

Wholeness Wheel for Congregations

Introduction

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

In this passage St. Paul introduces the metaphor of the Body of Christ. This has come to be a very fruitful metaphor for the Church which now understands itself as the means by which Christ is present and active in the world. When Paul first introduced the metaphor, however, he was being much more practical. Paul was addressing a specific collection of believers, a congregation, that was trying to live out and proclaim their faith in Christ Jesus. But, because they were all still very human, conflicts arose.

In this portion of the letter, what seems to be the problem that Paul is addressing?

What is Paul trying to get them to do differently?

How does the metaphor of the Body of Christ help Paul make his appeal?

This Body of Christ metaphor has grown in significance over the years because it is an especially useful way to think about the Church, what its purpose is, how it should relate internally and so forth. But there can be usefulness in the original, functional application of the metaphor as well. There are lots of ways in which a congregation is like a body, or more generally, like a person. To be sure, congregations have individual members who have different roles which benefit the whole group. But congregations also have personalities. As a collection of people at a particular time and place they have gifts and talents. Congregations have unique quirks, habits (both good and bad), pain thresholds, and will power.

How would you describe the personality of your congregation?

What quirks or habits endear your congregation to you? Are there some that sometimes drive you crazy?

People can change. Sometimes those changes come about because a life-altering event forces a change. Heart patients are often compelled to change their diet, exercise routine, and work habits in order to maintain heart health and life. Some people's lives are changed by traumatic events or profound loss. Other people change simply because they are tired of living the way they have been living. They seek counseling, lose weight, or change their relationships in order to find greater health and vitality and experience more inner peace. It stands to reason then that if a person can change, a congregation can change too. A congregation can take steps toward greater vitality and more inner peace.

Often folks have an awareness of something amiss before they can exactly identify the problem. If your congregation were a person going in for an annual check up, what areas of concern might you raise with the physician?

As of yet, there is no “Annual Check Up” for congregations. The Wholeness Wheel for Congregations is a tool to help congregations take a look at themselves. The Wholeness Wheel looks at ministry programs as well as habits, quirks, personality traits and the tenor of life together in general to see how a congregation might improve its vitality, peace and robustness. The Wholeness Wheel for Congregation is an adaptation of the ELCA Board of Pensions Wholeness Wheel for individuals. Like the wheel for individuals, it looks at seven aspects of a congregation's life together that can impact its well-being and capacity for accomplishing its goals. Those areas are: Social/Interpersonal Wholeness, Emotional Wholeness, Financial Wholeness, Vocational Wholeness, Intellectual Wholeness, Physical and Structural Wholeness, and Spiritual Wholeness.

There is no right way to proceed through this process. The areas can be examined in any order. But, as with any annual check up, you must be honest with yourselves, especially if you need to make changes in your life together. Congregational wholeness and vitality is the foundation upon which vital ministry can be built, not the other way around. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth to help them resolve certain issues so that they could continue to witness to the Gospel of Christ Jesus. Indeed, their ability to resolve their issues has come to be part of their witness to the world about what difference Christ makes. As a congregation you seek health and vitality, not for its own sake, but so that you can more effectively carry out God's mission in your corner of the world. In the process, your ability to resolve issues and maintain vitality and inner peace may become part of your witness to the world around you.

As always, the first step is awareness. That comes from honest, forthright assessment.

Social Interpersonal Wholeness.

Social/Interpersonal Wholeness has to do with how well people are welcomed and integrated into the life of the community and how well relationships between members are built and maintained.

Scholars believe that when the earliest Christians came together to share the Lord's Supper it was nothing like the ritual that occurs in our weekly worship services today. The early sharing of the Lord's Supper was more like a cross between a potluck dinner and a soup kitchen. Those who had plenty to eat brought food to share. Those who had little were able to come and be fed. It was a community meal that the whole community shared together. At least, ideally, that was what happened.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

What seems to be the problem in this part of Paul's letter to the Corinthians?

“Discerning the body” is probably actually a practical task and not a theological task. Paul is probably asking them to make sure everyone is there before they go ahead and have the meal. Waiting for everyone to be there would mean that people would be sharing the food with everyone in the community and not just their closest friends.

What sort of dis-ease or dis-connection might have led to the Lord's Supper being practiced in so unworthy a manner?

How would a more worthy practice of the Lord's Supper change the dynamics of their relationships with one another?

Some questions to assess the Social/Interpersonal Wholeness of your congregation:

What opportunities exist for deepening relationships between members?

How are connections maintained when people are not attending worship?

How are newcomers invited to participate in the activities of the congregation?

How readily are newcomers integrated into the life of the congregation?

How well does the congregation reflect the diversity of the community in which it is situated?

Emotional Wholeness

Emotional Wholeness has to do with how well a congregation processes its corporate experiences of joy and sorrow and how well it navigates its hopes and fears.

1 Thessalonians is thought to be St. Paul's earliest letter. The Christians in the city of Thessalonica have experienced persecution and have, presumably, lost beloved members of their community. Paul had feared that these persecutions would overwhelm them and they would fall away from their faithfulness to the mission of proclaiming Christ Jesus. He sent Timothy to see how they were doing. Paul is writing in response to a report from Timothy that they continue to minister in the name of Christ even as they have questions about what the future holds.

What happens in a faith community when beloved members die, when prominent lay leaders and their families move away, or when a pastor takes another call or retires?

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 and Romans 12:9-21

Most of Paul's final words to the Thessalonians are about attitude and not specific actions. This exhortation is repeated, in a somewhat expanded form, in the letter to the Christians in Rome. What are the key attributes and attitudes that contribute to the well-being of communities seeking to remain faithful in difficult times?

How would these attributes assist a congregation process shared grief or anxiety?

Some questions to assess the Emotional Wholeness of your congregation:

How do members process shared emotion over events in the life of the congregation?

What modes of communication predominate when negative emotions run high?

When anxiety is high, how is it moderated?

How does the congregation deal with the concerns that arise from chronic anxiety within the congregation?

What is the prevailing attitude about the congregation's abilities and outlook?

Financial Wholeness

Financial Wholeness has to do with how well the congregation marshals its financial resources and monitors their use to accomplish its ministries.

Many of the congregations that St. Paul established or visited in the Gentile regions of Macedonia and Acacia provided generous financial support to the struggling Christian communities and the leaders of the early Church in Jerusalem. This was, by no means, happenstance.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, and 2 Corinthians 9:1-5

What sort of safeguards is Paul establishing so that the Christians in Corinth will know their gifts are being used for their intended purpose?

What procedures is Paul asking them to follow in order to accomplish the financial support goal they have apparently established?

In 2 Cor. 8 Paul mentions that the churches in Macedonia have given both “according to their means” and “beyond their means.” What does it mean to give according to one's means? What might compel a person or a congregation to give beyond their means? What might compel a congregation to refrain from even giving according to their means? How might Paul respond to their reasoning?

Some questions to assess the Financial Wholeness of your congregation:

How well does the church follow financial fiduciary guidelines?

How does the congregation prepare and plan for future spending?

What sort of giving do the pastor(s), leaders, and the congregation itself model for the members?

What sort of attitude surrounds major financial decisions?

Vocational Wholeness

Vocational Wholeness has to do with how clear is the congregation's sense of purpose and how consistently and directly are their ministries accomplishing it.

Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth must have had mixed results. From Paul's second letter to that congregation, it seems some relationships with, and within, that congregation has become more complicated. Even so, Paul uses portions of his second letter to refocus their attention on what it is that they are about.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-15

In what ways might we think of one's congregation as a clay jar?

In what ways does “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” shine out of your congregation clay jar for the sake of extending the grace of God to more and more people? What barriers need to come down to enable it to shine more brightly?

In what ways might congregations feel that they have been afflicted, perplexed, persecuted or struck down? How do such events or dynamics affect their capacity to carry out their ministry? What might St. Paul say to such a congregation?

Some Questions to assess the Vocational Wholeness of your congregation:

How focused is the congregation's sense of purpose?

How does the congregation go about implementing ministries that fulfill God's mission?

How well-balanced is the constellation of ministries of the congregation?

Are members encouraged to follow their own sense of vocation and service beyond the church walls?

Intellectual Wholeness

Intellectual Wholeness has to do with how well the teaching ministries of the congregation foster deeper understanding of Scriptures, history and theology of the Church and faith formation in general.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is in response to what Paul considers to be a catastrophic turn of events. After Paul has established a Christian community among these Gentiles (e.g. not Jewish, and therefore not circumcised, people) someone has come into their community and convinced them that they need to first become like Jews (e.g. to be circumcised) in order to be “real” Christians. Much of Paul's letter is pure theological discourse, but with a very practical application: to be or not to be circumcised.

Read Galatians 1:6-7 and 5:2-15

There are clearly two movements of faith formation evident in Paul's letter. The first is his original proclamation of the Gospel when he formed the community. The second is this letter itself. It is a reminder, a course correction, a re-grounding in the Gospel he proclaimed in the beginning.

How does it happen that a person or a community that is “running well” becomes confused about the practical applications of the theology of their faith?

What does or does not contribute to a person's re-grounding in the Gospel in your congregation?

Reread Galatians 5:14-15.

Over the long history of the Church, in what ways have we lost sight of the single commandment and instead used our disputes to “bite and devour one another?” How is the single commandment itself the antidote?

Some Questions to assess the Intellectual Wholeness of your congregation:

How vital is the Sunday School and Confirmation program?

What opportunities exist for adult faith formation within the congregation's ministries? Do most people attend at least a few things?

What is the level of participation in outside opportunities for adult faith formation and leadership development?

Physical and Structural Wholeness

Physical and Structural Wholeness has to do with how well the physical plant and the organizational structures assist the congregation in accomplishing its purposes.

Archeological evidence indicates that it would be several more generations after Paul before Christians would have specially-designated buildings to house their ministry of Word and Sacrament. But Paul was very much attuned to the things that might create an impediment to a person coming to believe in the Gospel of Christ Jesus. For an example of that, read I Corinthians 8:1-13

What is Paul's primary criteria for what is and is not acceptable behavior for a Christian?

Based on the stance Paul takes in relationship to the acceptability of certain foods what advice do you suppose Paul would give a congregation in relationship to its buildings and facilities?

How might that advice inform the decisions that your congregation makes about its facilities?

Read I Corinthians 12:4-11, 27-31 and 14:1-5

Even from the beginning there were many different activities that constituted the ministries of a congregation and the differing gifts of many people were required to do them. What unifies and focuses these potentially disparate energies?

Make a list of the varieties of gifts that are required for the ministries of your congregation to flourish. Does the organization of your working groups help or hinder the exercise of those gifts?

A body has a very efficient means of communicating with itself: the central nervous system. How do the various parts of your congregation stay in communication with one another? How well do they listen?

Some Questions to assess the Physical and Structural Wholeness of your congregation:

What is the condition of the physical plant of the church?

How well is your physical plant utilized?

Do you have sufficient facilities to accomplish your ministries?

How well-matched are the boards and committees and the ministries which they carry out?

How well are the activities of the working groups communicated with the congregation?

How are group decisions that affect the whole congregation made?

Spiritual Wholeness

Spiritual Wholeness has to do with how consistently the ministries and activities of the congregation create opportunities for people to connect with God and to re-connect with each other.

Not all of Paul's letters were sent to troubled congregations. Paul's letter to the Philippians is, generally speaking, a letter of commendation and encouragement.

Read Philippians 2:1-11

What does it mean to you to “let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus”?

Verses 6 to 11 of this passage are sometimes referred to as the Christ Hymn. It indicates that music and singing were a part of the worship life of congregations from very nearly the beginning. Paul lifts up these words from this favorite hymn as guidance for the community at this particular point in their life together. Has there been a time when the words of a hymn have given you guidance or inspiration at a particular moment in your life? In the life of your congregation?

What other sources provide you and your congregation with inspiration and guidance to carry out the ministry of the church or shape the behavior of the community?

Read Philippians 4:2-7

We don't know anything more about Euodia or Syntyche. This is the only place they are mentioned. We can assume that they are known to the members of the congregation at Philippi. And we can gather that there is some issue or dispute between them such that, at present, they are not of the same mind. But we don't need to know much more than that because every congregation, at one point or another, has a Euodia and Syntyche. Maybe more than a few of them. Members have different opinions about how to proceed in the future or about how things unfolded in the past. They have different likes and dislikes about practically every aspect of congregational life. So, of course, there are times when people are not of the same mind. What happens next depends a lot on how the community handles these occasions. What role is Paul asking the rest of the congregation to assume in relationship to Euodia and Syntyche? How is that different from what often happens?

There is a saying, “If you worry, why pray? If you pray, why worry?” What difference might it make in your congregation if you took Paul's exhortation in verse 6 about anxiousness and prayer more seriously?

Some Questions to assess the Spiritual Wholeness of your congregation:

How well does worship feed the spiritual lives of the congregants?

Is the Holy Spirit's presence and guidance sought in the day-to-day activities of the congregation?

How does the church foster spiritual growth on the part of its members?

How well do members of the congregation extend the grace of God to one another?

Conclusion

If we accept that the Church, as the Body of Christ, is the means by which Christ is present and active in the world then we must take seriously that each congregation exists for a purpose greater than itself. Churches are not merely social clubs that exist for the well-being of its members. As part of the whole Church, each congregation exists to make God's love known - through word and deed – in its particular corner of the world. The assessment of the wholeness of a congregation is not to make a congregation a better club. The assessment of the wholeness of a congregation is to prepare the congregation for the work of ministry in the world today.

The 21st century is poised to be shaped by global economic hardship, religious strife, and environmental crises. At the same time, more and more people identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” What does the Christian Church have to say to such a world? Can we let go of an articulation of the Gospel that answered questions no one is asking any longer in order to embrace what the Gospel of Christ Jesus does have to say to today's concerns? Asking and answering that question is going to be pretty heavy lifting. It is going to require healthy, robust congregations bold enough to engage such questions. The Wholeness Wheel for Congregations is not an end in and of itself. It is offered so that congregations can become healthier, more robust and ready to engage the work of ministry in the 21st century.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

How might these verses speak to your congregation today? What reconciliations would make the greatest impact on the wholeness of your congregation? On the impact your congregation has within its community?

What difference would it make if this, instead of John 3:16, was the passage understood to summarize the whole Gospel? Are there other verses that are particularly powerful for you in summarizing what difference Jesus makes in your life? Is your congregation ready to engage in such conversation with folks who have ditched religion? If so, what is keeping you from doing so? If not, what would it take to be ready?