

Your Congregation's Strengths Report

A Congregational Study, Discussion, Planning, and Action Process Using the *U.S. Congregational Life Survey Strengths Report* and the *Beyond the Ordinary Video*

Purpose: This process helps your congregation (a) recognize present strengths, (b) understand how those strengths compare with other congregations, (c) identify action possibilities that by building on those strengths increase congregational effectiveness, and (d) implement those actions. Use this process together with your 10-page *U.S. Congregational Life Survey Strengths Report* (the second report based on the answers of worshipers in your congregation).

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How to Use This Resource

The term “Appreciative Inquiry” describes the long-term process this resource outlines:

- I**dentify and appreciate our congregation’s present strengths.
- D**ream of how we might build on these strengths.
- E**xamine and prioritize action possibilities for building on our strengths.
- A**ct on selected action possibilities to create a stronger future.

The Appreciate Inquiry process unfolds in ways that ask and answer five important questions:

1. How can our congregation benefit from the information in our *US CLS Strengths Report*?
2. Who is responsible for interpreting and processing this information?
3. How should we transmit this information to our congregation’s paid staff, lay leadership, and worshippers so that it achieves maximum benefits?
4. What are some practical action possibilities that build on the insights and ideas generated by our congregation’s *US CLS Strengths Report* information?
5. How can we select and implement those action possibilities?

This resource provides a long-term process for discovering, dreaming, deciding, and doing. Planning groups and leaders in your congregation can experience themselves into new awareness, insights, and action directions.

To insure that the Appreciative Inquiry process becomes more than an intellectual exercise in which participants gain some insights but do not take action, remember the following facts:

- Fact #1:* Information on paper does not equal transformation in congregations. Knowing does not equal doing.
- Fact #2:* Building on present strengths only occurs in the presence of strong motivation. Unmotivated people tend to resist insights and actions that could propel them in new directions.
- Fact #3:* The strong motivation that enhances congregational strengths rarely happens just by reading a book or by attending a single meeting, seminar, workshop, or event; or by taking a survey.
- Fact #4:* The motivation-building process that leads to enhancing congregational strengths more often arises through a lengthy period of personal experiences, study, interactions with other respected persons, testing ideas, and refining procedures through experience.

Unfolding This Study, Discussion, Planning, and Action Process:

Step #1: The congregation’s governing board appoints a special task force to act on its behalf, comprised of six respected laypersons and the pastor. A good selection formula for this Congregational Planning Team is two people above age forty, two people under age forty, two adults who became members within the last three years, and the pastor. *Warning:* No matter how small or large the number of active leaders in your congregation, you get better results by appointing this special task force than by handing this material to any pre-existing group in your congregation, such as the governing board or a committee.

Step #2: Your Congregational Planning Team schedules one-hour sessions during seven consecutive weeks. Prior to the first session, create a three-hole notebook for distribution to each Planning Team member at the first meeting. The notebook should contain a copy of (a) this Congregational Study, Discussion, Action, and Planning Process and (b) your congregation’s *U.S. Congregational Life Survey Strengths Report*. These seven sessions require no advance preparation by team members.

During sessions 1-6, the team will generate and consider actions the congregation might take related to each of its strengths. Assign one team member with responsibility for recording these possible actions. Compile a list of all possible actions for each of the congregational strengths to use during session 7.

Step #3: At the conclusion of its seventh session, the Planning Team sets the four dates for implementation and checkup meetings (every three months during the next year). The purpose of the checkup meetings is to coordinate efforts of the congregation’s committees, ministries, and governing board in implementing, refining, and perfecting the action possibilities selected during the seven-week discussion sessions.

First Study, Discussion, Planning, and Action Session: Strength #1—Growing Spiritually and Strength #2—Meaningful Worship

Distribute to each Planning Team member a three-ring notebook containing two items:

- *A copy of this Congregational Study, Discussion, Action, and Planning Process*
- *A copy of your congregation's U.S. Congregational Life Survey Strengths Report*

To minimize the possibility of the Planning Team misunderstanding its purpose and the US CLS Strengths Report, the discussion leader opens the meeting by reading aloud to them the following five paragraphs:

In strong congregations, something already works well. The members focus on those strengths. They value the best of the past and have a vision for the future.

Strong congregations show intelligence, heart, and courage. Their members ask, "What gives us joy? What are we really about? What are we going to courageously seek?"

Congregations that want to move beyond the ordinary do not fall for the "one-factor fallacy." Maximum effectiveness stems from numerous factors. Strong congregations strive to develop multiple strengths.

Congregations cannot legitimately use their size ("We are too small!") or their affiliation ("We are Presbyterian; we're not supposed to be growing as much as a conservative church!") as reasons not to be strong and vibrant congregations. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey found examples of strong, healthy, effective congregations of every size, in cities and in rural areas, and in many different kinds of community circumstances.

Congregations that wish to move beyond the ordinary must ask, "What's going to work for a congregation of our size, in our community circumstances, at this time in our history, with these members, and with the people who live in our community?" [Excerpts adapted from Leslie Scanlon, "Multiple strengths make successful congregations, says survey," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 5-14-2003]

Strength #1 in Our Congregation: *View the introduction and the Strength #1 section of the video titled "Beyond the Ordinary: U.S. Congregational Life Survey" enclosed with the two resources listed above. The video ensures that Planning Team members understand how to interpret the US CLS Strengths Report provided in their Planning Team Notebooks. Do not view the entire video. Stop at the end of the video's description of Strength #1—Growing Spiritually.*

Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of video section Strength #1—Growing Spiritually and the corresponding section of your congregation's US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Ask questions such as the following: "What does this section of our congregation's report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?"

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #1—Growing Spiritually: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Growing Spiritually is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Have a strong sense of belonging to the congregation (Strength 4)
- Experience meaningful worship in the congregation (Strength 2)
- Participate in congregational activities (Strength 3)
- Have begun attending the congregation in the last five years (Strength 8)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in small congregations averaging fewer than 100 worship attendees were *slightly* more likely to be Growing Spiritually than people in midsize or large congregations. However, people in theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *much more likely* to be Growing Spiritually than people in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

A congregation’s thinking and behavior habits—which are often several decades old—increase or retard its abilities to provide spiritual-growth experiences. Healthy, effective congregations have an atmosphere of faith, hope, and love that promotes the spiritual growth of members/attendees by providing the following: (a) Spiritual space—spiritual growth methods that connect with all four adult generations plus a fifth children and youth generation; (b) Psychological space—warmth and friendliness toward newcomers; (c) Sociological space—acceptance of newcomers in governing boards, committees, ministries, and leadership roles; (d) Spirit of fun and fellowship in all congregational meetings and endeavors; (e) Prayer emphasis—making prayer more important than the operation of organizational structures; and (f) Conflict prevention and resolution skills that minimize dysfunctional personal relationships and power struggles.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #1—Growing Spiritually:

- Countless people in thousands of congregations across a broad spectrum of faith families report positive experiences from Rick Warren’s book and six-week, spiritual-growth program titled *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, www.zondervanchurchsource.com).
- Few endeavors increase insights and spiritual maturity in adults more than prayer. Congregations can involve the majority of members/attendees in using the prayer model titled *The Secret to Abundant Living*. [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation’s name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller’s Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]

Congregations that possess Strength #1—Growing Spiritually, often have four additional strengths: (a) strong sense of belonging to the congregation, (b) they experience meaningful worship, (c) a large percentage of attendees participate in congregational activities, and (d) a high percentage of newcomers within the last five years. Those four strengths are often facilitated or retarded by high levels of congregational conflict. The following resources improve congregational leadership’s abilities in reducing, preventing, and managing conflict:

- Sources of helpful information regarding the causes behind and procedures for dealing with a wide variety of “bent personalities” and congregational conflicts include books such as *Congregational Fitness: Healthy Practices for Layfolk* by Denise W. Goodman (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute); *The Care of Troublesome People* by Wayne E. Oates (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute); and *Creating a Healthier Church* by Ronald Richardson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress), which explains why congregational patterns tend to repeat themselves.
- As a way to enhance their skills, the officers, committee chairpersons, and governing board members in some congregations study and discuss the 21-page resource titled *How to Prevent and Resolve Congregational Conflict*. Two options for using that resource: (a) Invite a psychologist, pastoral counselor, or hospital chaplain from outside the congregation to lead a three-session study/discussion for the governing board and key leaders. (b) Use the material as part of each year’s orientation for new officers, committee chairpersons, and governing board members. [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation’s name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller’s Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]

Closing Thought: Without intentional focus on Growing Spiritually, congregations can drift into the routine of providing a positive social and psychological atmosphere for well-adjusted pagans.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
- What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?
- In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?
- What actions should our congregation consider?

Strength #2 in Our Congregation: View the video explanation of Strength #2—Meaningful Worship. Discuss the Strength #2 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #2—Meaningful Worship: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Meaningful Worship is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Be growing spiritually (Strength 1)
- Have empowering congregational leaders (Strength 9)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in all three sizes of congregation—fewer than 100 worshipers, 100 to 350 worshipers, and more than 300 worshipers—were about equally likely to experience Meaningful Worship. However, people in theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *slightly* more likely to report that they experience Meaningful Worship than were people in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations conduct worship services that honor God, spiritually enrich members, and retain young adult newcomers. Worship is every congregation’s strength and power source. In worship, we encounter God, and God empowers us for quality living and service to others. Worship is also the entryway for people exploring the possibility of a relationship with our congregation.

Numerous factors facilitate or retard the effectiveness of worship experience. Examples: styles such as informal or formal, components such as prayers and liturgies, hymn types, music tempo, “sing-ability” of songs, sermon quality, symbols, rituals, worship-leader behaviors and attire, communication style and methods, worship pace (drags, hops, races, or flows smoothly), balance between continuity and variation each week, cold or friendly atmosphere, greeter and usher skills, worship-bulletin communication quality, service length, number of services each week, worship area ambience, and quality of nursery and childcare staffing and rooms.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #2—Meaningful Worship:

- The national offices of most denominations and faith families publish resources designed to strengthen the quality of worship. Several large congregations across the country provide music and worship workshops each year. Across the desk of congregational staff come numerous mailings each year, describing these workshops. Select one that seems to fit your needs.
- Both small and large congregations find helpful, practical suggestions in *The Generation Driven Church* by William Benke & Le Etta Benke (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), especially Chapter 7, “Reaching Unchurched Generation Xers” and Chapter 10, “Alternative Outreach Models.”

- The 37-page resource titled *How to Increase Worship Attendance* provides dozens of principles and procedures that attract, retain, and spiritually enrich larger numbers of people in weekly worship. [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation's name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@ctr.pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller's Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]

Closing Thought: Every human endeavor has a “main thing.” Putting out fires is the main thing for fire fighters. They do other important things, such as fire prevention education, but lack of effectiveness at their main thing spells institutional failure. Congregations do many important things, but their main thing is helping people connect with God. Worship is not the only way that happens, but it is a primary way.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- *Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?*
- *What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?*
- *In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?*
- *What actions should our congregation consider?*

Close this session by asking Planning Team members to stand in a circle, join hands, and take turns offering one-sentence prayers.

Second Study, Discussion, Planning, and Action Session: **Strength #3—Participating in the Congregation or Parish** **Strength #4—Having a Sense of Belonging**

Strength #3 in Our Congregation: *View the video explanation of Strength #3—Participating in the Congregation or Parish. Stop the video and discuss the Strength #3 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”*

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #3—Participating in the Congregation or Parish: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Participating in the Congregation or Parish is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Be growing spiritually (Strength 1)
- Be inviting others to worship and talking about their faith (Strength 7)
- Share a strong vision for the congregation’s future (Strength 10)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in small congregations—fewer than 100 worshipers—were *slightly* more likely to be Participating in the Congregation (attending a Bible study or holding a leadership position, etc.) than people in midsize or large congregations. People in theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *much more likely* to report Participating in the Congregation than were people in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations quickly involve new adult attendees and members in group participation and service opportunities. Members of many congregations tend to exhibit greater friendliness toward one another than toward newcomers. This behavior can result in too many newcomers feeling left out and becoming inactive or relocating to other congregations.

The number one reason why people volunteer is because they are asked. Only 21% of Americans volunteer when nobody asks them, whereas 85% volunteer when asked.

Two experiences are crucial to insuring that close to 100% of new attendees and members are active participants one year later: (1) Involve newcomers in an adult class or group of some kind within the first six weeks after becoming regular worship attendees. (2) Ask newcomers to assume some type of church responsibility or job within the first six months after they establish a regular worship attendance pattern.

Accomplishing those two goals—a group and a job—requires (1) an organizational structure that accomplishes this goal (one that includes numerous “ministry teams,” in addition to and separate from the regular “standing committees”) and (2) some type of individual interview, conducted by a staff member or a volunteer who assumes the role of “Newcomer Assimilation Coordinator.”

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #3—Participating in the Congregation or Parish:

- *Large Congregations:* A helpful new-member assimilation procedure is available from Saddleback Valley Community Church, 1 Saddleback Parkway, Lake Forest, CA 92630 or www.saddlebackresources.com. Ask for their S.H.A.P.E. materials and an overview of their procedures outlined in C.L.A.S.S. #301.
- *Midsize and Large Congregations:* Learn about the excellent materials and training events for Directors of Volunteer Ministries (a part-time position in some congregations and a full-time position in others) by contacting Sue Mallory or Carolyn Cochran, PO Box 850954, Richardson, TX 75085-0954, 972/761-0099, email to equipper@attbi.com.

- *Congregations of All Sizes:* To enhance Strength #3, see the newcomer interview process and Action Possibilities in Strength #4. These are two different strengths. However, effective newcomer interview processes that provide strong communication and accountability links with committees, ministry teams, and fellowship groups accomplish improvements in both Strength #3 and Strength #4.

Closing Thought: Most people who worship in a congregation but do not participate in any other manner soon feel they have entered a lonely crowd. Sitting in the bleachers as an observer is fine at ball games. In congregations, it tends to deaden enthusiasm. Most attendees who do not participate vegetate and eventually evacuate.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
- What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?
- In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?
- What actions should our congregation consider?

Strength #4 in Our Congregation: View the video explanation of Strength #4—*Having a Sense of Belonging*. Stop the video and discuss the Strength #4 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraph in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #4—Having a Sense of Belonging: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Having a Sense of Belonging is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Be growing spiritually (Strength 1)
- Share a strong vision for the congregation’s future (Strength 10)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in small congregations—fewer than 100 worshipers—were *slightly* more likely to report Having a Sense of Belonging than people in midsize or large congregations. People in theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *much more likely* to report Having a Sense of Belonging than were people in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations. Congregations with more young adults were also more likely to report strength in Having a Sense of Belonging, probably indicating that a sense of “home” is particularly important to younger adults. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations build experience-bridges by which new attendees and members quickly bond to new friends, groups, and service opportunities. Critics accuse some congregations of attracting crowds of new people who “go out the back door” soon after arriving. More often, new attendees who drift out the back door to inactivity *never got in the front door*.

Congregations in which most newcomers become (a) highly committed participants who do not drift out the back door and (b) report themselves as Growing Spiritually do not focus on shutting the congregational back door. They build bridges so newcomers get fully in the front door.

Congregations with effective assimilation bridges gain 90 or more *active* participants per 100 new members, instead of only 40 to 70 *active* participants per 100 new members.

Assimilation-effective congregations build four kinds of newcomer bridges:

1. Bridges to group involvement that give newcomers the sense of inclusion that helps them to feel loved and give them the opportunity to express love to others.
2. Bridges to friendships that give newcomers feelings of acceptance and self-esteem.
3. Bridges to service or leadership roles and responsibilities that give newcomers a sense of purpose, meaning, and positive self-identity.
4. Bridges to spiritual growth experiences that give newcomers life-strengthening values.

These four bridges meet universal psycho-social-spiritual needs that help people become (a) highly committed to congregational involvement and (b) spiritually-growing participants. The four bridges to effective assimilation are like a box with four sides. Remove one or more of the sides and the contents of the box do not stay inside.

Six Crucial Questions: Congregations with effective assimilation procedures can say “yes” to six questions:

1. Do we have an intentional system that helps all new attendees and members become involved in a group within six weeks?
2. Do we provide the opportunity for all new attendees and members to develop five to seven new friends within the first six months?
3. Do we have an intentional system that involves all new attendees and members in a role or responsibility within the first six months?
4. Do we have a large number of entry-level places of service?
5. Do we have an attitude of openness to the idea of beginning the kinds of new ministries each year in which new members want to be involved?
6. Do we provide several kinds of opportunities for personal spiritual growth that help new attendees and members experience a life-transforming connection with God?

Churches that effectively answer questions 3, 4, and 5 establish some type of newcomer placement system. That system compensates for the fact that most newcomers have (a) between zero and few natural social connections in this congregation and (b) no way to experience the comradeship and Sense of Belonging derived from working together on important service goals with long-time members.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #4—Having a Sense of Belonging:

- Many small and midsize congregations appoint an unpaid, newcomer-assimilation coordinator. He or she is responsible for conducting an oral interview with all new attendees and members in order to fill out a “Talent and Interest Inventory.” In larger congregations, a quarter-time or a half-time lay staff person works best. Warning: Do not substitute a mailed form for a personal interview. The interview has at least 10 times the value of a printed and mailed Talent and Interest Inventory. You get about 10% of them back when you mail them, and the information has little value; you get 100% of them back when you conduct personal interviews and obtain much information people would not have written on paper.

Overview of this interview process: Make an appointment to visit the home of newcomers who have regularly attended worship for two to three months. Take along a newcomer packet, which contains various items to help get people acquainted with the congregation. Begin by saying something like, “We interview everyone who establishes a regular attendance pattern.”

After explaining the contents of the newcomer packet, the interviewer says something like this: To address the fear that some newcomer transfers from other congregations in which they were burned out with too many responsibilities, begin by saying, “We try to avoid working anyone to death in our congregation,” then add, “but we know that everyone God sends to us has special talents and abilities that allow them to serve God in a special way. May I ask you a few questions about your experiences and interests?”

Newcomers respond affirmatively. They obviously feel positive about your congregation. They have become regular attendees. The interviewer uses a form on which he or she writes notes. The questions are oral, developed from glancing down the sheet at various categories that each congregation personalizes to match its programs and activities. Examples: “Have you ever sung in a choir? Do you play the organ or the piano? Do you play other musical instruments? Have you ever taught a class?”

Other kinds of questions that facilitate helpful interviews with new members and attendees:

- How did you first hear about our congregation?
- What are some of the reasons you decided to begin attending regularly?
- Have you been involved with other congregations before coming here?
- What are some of the ways you think our congregation can be helpful in strengthening your spiritual growth?
- Are you involved in one of our religious education classes?
- What are some skills or knowledge that you have enjoyed using in other congregations?
- What are some things you’ve never been involved in but think you might find meaningful?
- What are some things you hope we will never ask you to do?
- At what times and where do you prefer receiving telephone calls?
- Do you prefer your mailings to come to your home or somewhere else?
- Do you have any specific questions about the congregation or its ministries?

The interviewer obtains information that would have taken years to learn. Based on that information, the interviewer telephones the appropriate congregational ministry leaders; adult, youth, and elementary class leaders; small-group leaders; and committee chairpersons to engage them in the bridge-building process that helps newcomers feel they are a genuine part of the congregation.

- Find more extensive details of why and how to institute a newcomer interview process in the 19-page resource titled *How to Build Assimilation Bridges for New Members/Attendees*. [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation’s name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller’s Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]

Closing Thought: Loneliness and feeling disconnected is epidemic in American culture. A city planner says we must find ways to create within the urban environment a sense of belonging. In every type of community—suburban, small town, and rural—congregations operating at maximum health and effectiveness organize in ways that meet that need in *every* newcomer.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- *Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?*
- *What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?*
- *In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?*
- *What actions should our congregation consider?*

Close this session by asking Planning Team members to stand in a circle, join hands, and take turns offering one-sentence prayers.

Third Study, Discussion, Planning, and Action Session

Strength #5—Caring for Young People

Strength #5 in Our Congregation: *View the video explanation of Strength #5—Caring for Young People. Discuss the Strength #5 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”*

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs, in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #5—Caring for Young People: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Caring for Young People is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Be growing spiritually (Strength 1)
- Share a strong vision for the congregation’s future (Strength 10)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in midsize congregations—100 to 350 in average worship attendance—were *slightly* more likely to report strength in Caring for Young People than people in small or large congregations. People in theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *slightly* more likely to report strength in Caring for Young People than were people in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations. Congregations with more young adults were also more likely to report strength in Caring for Young People. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations have vital children and youth classes and groups. The purpose of children’s classes and youth groups is not to grow larger churches or to meet parental preferences. *The mission of children and youth classes and groups is to help the largest possible number of children and youth make a life-changing connection with God and grow spiritually in that relationship.*

Yet, because most congregation-attending parents want strong children’s classes and youth programs, congregations tend to prosper when they provide such groups. Congregations that fail to provide such groups damage their present effectiveness and amputate their futures. (The chief exception to this rule is churches in retirement communities that restrict property ownership to senior adults.)

Strong children’s classes and youth groups that magnetically attract and spiritually nurture youth do not happen by accident. Like every other facet of healthy, effective churches, a composite of several factors makes that possible. Motivated, knowledgeable adult teachers and sponsors are the drive-shaft in that vehicle. Strong children’s classes and youth groups happen when capable adults (a) understand the foundational principles that underlie all effective children’s classes and youth groups and (b) apply those principles with methods that fit their congregation’s size and cultural circumstances.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #5—Caring for Young People:

- The national offices of most denominations and faith families publish study/discussion resources designed to strengthen the quality of children’s classes and youth groups. Several large congregations across the country provide a wide variety of workshops on these topics each year. The mail brings congregations numerous such opportunities each year. Pick one that seems to fit your needs and send youth sponsors and religious education leaders.
- Contact organizations such as (a) Group Publishing, PO Box 366, Loveland, CO 80539-9913, 1-800-447-1070, www.grouppublishing.com and (b) Youth Specialties, ChurchSource, PO Box 668, Holmes, PA 19043-0668, 1-800-776-8008, www.zondervanchurchsource.com. Their resources and monthly magazines for youth ministers/sponsors provide effective programming ideas for contemporary youth.

- Ask youth leaders to study the 19-page resource titled *How to Grow Strong Youth Groups*, which provides ideas for small, midsize, and large youth groups. [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation's name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller's Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]
- Ask education and children's class leaders to study the detailed, how-to-do-it suggestions in the 19-page resource titled *How to Increase Children and Youth Sunday School Attendance* [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation's name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller's Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]
- Congregations with zero or almost no children in their sixth-grade and younger religious education classes: Use the method in the "Reinventing the Sunday School in Childless Churches" section of the above-noted, 19-page resource titled *How to Increase Children and Youth Sunday School Attendance*. Other congregations use this timeline and system to infuse their elementary classes with new attendees and increase outreach to young families.
- In many congregations, raising expectations of adult members regarding teaching is crucial to strengthening elementary classes. Develop a climate that expresses the following: (1) No one takes early retirement from transmitting the Faith to the next generation. (2) Everyone plays a role in transmitting the Faith, not just parents with small children. (3) Instead of one teacher, a four-to-seven-person team works together in each elementary class. Study the how-to-do-it section on "Teacher Teams" in the above-noted, 19-page resource titled *How to Increase Children and Youth Sunday School Attendance*. Not to be confused with an older, very different model called team teaching, the Teacher Team concept simultaneously provides sufficient teachers and assimilates new adult church attendees in a positive way.
- The "Workshop Rotation Model" delivers quality education in elementary classes—with fewer teachers and less preparation time than traditional models. Download information from www.rotation.org. Curriculum for the Rotation Model titled "PowerXpress," is available at www.cokesbury.com.

Closing Thought: "The vast majority of older American adolescents display positive regard, not negative hostility toward or disaffection from organized religion. *"The minority of older adolescents in America who do appear to be hostile to or estranged from organized religion has not grown (or declined) in recent decades."* [Christian Smith, Robert Faris, Melinda Lundquist Denton, and Mark Regnerus, "Mapping American Adolescent Subjective Religiosity and Attitudes of Alienation Toward Religion: A Research Report," pp. 111-133, *Sociology of Religion*, Spring 2003]

- Leaders in small and/or less effective congregations often remark, "Youth today are just not interested in youth groups."
- Leaders in beyond-the-ordinary congregations refuse to believe that myth. Those leaders also know that the parents of teenagers are magnetically attracted to congregations that "have a really strong youth program." Therefore, they provide (a) the spiritual-growth programs and (b) the strong vision for the congregation's future that usually accompanies this Caring for Young People strength.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- *Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?*
- *What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?*
- *In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?*
- *What actions should our congregation consider?*

Close this session by asking Planning Team members to stand in a circle, join hands, and take turns offering one-sentence prayers.

Fourth Study, Discussion, Planning, and Action Session: Strength #6—Focusing on the Community and Strength #7—Sharing Faith

Strength #6 in Our Congregation: *View the video explanation of Strength #6—Focusing on the Community. Discuss the Strength #6 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”*

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #6—Focusing on the Community: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Focusing on the Community is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Have a strong sense of belonging to the congregation (Strength 4)
- Have empowering congregational leaders (Strength 9)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in midsize congregations—100 to 350 in average worship attendance—were *slightly* more likely to report strength in Focusing on the Community (everything from being involved in community service to voting and making charitable contributions) than were people in small or large congregations. People in theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *slightly* less likely to report strength in Focusing on the Community than were people in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations. Congregations with older median-age members were also more likely to report strength in Focusing on the Community. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations involve attendees in community service, benevolence, and world missions that accomplish the spiritually-driven injunction to “love your neighbor” taught by Christianity and most other faith families across the world. For example, in Luke 10, Jesus defines “neighbors” as people we do not personally know, not merely people with whom we are acquainted. Healthy, effective congregations continually look for needs other congregations and community organizations are not meeting, and consider whether they should play a role in addressing these needs.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #6—Focusing on the Community:

- *Most communities need a variety of childcare programs.* Congregations can usually provide these services on a financially break-even basis. From the following list, select the one you think makes the most sense to begin with. Add another program the second year. (a) Mothers’ Day Out program. (b) Preschool program. (c) Daycare ministry. (d) A Montessori education unit for children. (e) After-school Latch-Key ministry. (f) Parents’ Night Out on Friday or Saturday from 6:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. that provides childcare. (g) In small towns, a Home Game Childcare program and/or a Fifth Quarter, after-the-game gathering for youth. (h) In small towns, Wednesday, after-school children’s ministries such as “Kid’s Club” are quite effective. The format includes recreation, crafts, study, worship, and food.

To be long-term effective, the above-listed children’s ministries should charge a small fee that covers staffing expenses. Such projects quickly crash and burn if they rely on volunteer staffing. Most of the above-listed programs do *not* require additional liability insurance. Nor are most of these programs regulated and licensed by state laws with regard to staffing, facility construction, etc. The exceptions usually include daycare, preschool, and Montessori programs.

Weekday childcare services of various kinds need a governance structure that provides personnel guidance and ensures continuing financial stability. Three different models of governance structures are used by congregational childcare ministries across the United States. The pros and cons of each model are outlined on pages 78-97 of *Starting a Nonprofit in Your Church* by Joy Skjogstad (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2003).

- *Identifying other community service needs:* Use the step-by-step process and resources in *Handbook for Urban Church Ministries and All Who Reach Out With Their Neighbors*, edited by Phil Thom and Sally A. Johnson (Chicago: Metro Mission), Covenant Bookstore, 3200 West Foster Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625 or from the Urban Ministries Office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1-888-728-7228 ext. 5845.
- *Another way to identify top community needs:* Study the following list.

Ministry with Young Adults, Age 20-34: Takes two avenues—single and married young adults. Examples: recreation, premarital counseling, marital-adjustment counseling, singles retreats, campus ministry, daycare, mothers' morning out, parenting classes, single-parent support groups, crisis-pregnancy counseling, AIDS ministry, university student or correctional institution chaplain ministries.

Middle Adults, Age 35-59: How to deal with job loss, disabling injury, death of the primary wage earner, and divorce; opportunities to participate in meaningful ministries that utilize gifts and talents.

Older Adults, Age 60-Retirement: Financial/legal counseling, transportation, reading and/or letter writing services, adult day care, grief support groups, medical/dental clinics, nursing home ministries, and senior-adult clubs plus the opportunity to volunteer for church ministries.

Married Couples with Children: All types of family ministries, plus preschooler mothers' groups, latch-key programs, parenting seminars, children's mission organizations, and Vacation Bible Schools.

One-Person Households: Needs related to peer relationships, finances, care of older parents, loneliness, feelings of rejection, grief-support groups, day care, Big Brother/Sister programs, divorce recovery, food pantries, clothing closets, homeless shelters, craft classes, and senior-adult clubs, plus opportunity to volunteer for worthy ministry projects.

College Graduates/Some College: Personal, career, and family counseling plus opportunities to serve others through traditional church programs, providing housing for homeless people, literacy training, and refugee resettlement.

High School/Less than High School: Tutoring for children, literacy training, and high-school equivalency training.

Racial Groups: Immigrants may need language classes. Economically disadvantaged groups require the full range of community and family ministries listed in previous and subsequent categories.

Mobile Home, Trailer, and Other Housing Units: These people often respond best to on-site ministries such as social activities, counseling, assistance with material needs, and activities for children, plus the range of other ministries.

Low-Income People, \$0-\$14,999 Per Year: Ministries in already-listed categories, plus literacy training, job-referral services, substance-abuse treatment, transportation, legal advocacy, and leadership development, plus coordination of ministries with those provided by other churches and social service agencies.

High-Income Households, \$50,000 or More Annually: Ministries that focus on intellectual stimulation, developing community, finding meaning and fulfillment in life, and professional counseling, plus opportunities to use personal gifts and resources in ministry.

[This list was adapted by permission from *Research Report*, North American Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, Strategic Planning Support Team, Phil Jones, Director.]

- *Specific Examples of Hands-On Ministries:* (1) Habitat for Humanity. (2) "Backyard Mission" is a systematic process through which teams of people in churches provide free home repair for needy people. For information, contact LakeRidge United Methodist Church, Lubbock, Texas; www.backyardmission.org

or Fax 1-806-794-2266. (3) In the “Wheelchair Ramp Outreach Program,” church member teams build wheelchair ramps for needy people. For information, contact First United Methodist Church, Slidell, Louisiana; Phone 1-504-643-6437 or Fax 1-504-643-6439. Team members visit churches across the country free of charge, provide training, and help the new group’s members construct their first wheelchair ramp. (4) Many communities have volunteer organizations that organize, train, and deploy congregation members to tutor at-risk, elementary students in learning to read. The following statistics make literacy ministry’s value more obvious: 85 percent of unwed mothers are illiterate; 70 percent of Americans arrested are illiterate. [*USA Today* “USA TODAY Snapshots,” 11-29-00]

- “Faith-based” community service endeavors set up as nonprofit entities connected with congregations are increasingly common across the United States. Such a structure allows a congregation to obtain funding through foundation grants, donations from interested people and corporations in the community, and in some cases the federal government. Everything a congregation needs to know about how to set up such a nonprofit entity is found in the excellent book *Starting a Nonprofit in Your Church* by Joy Skjegstad (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2003; www.Alban.org).

Closing Thought: Theologically speaking, selfishness is alien to the nature of effective congregations. Pragmatically speaking, congregations that begin living only for themselves are starting a trip toward dysfunction. They eventually die of spiritual asphyxiation because they lack the life-giving oxygen of extroverted love.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?
- What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?
- In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?
- What actions should our congregation consider?

Strength #7 in Our Congregation: View the video explanation of Strength #7—Sharing Faith. Discuss the Strength #7 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #7—Sharing Faith: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Sharing Faith is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Participate in congregational activities (Strength 3)
- Have a strong sense of belonging to the congregation (Strength 4)
- Have empowering congregational leaders (Strength 9)
- Have begun attending the congregation in the last five years (Strength 8)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in small congregations—fewer than 100 worshipers—were *considerably* more likely to report strength in Sharing Faith (talking to others about their faith, inviting people to worship, and reaching out to those with no connection to any congregation) than were people in midsize or large congregations. However, people in theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *much more likely* to report strength in Sharing Faith than were people in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations involve attendees and members in faith sharing, inviting others to worship, and hospitality. Congregations, when they live up to their true nature, are magnetic. Two examples from the Christian Faith: Jesus said, “Go . . . make disciples.” (Matthew 28:19). “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily” (Acts 16:5). A congregation’s effectiveness in helping

people connect with God happens through a complex mixture of numerous factors. Especially powerful is the convergence of three major influences: (1) what God does by the Spirit's interaction with the flow of each individual's life, circumstances, and needs; (2) what congregations do to help meet the spiritual, psychological, emotional, and relational needs of individuals; and (3) what individual members do to influence acquaintances, friends, and relatives toward a relationship with God.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #7—Sharing Faith:

- The national offices of most denominations and faith families suggest a wide variety of faith-sharing study/discussion resources and action possibilities. parachurch organizations and large congregations across the country provide numerous faith-sharing workshops each year.
- Fine-tune methods of contacting first-time worship guests. A description of, the rationale behind, and training for this procedure are found in the 22-page resource titled *How to Transform Worship Visitors into Regular Attendees*. [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation's name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller's Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]
- Encouraging people toward our congregation's orbit of influence: Congregations use four primary types of activities as the first step in reaching out to people who have not visited their worship services: (a) Personal communications: invitations to friends, relatives, and acquaintances we know (more than 75% of new members visit worship the first time due to an invitation from someone who worships in our congregation); (b) Mass communications, invitations to people we do not know personally; (c) Event marketing, drawing the attention and eventually the involvement of outsiders through invitations to specific worship services or other church functions; and (d) Community service activities that both minister to hurting people and attract worship visitors. For numerous ways to accomplish those four reach-out methods, consult the 22-page resource titled *How to Attract First-Time Worship Visitors*. [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation's name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller's Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]

Closing Thought: Numerical growth can become ideological idolatry if congregations make that their *only* goal. But leaving reach-out to new people off the congregational priority list is an opposite theological and pragmatic heresy.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- *Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?*
- *What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?*
- *In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?*
- *What actions should our congregation consider?*

Close this session by asking Planning Team members to stand in a circle, join hands, and take turns offering one-sentence prayers.

Fifth Study, Discussion, Planning, and Action Session

Strength #8—Welcoming New Worshipers

Strength #8 in Our Congregation: *View the video explanation of Strength #8—Welcoming New Worshipers. Discuss the Strength #8 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”*

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #8—Welcoming New Worshipers: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Welcoming New Worshipers is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Be inviting others to worship and talking about their faith (Strength 7)
- Share a strong vision for the congregation’s future (Strength 10)
- Be caring for children and youth participating in the congregation (Strength 5)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in small congregations did *about equally well* at Welcoming New Members (as measured by the percentage of worshipers who began attending during the last five years) as did midsize and larger congregations. However, congregations with younger median-age members attracted more new people. Theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *much more likely* to report strength in attracting newcomers than historically black and mainline Protestant congregations and Catholic parishes.

Numerous factors influence the volume and type of new worshipers the congregations experience during the past five years. Examples: Some communities experienced high in-and-out mobility, with lots of people coming and going each year. Catholic parishes tended to draw more transfers from other parishes. Protestant congregations were more likely to experience large numbers of newcomers switching denominations.

None of the four kinds of congregations—mainline Protestants, theologically conservative Protestants, historically black congregations, and Catholic parishes—did better than the others at bringing in people who had not regularly attended worship before.

The strongest predictors for whether congregations grew numerically were (a) doing a good job of caring for children and youth, (b) a high percentage of people participating in small groups and various activities, and (c) a welcoming attitude toward new people.

Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations overcome thought barriers that restrict their reach-out abilities.

Strengthening outreach results requires more than a change in behaviors and methods. Increasing the number of new attendees and members each year also requires several changes in thinking, among which the following are especially important:

- Members in some congregations continuously remind one another of the declining and/or changing community population near their meeting facility. This kind of talk creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that blocks action. A sizeable percentage of growing-membership congregations in the United States serve in a declining or changing population base. Factors other than demographic trends control a congregation’s future size.

- *Leaders of numerically growing congregations in every faith family use comprehensive thinking and behavior that summarize in six words—Love God, love people, reach out.* Growing-membership congregations do not engage in the faulty logic of believing that emphasizing one of those three imperatives substitutes for strength in one or both of the other two. Growing congregations believe in all three and take action to intentionally and specifically accomplish them.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #8—Welcoming New Worshipers:

- The national offices of most denominations and faith families suggest study/discussion resources designed to strengthen congregational reach-out and hospitality skills. Large congregations across the country provide a wide variety of workshops on these topics each year.
- Use action possibilities found in Strengths #1, #3, #5, #7, and #10. Congregations with those strengths usually begin to experience significant increases in the number of new attendees and members.

Closing Thought: Old-time cowboys wondered why cow herds so easily spooked and ran with no apparent danger nearby. Current agricultural experts know why. On days with a light wind, cows can smell predators as far away as six miles. Congregation leaders likewise underestimate the uncanny accuracy of newcomers in sensing and responding to non-inclusion signals.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- *Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?*
- *What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?*
- *In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?*
- *What actions should our congregation consider?*

Close this session by asking Planning Team members to stand in a circle, join hands, and take turns offering one-sentence prayers.

Sixth Study, Discussion, Planning, and Action Session

Strength #9—Empowering Leadership and Strength #10—Looking to the Future

Strength #9 in Our Congregation: *View the video explanation of Strength #9—Empowering Leadership. Discuss the Strength #9 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”*

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #9—Empowering Leadership: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Empowering Leadership is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Experience meaningful worship in the congregation (Strength 2)
- Share a strong vision for the congregation’s future (Strength 10)
- Be involved in the community (Strength 6)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in small congregations—fewer than 100 worshipers—were *slightly* more likely to report strength in Empowering Leadership (feel empowered to use their gifts and talents for leadership) than were people in midsize or large congregations. However, people in theologically conservative and historically black congregations were *much more likely* to report strength in Empowering Leadership than were people in Catholic parishes and mainline moderate Protestant congregations. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations have organizational systems that involve a high percentage of attendees and members in their various ministries. By force of habit, many congregations use organizational procedures that successfully involved large numbers of members during the 1950s. During the 2000s era those procedures create (a) a short list of hard-working lay leaders who feel increasingly burned out, (b) a large number of members who “sit in the bleachers and watch,” and (c) the feeling that “a small clique runs our church.”

Communication systems and organizational structures: Fit a congregation’s size and are appropriate to this stage in history increase its health and effectiveness by (1) enlarging the percentage of members/attendees involved in its ministries; (2) increasing the spirit of congregational unity; (3) encouraging the free flow of new ideas and creativity; (4) providing efficient, rapid decision-making in a spirit of participatory democracy; (5) holding conflict to a minimum; and (6) protecting against the two primary kinds of dysfunctional leadership: (a) micro-management by paid staff or over-controlling laypersons and (b) laissez faire management by paid staff or passive lay leadership.

Inappropriate organizational structures create the opposite of those congregational personality characteristics. Unfortunately, despite the fact that many members and leaders in such congregations think their organizational structure is dysfunctional, they are so addicted to the familiar pattern that they keep doing it “the way we have always done it” instead of changing to a system that works better but with which they are unfamiliar.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #9—Empowering Leadership:

- Improve the quality and volume of communication among attendees and members by installing a “pastoral telecomputer.” This electronic system sends telephone messages to specific lists, such as choir members, governing board members, or the entire membership. Within a few hours, the machine can telephone all of the congregation’s members and notify them of a funeral service time, announce a special function, or cancel a church service due to weather conditions. Most such equipment is capable of two-way communication. This allows people that the machine telephones to raise a question or concern, if they wish to do so. Preset to call during appropriate hours of the day or evening, the telecomputer keeps calling until it reaches everyone on the staff member’s selected list. The telecomputer pays for itself in labor and

postage savings, replacing postcard reminders of meetings. One company that provides this equipment: Church Communications, 3039 Hidden Forest Court, Marietta, GA 30066, 1-800-445-2155, www.churchcommunications.com. Shop carefully. Obtain a machine with sufficient capacity and speed. For a list of companies that provide such equipment, contact *Your Church* and ask for their most recent annual *Desk Reference*, 465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188, 1-630-260-6200, or its www.yourchurch.net Internet site.

- Obtain a copy of the comprehensive resource titled “Governing Board and Ministry Team Model.” [Available FREE to congregations that use the U.S. Congregational Life Survey process: Obtain this volume of *Nuggets* in the complete packet of detailed, how-to-do-it items authored by Herb Miller. Order the complete package by calling 1-888-728-7228, Ext. 2040, or emailing your congregation’s name and *mailing address* to USCongregations@pcusa.org. Request *Herb Miller’s Nuggets*; only one order per congregation, please.]

Closing Thought: Nothing so immediately influences congregational direction, mood, and atmosphere as paid and volunteer leaders who model a positive outlook on people, on reality, and on the future. The great secret of congregational leadership is the constant, daily art of seeing congregants as people with great potentials. Great leaders, by their words and actions, make people feel exceedingly valuable.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- *Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?*
- *What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?*
- *In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?*
- *What actions should our congregation consider?*

Strength #10 in Our Congregation: *View the video explanation of Strength #10—Looking to the Future. Stop the video with the question, “Can your congregation claim Looking to the Future as one of your strengths?” Save the video’s conclusion to use as you begin the seventh Planning Team session.*

Discuss the Strength #10 section of your congregation’s US CLS Strengths Report in the Planning Team Notebooks. Invite Planning Team members to respond to and discuss the content of this video section with questions such as the following: “What does this section of our congregation’s report say to you? What is the biggest insight that jumps out at you?”

Give Planning Team members three minutes to read the following paragraphs in preparation for a discussion of the four questions at the end of this section.

Strength #10—Looking to the Future: Congregations and parishes in the top 20%, those in the 80th percentile or above (where Looking to the Future is high), also tend to be doing well in other areas. Their worshipers are more likely to:

- Have a strong sense of belonging to the congregation (Strength 4)
- Have empowering congregational leaders (Strength 9)
- Have begun attending the congregation in the last five years (Strength 8)

The Big Picture: The US CLS research indicates that people in all three sizes of congregation did *about equally well* at Looking to the Future. However, congregations with more young adults, theologically conservative Protestant congregations, and historically black congregations were *much more likely* to report strength in Looking to the Future than were mainline Protestant congregations and Catholic parishes. Does this “big picture” information tell us anything about how congregations of our size and theology might be more effective?

Healthy, effective congregations often maintain their positive focus on the future by developing brief, easily-understood Vision, Mission, and Values Statements. Developing a mission statement can energize a

congregation in two ways: (a) by strengthening convictions regarding its central purpose and (b) by helping to build dreams for the future consistent with these convictions.

Action Possibilities for Building Strength #10—Looking to the Future:

- The step-by-step process for developing a mission statement found in *How to Set a Clear Direction for Your Church* by Bob Orr is ideal for planning retreats and/or a series of on-site meetings. Obtain from Church Growth, Inc., PO Box 541, Monrovia, CA 91017, 1-818-305-1280, www.churchgrowth.net.
- *Another way to develop vision and mission statements:* Imagine that your congregation is five years from now. You have achieved the optimum of your mission/ministry dreams. *Fortune* magazine is interviewing your leaders for an article. What is the topic sentence for each of four or five paragraphs in the article, each of which describes what you have accomplished? What is the article's title?

In such a scenario, the title is a one-sentence "vision statement" describing your congregation when it achieves what you feel God is calling it to do. The list of topic sentences from each of the four or five paragraphs is the "mission statement" that describes how your congregation achieves that vision.

Vision statements say *what* and are short enough to print on a t-shirt. Mission statements say *how* and are not longer than one-half page. For example, one congregation's vision statement is "Make more and better disciples of Jesus Christ." The paragraphs that comprise their "mission statement" describe the principal ways they accomplish their two-fold vision statement of (1) making new disciples and (2) strengthening the spiritual life of present disciples.

- *In addition to or instead of vision and mission statements, some congregations develop a "values statement" that focuses on overall congregational identity (who we are) rather than on governing board policies or the mission statement (our ministry objectives) or on our vision statement (picture of our ministries achieve at their optimum performance level).*

Example of one congregation's *Values Statement*:

Ten Special Affirmations of Our Church

We Believe:

1. Personal spiritual growth is our first priority: The changing of human lives comes about only as individuals turn to Jesus Christ.
2. There should always be passion for spiritual essentials, yet always freedom to differ on peripheral issues.
3. God has called us to be a people-oriented church, not a program-oriented church.
4. Everyone who walks through our door truly matters, and everyone who joins our fellowship can truly contribute.
5. The people in our church are called to be ministers, or "active players," while our pastors are called to be coaches.
6. There should be no pressure to have a certain kind of spiritual experience: It matters not *how* we come to trust Christ, but only *that* we trust *him* today.
7. Honest questions deserve honest answers: No question about God is too simple, too challenging, or so inappropriate that it cannot be asked.
8. God has called our church to grow, and will provide all challenges that come with growth.
9. People striving to follow Jesus Christ will have the best experience when they are accountable to others as part of a small group that shares fellowship, study, and prayer.
10. The focus of our church is meeting the unique needs of those we are seeking to reach, not perpetuating the successful programs of our past.

--Zionsville Presbyterian Church, Zionsville, Indiana

Closing Thought: A congregation's future is far more determined by the priorities and direction in which its leaders point than by its past performance or present circumstances. Effective leaders maximize congregational health and effectiveness with a positive vision, communicated continuously and repetitively.

Ask Planning Team members to go around the circle four times, taking turns sharing their answers to these four questions:

- *Do you recall instances where something in the paragraphs above was true in your personal experience and/or in a congregation?*
- *What would you like to add or subtract from these paragraphs?*
- *In what ways does one or more of the ideas in these paragraphs seem true of our congregation?*
- *What actions should our congregation consider?*

Close this session by asking Planning Team members to stand in a circle, join hands, and take turns offering one-sentence prayers.

Seventh Study, Discussion, Planning, Action Session

View the video's conclusion, which begins with the words, "Now let's put it all together."

Distribute the list of possible actions generated during the previous 6 sessions.

From this list, the Planning Team selects, prioritizes, develops an implementation timeline for, and delegates action possibilities to the appropriate committees, ministries, and groups. (The Planning Team does *not* function as an action group but as an oversight and coordinating team for the entire process.) Where applicable, the Planning Team hands off implementation suggestions and how-to-do-it resources to the various committees, ministries, and groups.

The Planning Team meets monthly during the next twelve months to (1) receive progress reports from the various committees, ministries, and groups and (2) monitor the timeline to insure that the congregation is moving forward toward the various goals in a synchronized way.

Close this and subsequent quarterly sessions by asking Planning Team members to stand in a circle, join hands, and take turns offering one-sentence prayers.