



2009 BISHOP'S SERIES:
HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS



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NORTHWESTERN MINNESOTA SYNOD

Table of Contents

January: Healthy Congregations Accept Differences	2
February: Healthy Congregations Focus on Strengths.....	4
April: Healthy Congregations Focus on Mission	7
May: Healthy Congregations Respond to Anxiety	9
June: Healthy Congregations Manage Conflict	12
July: Healthy Congregations Act Flexibly and Creatively	15
August: Healthy Congregations Challenge People.....	17
September: Healthy Congregations Thrive with Healthy Leadership.....	20
October: Healthy Congregations Provide Immune Capacities	22
November: Healthy Congregations Respond Graciously and Truthfully	25
December: Healthy Congregations Develop Caring Relationships.....	28

January: Healthy Congregations Accept Differences

Perhaps you've seen these Signs of a Healthy Church in a church newsletter:

- People are constantly expressing disagreement, and they do it right out in the open.
- New groups keep cropping up and bumping into each other over schedules and competing over volunteers.
- The kids are noisy and all over the place, including during worship.
- The hymnals are wearing out, the coffee hour is crowded and noisy, and the electric bill is over budget.

Is that how you'd describe a healthy church? Most of us want our congregation to be safe, secure, serene. A good annual meeting is short and sweet—without any tensions or disagreements. “No problems here,” we say. “We never have any differences of opinion.”

But does that really describe congregational health? No! A church without differences of opinion has probably lost its passion for the gospel. A congregation that never has squabbles may well be a community whose zeal for Christ's mission has been slowly extinguished.

Peter Steinke, a pastor and counselor who has studied how congregations are like family systems, declares that the first mark of a healthy congregation is not the absence of differences, but rather the ability to accept differences. In a healthy church people constantly express disagreement, and they do it right out in the open—without allowing their differences to separate them from one another.

The Book of Acts and Paul's epistles (especially the letters to the Corinthians) hint that from right from the start Christians have had differences with one another—differences expressed rather openly. How should we care for our widows? How can we best welcome and receive the gifts of Gentiles, slaves, women and other marginalized folks? What's the proper way to worship and celebrate the Lord's Supper?

Sometimes our differences concern central matters of faith. The gospel itself may be imperiled. Mostly, our differences have to do with lesser things—and we can too easily get drawn into destructive, distracting conflict.

Pete Steinke urges us to reflect on the source of our differences with one another. He believes that many of our differences arise because of the tension between our need for separateness and our need for closeness. We're always trying to balance these needs in our life in the church. We need to identify ourselves, to be clear on what makes us unique wondrous creatures of God (separateness). But we also need to be in relationship with one another as God's children (closeness).

When a healthy congregation accepts differences,

- Church members don't paper over or smooth off the differences that are there.
- Disciples recognize how the natural tension between our needs for separateness and our needs for closeness bring differences to the surface.
- In times of disagreement, persons speak for themselves—openly, directly and respectfully. They define themselves while remaining connected to all their brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Church members understand anxiety. They find ways to respond thoughtfully rather than simply reacting automatically when anxiety rears its head.

The first mark of a healthy church is that people are constantly expressing disagreement, and they do it right out in the open. But what else would you expect from a community whose life is centered in the reconciling Cross and future-opening Resurrection of Jesus the Christ?

Some questions for reflection and discussion:

- How does your congregation deal with differences?
- Think of someone you know who is good at dealing patiently and creatively with anxiety. What does this person do to help keep anxiety in check?
- What could you do to help your congregation grow in its ability to accept differences?

February: Healthy Congregations Focus on Strengths

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:12-13¹

During 12 years of service on the staff of a neighboring synod I witnessed congregations that endured catastrophic losses. I think of the rural Grove City congregation whose building was destroyed by fire in the early 1990s. I recall the two Comfrey congregations whose buildings were severely damaged by an “F-5” tornado a decade ago.

Either of these parishes could have tossed in the towel. But instead both rebounded from tragedy and wound up in a better place. The Grove City folks invested their insurance settlement in forming (along with two other small congregations) a new, merged congregation that continues to thrive. And in Comfrey, the two congregations joined forces, replacing their two aged, inaccessible buildings with one modern mission center.

In both instances, tragic loss led to congregations being renewed in God’s mission. Why? Because these congregations focused on their strengths. They kept their eyes peeled, not on what they had lost, but on what they still had. They acted in the confidence that, with God’s help, their assets always outweighed their liabilities.

Peter Steinke, a Lutheran pastor and counselor, puts it this way: “When a congregation focuses on strength, it will look to the future and increase the potential for change or renewal.”² Focusing on strengths, a congregation will:

- Look at options
- Take stock of resources
- Seek out support

¹ Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing

² Quoted by Peter Steinke in *Healthy Congregations* training materials, p. 37.

- Ask a variety of questions
- Affirm the ability to reach goals
- Make clear, thoughtful decisions.

We've all seen individuals and groups that fail to follow this path. Congregations can become obsessed by what they don't have or have lost. They can start to see themselves as weak, ineffective, unlikely to flourish—and soon, their assessment becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like Winnie the Pooh's glum friend, Eeyore, their favorite song is: "Always look on the dark side of life."

The Apostle Paul, however, knew the deeper truth of the matter when he wrote to the Philippian church about how he could "do all things in [Christ] who strengthens me." It's as if Paul were reminding us that we and God always are a majority.

As congregations focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses, several wondrous things start to happen:

- They see themselves as flexible, not brittle—able to learn something from each new situation
- They are able to reorient and reorganize themselves after experiencing a significant loss
- They live in God's grace—exhibiting graciousness in their dealings with one another and with those outside their church.

Leaders—pastors, staff, officers, council members—set a mood and tone that says, "God has given us everything we need to be about God's mission." Their confidence is catching. As Dr. Steinke likes to say, "Morale always flows down."

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Think back over the history of your congregation. When did a time of grief or loss lead to renewal in God's mission?
2. What strengths or assets do you see in your congregation? How are you building on these strengths? What assets could be utilized even better?

3. Recall a leader you have known whose confidence was catching. What effect did this leader have on the congregation or organization he/she served?

April: Healthy Congregations Focus on Mission

Congregations are not algae or bacteria. That is to say: congregations are not single-cell creatures, concerned solely with their own survival. Congregations are marvelous, complex, purposeful living bodies. They're made up of many "cells" (disciples) who invariably want to accomplish more, make something new, and create fresh possibilities. Healthy congregations have a "life force" within them—the Holy Spirit—that frees them to focus on more than individual survival. Unable to help themselves, they simply have to reproduce, propagate, grow. When congregations stop doing these things, they die.

If you've been part of a mission church you know how exciting that can be—building a congregation from scratch, rounding up seekers, forming community, starting programs and ministries, looking ahead to a first building project. There is also a keen sense of connection with the wider church—both the denomination (which may invest dollars) and neighboring congregations (which may encourage their own members to "seed" the mission church). The atmosphere is "electric" in a mission church.

What if our synod thought of itself as having 270-plus mission churches? What if we kept calling congregations mission churches for as long as they live? What if we all realized that the only way to survive is to stop focusing on survival only—to turn our churches inside out, giving ourselves away as freely and lavishly as Christ gave himself for all?

Recovering a lively sense of mission is one of our most critical callings in these early years of the 21st century. Realizing that a congregation is more than just a place where religious folks gather to "do their thing," is crucial. Reorienting ourselves to understand the church as a people sent on a mission is essential.

How does this happen? Often it's triggered by a crisis or turning point. A tragedy forces us out of familiar patterns. The old ways simply aren't working any longer. New opportunities rise to meet us.

It would be a mistake to suggest that "focusing on mission" is a piece of cake. No. This is hard work—clarifying and redefining God's purposes for us in the thick of cultural transformation. Resistance from lovers of the status quo is real.

It usually helps if we at least take a stab at stating what we think our mission might be. A mission statement (or purpose statement) is simply a way for a congregation to define itself, to articulate its reasons for living and moving and having its being. Lutheran pastor and counselor Peter Steinke likes to say that a good mission statement includes the following elements:

- Is no more than a single sentence in length
- Is easily understood by a 12-year-old
- Can be recited from memory at gunpoint!

Such a mission statement can be “confessed” regularly (in worship and other places), even as it guides the leaders of a congregation in making choices and establishing priorities for the coming years.

Please consider your congregation’s mission or purpose statement a working document, though. Poke, prod and revise it regularly. It will change as surely as your mission will change in this constantly-changing world. If you’d like to help your congregation get in touch with its mission or purpose, please take a look at a book, *Living Lutheran: Renewing Your Congregation* (2007, Augsburg Fortress), written by Pastor David Daubert.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What are some ways God has been turning your congregation inside-out for the sake of others?
2. When did your congregation experience a crisis or turning point that led you take another look at your purpose for existing as a church?
3. Can disciples in your congregation articulate your purpose or mission in a single, understandable, memorable sentence? How could you help your congregation to define its purpose or mission?

May: Healthy Congregations Respond to Anxiety

Thank God for the gift of anxiety! If we had no anxiety about anything, we'd never climb out of bed in the morning, never get to work on time, never finish an assignment or meet a deadline. A modest degree of anxiety or stress gets us going in life.

But what about *unrelenting* anxiety? What if we continually operate on the high side of anxiety—above the threshold of normal, run-of-the-mill stress? What if anxiety paralyzes us, stops us in our tracks, overwhelms us? What then?

The word anxiety comes from a Latin word *angere*, meaning “to cause pain by squeezing.” Related words are anger, angst, angina (heart pain). The image here is telling: anxiety run amok constricts us, squeezes us, reduces our options and possibilities. It feels as if the “cords of death” are wrapped around our necks, choking off our oxygen supply (Psalm 18:4).

This is true for organizations as well as individuals. Congregations are living bodies—vibrant emotional systems of inter-relationships. Congregations can easily become “anxious systems.” And when that happens they become constricted, limited, “squeezed.”

Peter Steinke contends that there are ten common triggers of anxiety in congregations:

- Money (too little or too much, e.g. a large bequest)
- Changing worship patterns
- Issues around sexuality
- Pastor's leadership style
- “Old versus new” discussions
- Concern over growth or survival
- Conflicts among church staff or resignation of a staff member
- Being overly focused on internal matters or on external matters
- Suffering some major trauma, tension or transition

- Harm done to a child or the death of a child.

Every congregation deals with anxiety. That's a given. The crucial question before us is: will we mindlessly, automatically react to anxiety? Or will we reflectively, thoughtfully respond to anxiety?

When a congregation simply *reacts* to anxiety we notice things like...

- Folks are constantly critical of one another;
- Persons or groups make threats, engage in manipulation, throw tantrums;
- Splinter groups form;
- Change is feared and rejected;
- Quick fixes are sought, and the path of least resistance is preferred;
- People keep secrets and avoid open communication;
- Folks get stuck in narrow, "either/or" thinking and thus miss the array of possibilities before them.

When a congregation and its leaders learn to regulate their stress and *respond* to anxiety they:

- Avoid snap judgments and quick fixes;
- Take time to gather information and analyze options;
- Generate all sorts of possible solutions;
- Endure short-term pain for the sake of long-term health;
- Commit themselves to living in the unity of Jesus Christ;
- Make wise, balanced, thoughtful decisions;
- Trust that God will sustain them, guide them and bless their faithful efforts in the midst of anxious times.

(This article is based on the Healthy Congregations training materials by Dr. Peter Steinke.)

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. How do you recognize when you're dealing with high anxiety? What physical symptoms show up? How do you know when anxiety is operating in your congregation? What are its symptoms?
2. Recall a time when your congregation reacted rather than responded to anxiety. What happened and what was the outcome?
3. Right now what is one way you could help your congregation live into the "broad place" of God's care and mercy? How could your church improve its capacities to respond rather than react to anxiety?

June: Healthy Congregations Manage Conflict

If I'm asked how many conflicted congregations we have in the synod, what they really wants to know is: How many churches aren't managing their conflict well? For how many congregations has conflict become a problem?

On any given day the Northwestern Minnesota Synod does have some congregations that have, for a time, lost the ability to manage conflict in their midst. Conflict is thwarting God's mission.

How can you tell if your congregation is no longer managing a conflict well? Here are some symptoms:

- People vehemently deny that any conflict exists.
- Members stop listening carefully to one another.
- Persons withdraw their presence, withhold their support, issue ultimatums.
- Blame gets focused on a scapegoat, often the pastor.
- People think less reflectively, less imaginatively.
- Folks start choosing up sides.
- Secrets are kept, clandestine meetings are held, anonymous letters are written, communication breaks down.
- People stop taking responsibility for themselves.
- Quick fixes are sought.
- Members gossip about one another or "triangulate"—bringing in a third party rather than going directly to the person who troubles them.

Conflict run amok damages relationships within the Body of Christ, and that in itself is tragic enough. What's even worse is that unmanaged conflict derails the congregation's ability to move forward in God's mission. Rather than walking faithfully and purpose-fully behind their Lord toward God's gracious future, members of the church get sidetracked.

Fortunately, the vast majority of our congregations are not paralyzed by unmanaged conflict. Most churches have learned how to deal with conflict in the course of their common life. How do they do it?

Peter Steinke, in his *Creating Healthy Congregations* study guide, speaks of three characteristics shared by churches that possess a sense of coherence that allows them to manage conflict.

- **Meaningfulness.** Church members have a sense of purpose and are committed to it. They take up the challenges that come to them and shape their destiny under God.
- **Comprehensibility.** Folks have a framework for making sense of what is happening. Healthy interaction and clear communication are taken for granted. People see change as natural. Decisions are made on the basis of clarity, not necessarily certainty.
- **Manageability.** Church folk don't act like victims or complain about how unfairly they have been treated. They recognize the gifts and tools available to them, and they respond thoughtfully to the challenges that confront them.

Let me add two more characteristics:

- **Forgiveness.** When we gather weekly to begin our worship, it is not by accident that we start by confessing our sin to one another and to God. We dare to speak these words only because we know God has an answer to offer us: *I declare unto you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, for Jesus' sake.* People who live within that confession-absolution rhythm always have the best resource for managing conflict.
- **Preparedness.** Healthy congregations expect that they will occasionally encounter sharp disagreements. Just as they keep their liability insurance up to date and their fire extinguishers recharged, they have a conflict management plan "in place." They cultivate leaders who know how to take stands and stay connected with others. They work with clear guidelines and policies. They have functioning Mutual Ministry Committees. They read and practice Matthew 18:15-20 routinely. They ask their leaders to go through *Healthy Congregations* training.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Recall a time when you or your congregation was involved in “conflict run amok.” How did it start? What happened? What resulted from the conflict situation? How did it end? What did you learn?
2. Recall a time when you or your congregation experienced a well-managed conflict situation.

July: Healthy Congregations Act Flexibly and Creatively

Exodus 18 contains one of my favorite leadership stories in the Bible. The children of Israel, having escaped from Egypt, are encamped near Mount Sinai for an extended time. Moses, their God-ordained leader, seems to be in charge of everything—even settling their petty squabbles.

Each day people come to Moses, begging him to settle their disputes with one another. During this time, Moses' father-in-law Jethro (a foreigner, by the way!) comes for a visit. He observes his son-in-law growing wearier by the hour. "What you are doing is not good," Jethro interjects. "You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." (vs. 17-18)

So Jethro proposes a creative solution: Moses needs to share leadership by enlisting others ("able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain," v. 21) to help him govern the people. Moses takes Jethro's advice—and it worked beautifully.

But why, I wonder, didn't Moses himself come up with such a solution? Why couldn't Moses be creative enough to generate this idea? The text of Exodus 18 doesn't tell us, but I suspect it's because Moses was so weary and uptight that he had developed tunnel vision; he had become rigid and brittle. Tension robbed him of the vision to see another way of doing things.

Stress and anxiety do that to us as individuals. We feel pain or angst, and we tighten our muscles. Pretty soon a dull, tension headache sets in, and a mental fog settles over us. We're sluggish, "stuck," no longer quick on our feet.

The same goes for congregations. Congregations that are highly stressed (by unmanaged conflict) or anxious (about any number of things—including their own survival) grow dull, rigid, and brittle. They lose their capacity for creative thought or nimble action. They lock themselves into tired old routines and fall back on the Seven Last Words of the Church: "but we've always done it that way."

Healthy congregations are flexible. They see change as a manageable process—an adventure, even. Rather than blaming or attacking others, people in healthy congregations invest energy in problem solving. They're willing to learn and confident that things can change for the better.

Healthy congregations are creative. They make room for exploration, take time for innovation. They bounce back from adversity quicker. Realizing that they don't have all the wisdom in the world, they ask for help—they bring in resource persons from the outside (like Jethro, the foreigner, giving wise advise to his world-weary son-in-law!)

Healthy congregations are not deadly serious or uptight about everything. They have a sense of humor and a "lightness of being." You sense it when you walk through their doors. There may even be a little "holy mischief" afoot that keeps folks guessing, on the edge of their seats, wondering what's coming next!

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Think about your own experience of stress and anxiety. What bodily symptoms tell you that you're feeling tense? How does tension thwart your own flexibility and creativity?
2. In what areas of your congregation's life do you detect brittleness or rigidity? How is this holding you back from being faithful in God's mission?
3. What is the most creative venture your congregation has tried in the last five years? Recall a time when your church responded nimbly and flexibly to changing circumstances.

August: Healthy Congregations Challenge People

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Mark 10:21-22

Do you ever wonder what it would be like to converse with Jesus, face to face? The gospels offer some pretty strong clues about how Jesus related to people. For one thing, Jesus seems utterly comfortable in his own skin—he knows who he is and what he is about. Jesus also is “transparent” and brutally honest with others. If I were in a conversation with Jesus I’d expect him to look me right in the eye and say exactly what he’s thinking, even if that troubled me.

This means that Jesus can comfort or challenge others, depending on what they most need. In the familiar story of the rich man (quoted above), Jesus has an extended conversation with an earnest fellow who hankers for eternal life. He knows his Bible, but he lacks one thing. Gazing deeply into his heart, Jesus challenges him to give up the only thing standing between him and full life in God’s Reign: his possessions.

Jesus did not hesitate to challenge this man on the profound subject of wealth. Jesus upset the man’s equilibrium by naming the “elephant in the room.” Did Jesus do this simply to be provocative or unnerving? No. The text says that, just before Jesus issued his challenge, he looked at the man and “*loved him*” (Mark 17:21).

Leaders in Christ’s church love God’s people enough to look them right in the eyes and name uncomfortable truths. Leaders of disciples don’t shirk from upsetting the equilibrium in their relationships with others—even to the point of challenging them to address issues and respond healthily to changing circumstances.

Of course, we’d never need to challenge one another if two things were true: (1) if sin and its effects did not exist and (2) if nothing ever changed. But because sin persists, because change is relentless and because we live our lives trying to ignore these realities we need to be challenged to “wake up and smell the coffee.”

In healthy congregations leaders challenge people. Indeed, that is a central role for leaders—to be “challengers.” However, this is not for the faint of heart. Most of us would rather avoid rocking the boat. But that “strategy” works only in a perfect world!

So in this imperfect world, where things are always changing, effective leaders of Christian communities will be “challengers.” What does that look like, though?

- Such leaders realize that *people naturally react to change, which usually provokes anxiety in the congregation*. Such anxiety is a normal reaction to change; the issue is how this anxiety is managed.
- Such leaders *understand people’s natural desire to get rid of anxiety at any cost*. As Peter Steinke puts it, “Instead of analyzing the circumstance, seeking clarity, exploring a number of responses, and planning new directions, the congregation is over-focused on its discomfort.”
- Such leaders *cultivate the capacity to tolerate pain both in themselves and in others*. Rather than making decisions on the basis of other persons’ current “emotional temperature,” healthy leaders function on the basis of their beliefs and convictions.
- Such healthy leaders are also able to take the long view of things. They realize that if others initially resist being challenged—things may change down the line. Mark 10:17-22 ends with the rich man walking away from Jesus “grieving.” But are we sure that’s how his story finally ended? What if our Lord’s stark challenge planted a seed in the rich man’s heart that took days, weeks, months or even years to germinate?

We may never know the answer to that question. But we certainly do see congregations that flourish because they had tenacious, far-sighted leaders willing to issue mission-driven challenges that did eventually bear good fruit.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Recall a time when you or your congregation were challenged by a Christian leader. How did you or your congregation respond to this challenge? What were the outcomes of this encounter?
2. What forces are producing anxiety in your congregation right now? How is your church responding to changes that are coming your way?

3. Assess your own ability, as a leader, to tolerate pain in yourself or in others. What impact does your “pain tolerance threshold” have on your ability to lead your congregation?

September: Healthy Congregations Thrive with Healthy Leadership

Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?

Esther 4:14 (NIV)

The Book of Esther tells the compelling story of a Jewish woman, Esther (4th century, B.C.), who used her position in the harem of the king of Persia to prevent the genocide of her people. To do this, Esther had to risk her very life!

Esther is unique in that it's the only book of the Bible that doesn't explicitly mention God. And yet it's impossible to read Esther without perceiving the guiding hand of God at work, raising up a powerful leader at the right moment, "for such a time as this."

God is always doing that—calling forth leaders in the right place, at the right time, with the right gifts. Over the past year I have witnessed this a number of times in congregations of our synod. I recall, in particular, a couple of congregational presidents who, simply by virtue of who they were and how they conducted themselves, helped keep parish crises from spinning out of control.

What makes for such healthy leadership? It's tempting to think that leaders have special knowledge, extraordinary skills or magnetic personalities. But as Dr. Peter Steinke points out in his *Healthy Congregations* training materials, leaders promote health in congregations primarily through their presence and functioning.

Steinke lists 26 attributes of such leaders. Let me highlight four of these attributes:

- **Healthy leaders know who they are.** They are comfortable in their own skins and don't hesitate to define themselves for others. They are anything but chameleons or "shape-shifters." They resist being squeezed into other persons' molds or preconceived notions of what a leader should be.
- **Healthy leaders take responsibility for their own actions.** They know they can't be responsible for how others function. They are self-aware, able to take criticism, willing to accept the consequences of their decisions

- Healthy leaders regulate their own anxieties. They can move calmly, patiently, deliberately within an anxious church environment. They resist picking up the “virus” of worry or desperation. God graces them with the ability to weigh alternatives, think clearly, and act responsively.
- Healthy leaders stay connected with others—including those absorbed by anxiety or those stirring up mischief in the congregation. Such leaders listen to others, creating space and time for respectful conversations. But they do not allow the mission to be thwarted or the congregation to be hijacked by persons with narrow agendas.

We’ve all seen how highly reactive persons can spread anxiety throughout a congregation—almost as if anxiety were a virus. But the same holds true for health in the congregation. Healthy leaders “spread” health throughout the system as they influence others to take responsible stands, keep focused on God’s mission, remain calm in adversity and stay connected with each other through thick and thin. Thank God for such servants in our midst!

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Recall effective church leaders you have known. How did they contribute to the health of the congregation through their presence and functioning?
2. What leadership gifts has God given to you? What are your “growing edges” as a leader?
3. How does your congregation identify, call forth and nurture healthy leaders?

October: Healthy Congregations Provide Immune Capacities

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

I Corinthians 15:58

This column's title is curious. "Now what's he talking about?" you might wonder. Immune capacities? Say what?

Let me be clear: this is not hard to understand in the cold and flu season. Some of us, myself included, have already wrestled with one "bug" this autumn. It's miserable, right? And those viruses sure can hang on!

So here's the question: What causes infections? The quick, obvious answer is: germs or "bugs"—right? But that's really only half of the reason. The other reason is that we are vulnerable hosts. We get sick when two things happen: a virus attacks AND our immune capacities are "down."

Our bodies are always being assaulted by viruses, germs, cancer cells. If that's all that caused illness, we'd be sick all the time. But fortunately, our bodies have wondrous defense systems that ward off the bugs. And, thankfully, most of the time our immune systems are strong and sturdy. But when they weaken—when we grow weary or malnourished in any way—opportunistic invaders can gain a foothold.

The same holds true in congregations. Congregations face multiple threats every moment of every day. Some of these are large and easily identified: demographic decline, economic recession, a neutral if not hostile culture, etc. Other threats come in the back door, though. The "cells" (members) of the Body of Christ can act like viruses, attacking the host.

I'm not just talking about specific individuals in the church—although there are persons who fit the bill. "Persistent troublemakers" can be found in every congregation.

But even more seriously, there are virus-like traits that all of us display from time to time. We all have moments when our anxieties overflow into the Christian community. We're all tempted to form "triangles," bypassing the person we need to speak with and conversing instead with a third party. We all, on occasion, operate secretly rather than openly and above-board.

There are enough obstacles and viruses assaulting the congregation to make it sick most of the time. But, thankfully, our congregations are not sick all the time. Why is that? It's because God protects us from such viruses, largely through the leaders God raises up in each congregation.

Leaders provide immune capacities in the Body of Christ. Leaders resist forces that undermine a congregation, forces that take our eyes off God's mission, forces that tempt us to act in underhanded ways. God graciously gives us leaders who are "steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord" (I Cor. 15:58).

But "immovable" doesn't always sound like a good thing, does it? We associate being immovable with being inflexible—and that's not always good in a leader, is it? The kind of immovability the apostle Paul speaks of, though, is about holding the line against forces that threaten Christ's church. In I Corinthians 15, Paul is defending the reality of the resurrection in the Christian life. It doesn't get more basic or foundational than that! Leaders provide immune capacities when they are clear and "immovable" about what God's word and God's mission is for us—and when they're willing to resist any and all forces that threaten that. That's a wonderful sort of "immovability."

But what does such "immovable" leadership look like or sound like? Imagine some brief exchanges between a virus-bearer (V) and an immovable leader (L):

V: "Some of us are having a secret meeting to talk about problems with our church staff."

L: "Isn't that why we have a personnel committee? Why don't you take your concerns to them, or better yet, speak directly to the staff members who trouble you?"

V: "If our congregation starts this new worship service, I know some members will leave."

L: "I'm sad to hear that. But we've been carefully considering the new worship service for a long time. It will enhance our ministry, and as a congregation we have decided to do this for the sake of our witness in the world."

V: "I'm so worried about the economic recession! We need to cut our spending and stop giving away so much money to missions beyond our congregation."

L: "Now is not the time to panic. God has not abandoned us. God is still blessing us. We need to act out of our hopes, not our fears."

Do you see how, in each of these examples, leaders increase the “immune capacities” of congregations? It’s amazing! Thank God for leaders who know when to be flexible and when to be “steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord.”

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Reflect on your own experience with illness and your immune system. When are you most vulnerable to a cold or flu bug? How do you shore up your bodily immune capacities?
2. Recall a time when you or someone you know acted like a “virus” in your congregational system. What was the outcome? Did the “virus” encounter a steadfast, immovable leader—and, if so, what happened?
3. Why is it challenging for leaders to provide immune capacities in the congregations they serve? How can we encourage such leadership in our communities of faith?

November: Healthy Congregations Respond Graciously and Truthfully

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.... The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 1:14, 17

These majestic words from the first chapter of St. John's gospel show up in our worship during the days of Christmas, and we hear their echoes during the season of Epiphany. The newborn Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, enlightens us with God's great gifts of grace and truth.

Grace and truth don't merely enlighten us, though. They also—literally—lighten us, reduce our burdens, permitting us to “travel lightly” in this world. Without grace and truth, we are weighed down, heavy, lead-footed, stuck.

Grace Lightens the Load

Without Jesus' grace in our lives, we are dragged down by sin—our sin and the sins of others who have done us wrong. We know what this means for our individual lives. If we are unable or unwilling to forgive someone else it is (as a pastor friend put it recently) “like *you* taking some poison, in the hope that it will kill *the offender* who has hurt you.”

But what does this mean for a whole congregation? What if a whole community of faith is not “lightened” by the grace of Jesus Christ? What does that look like?

It looks like a community weighed down by grudges, stalled by resentments and obsessed with keeping score. Certain ideas or topics are deemed “off limits.” This sort of condition is truly “heavy” for a community, so burdensome that a congregation can grind to a halt in following Christ and doing God's work.

A former colleague in synodical ministry once put it this way: “I wonder if the folks in that congregation are actually using the *Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness* during Sunday worship. To listen to how they're at each others' throats, you'd think that sins hadn't been forgiven around there for years!”

Sound familiar? When folks in congregations are not living in the gracious forgiveness of Jesus Christ, everything goes sour. Well-laid plans and good intentions are ineffectual. The reason is that when we aren't regularly forgiving one another, we are cutting ourselves off from God's future. Martin Luther wasn't kidding when he wrote in the catechism: "For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation." We have a future together—"life and salvation!"—when we walk in the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ.

Truth Unburdens Us

Walking lightly in God's grace, we also are willing to face the truth. Truth-telling is another weight-reducing practice in the community of Christ.

Garrison Keillor likes to say that liars need to have good memories. Since they don't live in the truth, liars have to work harder at remembering all the falsehoods they have uttered. It can be exhausting. Failing to be truthful in all things introduces another layer of "weight" in our common life.

It's not just that occasionally church-folk tell fibs or even whoppers. It's that we also like to "shave" the truth, hold back some knowledge, or cultivate secrets. A congregation will be weighed down to the degree that it allows clandestine meetings, permits some to be insiders and others to be outsiders, or fosters a cult of secrecy.

Peter Steinke suggests that such "heaviness" shows up when a congregation

- Values a rigid hierarchy, with lots of power at the top;
- Tries to "manage" or "spin" the truth;
- Puts on a "happy face" religiosity or a cozy unanimity; or
- Has a history of punishing or shunning truth-tellers.

A congregation that lives in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ will insist that all its members learn the gentle art of "speaking the truth in love." Perhaps no text is more helpful than Jesus' method (Matthew 18:15-22) for bringing "grace and truth" to bear in the web of relationships that make up a congregation. In short, if a congregation is so weighed down that things have ground to a halt, it's probably time to cultivate both truth ("speak directly with one another") and grace ("win back your brother or sister").

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Recall and share with others a time in your life when forgiving someone re-opened the future for you.
2. Where in your congregation's life are you experiencing the "weight" of sin, holding you back from fearlessly following Jesus?
3. What issue is most difficult to talk about in your congregation? How might truth-telling in this area "lighten the load" in your congregation.

December: Healthy Congregations Develop Caring Relationships

In Healthy Congregations, People Develop Caring Relationships and Empower Others

We now want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word...second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters.”

Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles, III:4

When Luther wrote these words in 1537, he came close—very close—to placing our relationships within the Body of Christ on a par with Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Caring relationships and loving conversations with other Christians are almost sacramental in the life of the church.

A Network of Connections

In itself the church is a gathering together of God’s people – a sharing of goodwill, energy, and gifts of the Spirit. It’s not far-fetched to define the congregation as a “network of connections.” This tracks with the language of the New Testament, which consistently favors *organic* – not mechanistic – images for describing the church, most notably as “the Body of Christ and individually, members one of another.” (I Corinthians 12:27).

Yet even within this lovely image there is place both for differentiation and togetherness. God doesn’t fuse us into a formless “blob.” The Body of Christ consists of *members* who are wonderfully diverse, but also *connected* inextricably, one to another.

Our challenge is to find balance between our identities as members of one another and the relationships that give us life. “How can a separate self-relate with others in a healthy way?” asks Dr. Peter Steinke, in his *Healthy Congregations* training materials.

Steinke points to four ways that *members* of the Body of Christ *relate* to one another:

- Playing together. “If you cannot get connected to others through relaxation, spontaneity, and letting go,” notes Steinke, “the only alternative is to connect through hostility or ‘dead seriousness.’”
- Touching one another, verbally as well as physically. Words we share are “touching” when they convey support, care, and comfort.
- Mirroring – simply looking into one another’s faces so we can tell whether we regard one another as important, noticed, and valued. How vital it is for us to know one another’s names and call each other by name!
- Nurturing connects people. There’s a reason why church suppers are so popular. “Half of Jesus’ parables,” observes Steinke, “are about food, feasts or farming.”

The Difficult Business of Helping

Helping one another, though, isn’t always as simple as you’d think. There are ways of “helping” that wind up hindering the growth of both the helper and the one being helped.

If our helping of one another always takes the form of fixing or rescuing someone, we could be tending to our own needs more than to the needs of the one being helped. Ask yourself: Am I driven by compassion or by my own anxiety at seeing someone who is hurt?

There is a kind of helping that dis-empowers the one being helped. Some helpers have a sick “need to be needed.” Their tendency to over-function can foster an unhealthy dependency in the one being “helped.”

It’s important to watch for this sort of behavior in our congregations. Peter Steinke suggests that overly-needy helpers can be spotted by their tendency to

- Listen *ad infinitum* to a friend’s problems
- Volunteer for every job that needs doing
- Stay up all night to do a project
- Do others’ work for them
- Try to provide the perfect environment
- Please others at the expense of their own well-being.

Another example of unhealthy helpfulness is when leaders of a congregation adapt to the weakest or most disgruntled members of the church. When such leaders try to appease or satisfy the chronically anxious or complaining, the whole congregation usually suffers. Writes Steinke: "Healthier functioning on the part of leaders involves keeping their focus on a goal, a direction, not the noise of the needy."

So what should be our goal in helping others? The founder of the modern servant leadership movement, Robert Greenleaf, has provided this helpful test: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. How well does your congregation play? Touch? Mirror? Nurture?
2. What connects people in your congregation?
3. How can you tell if your desire to help someone is motivated more by compassion than by your own anxiety?
4. Recall a time when leaders (perhaps in an attempt to be "helpful") adapted to the weakest or most unhappy members of your congregation. How did this affect the whole congregation?