

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Transforming Congregational Culture

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PAPER: 2011-50

REVIEW DATE: February 2011

One of the clearest accounts of what needs to happen in mainline churches if they are to become effective communities of faith is offered by the American author Anthony B. Robinson. Growing out of his experience with a variety of congregations in the U.S., his book *Transforming Congregational Culture* (W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003) outlines a series of shifts in congregational culture that are vital to the renewal of mainline congregations. These shifts reach far beyond the usual concerns of churches with adjustments to programming or even governance restructuring. They get at the heart of the identity and purpose of congregations and remind them that their core purpose or business is "human transformation".

Robinson's book, unlike many books in this field, tells a story which will resonate strongly with the experience of an established denomination like the United Church. It concludes with a chapter on leadership and why leadership is vital for the difficult *adaptive* work in which mainline congregations must be engaged.

Robinson does not push a single leadership style as the panacea for congregational ills. There is in his view no one model or style of leadership that is normative, or will fit every situation, and he does not expect that every leader will be able to fulfill every role and task that comes their way. What is essential, he suggests, is self-differentiation: the classic insight of family-systems theory concerning ability of leaders to define themselves, their goals and their values while trying to maintain a non-anxious presence within the congregational system. He writes: "Leaders need to know who they are and what their convictions are ... they require the ability to be clear about their goals without becoming so anxious that they seek to force their goals on others or on a congregation".

In our current contexts he also believes leaders need to be able to mobilize people for the adaptive challenges before them as well as keeping the group or body focused on that adaptive work. Leaders help people name and identify the challenges they face and help mobilize the gifts, strength, courage and resources necessary to respond to them.

Borrowing from Ronald Heifertz's *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, he names *and develops* six key strategies leaders need to consider:

- helping congregations and leaders get to the balcony – that is creating opportunities to identify patterns of activity and relationship in the church that are not visible within the immediate swirl of running and organizing the daily life of the congregation.

- identifying the elements of the adaptive challenges confronting the congregation and helping the congregation face the essential question of “what are we here for?”.
- regulating, not avoiding, the distress and pain caused by responding to the adaptive challenge.
- maintaining disciplined attention to the identified challenges and not allowing the congregation to avoid the hard work required by becoming diverted by the newest thing.
- giving responsibility back to the wider congregation by involving a wide group in leadership and visioning processes.
- protecting leadership from below – allowing those who are beyond the existing designated leadership and on the margins of the power structures to have a stake in shaping the future of their congregation.

Clearly these strategies suggest the very focused style of the self-differentiated leader. Is this a style of leadership that fits our own church context and would be understood within it?

Robinson suggests that concepts such as facilitation, empowerment, shared ministry and team ministry which is the currency with which we are more familiar are good in themselves. He points out that effective leaders do these things: they work in teams; they share leadership; they empower others. But he also has some sharp words on how these concepts have been used. “Effective leadership facilitates the fulfillment of congregational goals and aspirations. But too often such concepts have been a verbal fog seemingly designed to mask our lack of clarity about the nature of effective leadership and the importance of leadership for the church”.

Robinson sees evidence of this lack of clarity and ambivalence towards leadership in many places: in the shifting of leadership responsibility back and forth between congregations and paid accountable staff; in the tendency of clergy to see themselves as chaplains to a congregation rather than as leaders of the church; and in the confusion around the meaning of ordination, the ministry of the laity and the meaning of baptism. For Robinson these things are clear. “The ministry of the laity is to represent Christ to the world through their vocations and lives. Like coaches those who are ordained lead, teach and prepare the team for its games. The laity are the team that takes the field.” This is a robust view of leadership. Is it one that we can share?

As in the rest of the book Robinson brings a wonderful economy of words to his writing on this subject. There is a clarity that gives his words an interpretive power that is most helpful to anyone picking their way through the messy and untidy (chaordic is the buzz phrase) process of adaptive or transformative change. That same economy gives space to the reader to reflect on their own practice and starting points.

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