and confused, allowing it to be patient, playful, forgiving, and encouraging.
2. *Repentance* that frees the body to see its own sin before naming the sins of others, and thus allows the body to walk in humility, trust and respect.
3. *Respect* that honors all ages within the body as brothers and sisters in Christ, whose leaders are seen as trial-and-error pioneers to challenge the body to greater faithfulness and whose members are valued and loved as new creations in Christ.
4. *Hunger* to be the kind of body of Christ that blesses its wider community through intergenerational missional faith formation.
5. *Humility* that allows for honest evaluation of current practices and the assumptions embedded within them, the ability to step outside of the daily demands of ministry to discern the larger picture, and the patience for intentional, persevering commitments to grow, overcoming long-standing default practices and assumptions.

Such a spirit grows as:

- The leadership embodies this spirit
- Corporate worship embodies and cultivates this spirit
- The leadership recognizes how important this communal spirit is, and intentionally cultivates a healthy spirit during the long term (working with a 5 year window)

Discuss...

- What words would you use to describe the spirit that lives within your community? Have these descriptive words changed at all in the past ten years? If yes, what has led to these changes?
- What words describe the spirit embodied by the leadership and corporate worship?
- How much overlap is there between the words you’ve listed and Paul’s list of the fruit of the spirit in Gal. 5?
- To what extent does your list correspond with the qualities highlighted here: trust, repentance, respect, hunger, and humility?

Assumptions about faith formation...

Every Christian community and every believer hold literally hundreds of assumptions about faith formation; often these assumptions are not clearly articulated or examined. These assumptions are our answers to questions like:

- What matters most in our faith formation?
- What tasks are leaders responsible for and what tasks are followers responsible for?
- What roles does worship play in our faith formation?
- What does a mature believer look like?
- What does a strong and healthy congregation look like?
- How (if at all) is faith formation different for people at different ages?
- How (if at all) is faith formation different for new or seeking believers or for “long-term” believers?
- What unwritten rules about being a Christian exist among us?
- What unwritten rules about being a member of this church exist among us?

The unspoken assumptions that live in our communities are very powerful. For example, congregations will attempt to bring in adult education programs and, after a time of struggle, realize that a strong unspoken assumption embedded in their community is that educational faith formation is primarily for children and teenagers.

Discuss...

- Go through the nine questions listed above, and give examples of some of the assumptions that are present in your community as responses to these questions.
- Browse the list on the next page and highlight the assumptions there that are especially present in your community. Have you noticed any shifts in assumptions during the past 5-10 years? If yes, how?
- Because assumptions are usually present without being named and examined, healthy ones become stronger when they are named and toxic ones become weaker when they are named. This naming is especially effective through the kind of repetition provided by, for example, a 6 week sermon series. What are 2-3 healthy assumptions that live in your community that you are eager to strengthen?
- What are 1-2 toxic assumptions that you desire to weaken? How might creative repetition serve to strengthen the healthy ones and weaken the toxic ones?

Assumptions about faith formation

Every Christian community operates from assumptions about faith formation that often are neither articulated nor examined, and thus not subject to critique and re-alignment. These assumptions drive both the ethos and the activities of congregational life.

Because congregations embody a corporate new self and a corporate old self that are intertwined, these assumptions live on a continuum that has “new self” on one end and “old self” on the other. The new self assumptions flows from the love and grace of Jesus Christ, and the old self assumptions are rooted in self-protective fear. These assumptions live on this continuum as follows:

Old self

New self

Faith formation (FF) runs on automatic defaults	FF is reflective and intentional
Age 18 is a significant FF graduation	FF is lifelong, supported by milestones
FF is episodic, many separate pieces	FF is coherent and organic
FF preserves our static identity	FF is missional and dynamic
FF is segregated by age-niches	FF is intergenerational
FF is denominational	FF is kingdom oriented, while shaped by our theological tradition
FF focuses on one dimension of our humanness: e.g. intellect, emotions/experiences, decision-making	FF is intentionally holistic; stories are key for expressing this wholeness
FF deals with clear and certain knowledge	FF embeds what we know within the great mystery and wonder of faith.
FF inculcates a type of moral uprightness that easily leads to a judgmental spirit	FF inspires justice and integrity
FF indoctrinates the young in the belief systems of the older	FF calls everyone to growth
FF unwittingly leads to spiritual maskedness	FF invites realness, vulnerability
FF focuses on the right answers	FF leads to hospitable fruitfulness
The anchoring FF disciplines are either learning knowledge or receiving “spiritual experiences”	Prayer is the anchoring FF discipline
FF is embedded within an ethos of suspicion	FF is embedded within an ethos of trusting and playful discernment
FF involves confrontation or conflict-avoidance	FF requires “iron sharpening iron”
Clergy “do”; laity “receive.” Platforms for story telling	All disciples “do” and “receive”

STORY-TELLING

Story-telling is not first of all a program or an activity, but a “vertical pillar” that is rooted in the Biblical story in such a way that stories erupt organically and regularly. Some of the “platforms” below help to cultivate such an environment.

1. Sermons almost always include stories.
2. There are rich stories behind many hymns and worship songs and brief summaries of these often bless the worshippers.
3. Transform the baptismal form into stories from the mother/father or have someone close to the family tell a story.
4. Invite teens/middle school folks to interview nursing home seniors about their favorite bible passages and hymns and the stories behind their choices, and then give them a platform to tell others these stories.
5. Teens interview a senior on videotape, edit it, and give them a platform to show it.
6. Follow a sermon with a member testimony whose life embodies something significant from the sermon.
7. Frame prayer request time in such a way that it appropriately allows rooms for stories.
8. Invite people to read their favourite Scripture and briefly describe (2 min max) why it is their favorite. (Or limit this to the Psalms, or invite members to write their own Psalms, and read them at appropriate times and occasions.)
9. Incorporate milestones into worship life, and create platforms for story telling with these milestones (more on this later today).
10. Construct discussion questions that evoke stories for small group, youth group or family devotions that take that week’s sermon to a deeper level of discussion.
11. Briefly but poignantly honor certain life stories prior to a congregational prayer.
12. Invite members to share stories as part of specific programs, e.g. the youth group that is focusing on dating and marriage invites three couples in to tell the stories of their marriages.
13. At appropriate occasions, give the gift of a “personalized, highlighted study Bible.” For example, if four members profess their faith, have four study bibles on four separate tables in the fellowship hall after the service, with highlighters and a pen next to each one. Invite members to highlight a favorite Bible passage, writing their name in the margin. Each recipient will have a testimony-filled Bible, leading to many potential discussion-starters.

FOUR CONTEXTS OF WORSHIP

Worship occurs in four contexts. Each context nourishes us to become stronger worshipers in the other three contexts. Tension arises when we desire one context to provide what can best be found in another context. Most commonly, worshipers inappropriately seek (small group) intimacy and (festival) inspiration in congregational worship.

<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Chemistry with other 3</i>
Personal worship/solitude	Worship acts done in solitude: prayer, Bible reading, reflection, etc	Provides space for personal groundedness, “remembering my name,” and we can bring that groundedness to the other 3
Small Group	Groups of 2 – 20, practicing various activities such as Bible study, topical study, life reflection/accountability, prayer, service.	Provides space for interpersonal intimacy, becoming known by others, and receiving encouragement, challenge, “I am not alone.”
Congregation	A body that gathers for weekly worship and various ministries throughout the week.	The orienting body defined by its new life in Christ. The discipline of weekly worship with others I may not choose as friends, and strangers that we welcome, serves to keep Christ at the center.
Festival (conferences, retreats, etc)	Irregular activities apart from life’s normal rhythms to “step out” of our routines and be refreshed, inspired, and celebrate.	Our routines alone do not do justice to our life of worship; festivals provide space for celebration, fresh perspectives, renewal, energy to pour back into the routines of the other 3.

HUDDLE I WORKSHEET

Describe in point form the current reality in your congregation, noting how it may be affected by the communal spirit, healthy and toxic assumptions, the vertical pillars, the history of what has happened in this “room” of faith formation.

What (five year?) dreams do you have for this “room” of faith formation?

What are the potential next steps to take? (building on strengths, casting a vision with others, running a short-term pilot project, learning from other congregations or other resources, etc.)

HUDDLE II WORKSHEET

Describe in point form the current reality in your congregation, noting how it may be affected by the communal spirit, healthy and toxic assumptions, the vertical pillars, the history of what has happened in this “room” of faith formation.

What (five year?) dreams do you have for this “room” of faith formation?

What are the potential next steps to take? (building on strengths, casting a vision with others, running a short-term pilot project, learning from other congregations or other resources, etc.)