

CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Conflict Management (5)

Halstead, Kenneth A. *From Stuck to Unstuck: Overcoming Congregational Impasse*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998.

Halstead draws upon family systems theory (as articulated by the Mental Research Institute of Palo Alto) to argue that a particular kind of leadership is needed to move congregations 'stuck' in a particular conflict to move on, or get 'unstuck.' Halstead points out that family systems demonstrates the limits of leadership, such that leaders function within a larger system of relationships and attachments. In a symptomatic system, good leadership changes its own 'input' into the system and then gets out of the way of positive changes occurring throughout. Similarly, Halstead states that leadership in a 'stuck' congregation must 'free the flow' and 'fan the flame' of new energy. Halstead's thesis is that "stuckness is primarily the result of well-intentioned attempted solutions built into the rules and structure of the system--solutions that create life-draining feedback loops" (4). That is, feedback loops create so much stability in the system that it cannot adjust to some or other change, and homeostasis drains life rather than gives it. The 'Brief Systemic Therapy' of the Mental Research Institute of Palo Alto asserts that in such a situation, 'the attempted solution is the problem' and therefore one must 'do something different.' Halstead thus encourages leaders to do just that--to do something different and then fan the flames of positive changes that occur.

Leas, Speed. *Moving Your Church through Conflict*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1985.

Classic conflict-resolution process for churches. Primarily helpful for articulating levels of conflict in a congregation and the alleviating anxiety so that the congregation can build trust and engage in dialogue about the issue. It is, however, a 'problem-solving' kind of model.

Lott, David B., ed. *Conflict Management in Congregations*. Harvesting the Learnings Series. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2002.

An edited volume that highlights various and divergent stories about conflict-resolution interventions in congregations. Tends to build upon a Leas-type approach to congregational conflict in that the stories focus on understanding the level of conflict and then lessening anxiety so that parties can work together.

Sawyer, David. *Hope in Conflict: Discovering Wisdom in Congregational Turmoil*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Sawyer draws upon both family systems theory and process theology to articulate a reason for hope in congregational conflict: that such conflict can lead to greater health. Sawyer argues that "conflict itself presents an opportunity to imagine what God desires for the congregation's future. The hopeful leader sees the experience of conflict as an opportunity to unravel the clues in the deeper life of a congregation and to ask when God is working or trying to work in their midst" (9). Sawyer organizes his process for leaders working with a conflicted congregation around the three key concepts of family systems theory: (1) looking at structures (2) listening to stories, and (3) learning from symptoms. Although this sounds simple, Sawyer proposes a sophisticated and complex method for all three movements. He encourages leaders to look at the congregation and the conflict through mapping patterns of conflict according to family systems insights (paying attention to triangles, over-achievers, under-achievers, groups, subgroups, etc.) as well as attending to the rituals and symbols enacted in these relationships. The listening move takes a narrative turn for Sawyer, and he encourages leaders to attend to the literary type of story being told by the congregation--is it tragedy, comedy, romantic, or ironic? And finally, he draws upon family systems theory for instruction on addressing the symptoms of conflict in the congregation. He argues that one must formulate a hopeful hypothesis for the symptoms--that the expressed symptoms demonstrate a certain crisis in the congregation and also present an opportunity for the congregation to grow healthier in such a way. Conflict, then, becomes the way in which the congregation grows into the future, makes necessary systemic adjustments as it encounters God in a new way. Sawyer's model is complex and draws in a sophisticated way from systems theory; but it is clear throughout that the congregational leader or consultant functions as a kind of therapist for the congregation. It is an expert-driven model.

Steinke, Peter L. *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. 2nd ed. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006.

A family systems approach to conflict-management.

Dialogue in Action (2)

Gaede, Beth Ann, ed. *Congregations Talking About Homosexuality: Dialogue on a Difficult Issue*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998.

An edited volume that explores the ways in which congregations engage in dialogue to address the issue of GLBT clergy. It is helpful in some ways, but it also underscores the

fear that many in the conservative camp might have regarding dialogue. One cannot help but wonder whether dialogue here is an instrument of liberal activism rather than a process of open-ended moral/theological discernment.

Siler, Mahan. *Exile or Embrace?: Congregations Discerning Their Response to Gay and Lesbian Christians*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005.

A personal narrative of one pastor's work discerning with his congregation regarding GLBT issues.

Dialogue Model (1)

Phelps, Joseph. *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

A sustained argument for forming congregations in the politics and practice of dialogue. Phelps argues that the various culture-war conflicts present in many congregations create the possibility that congregations might learn to embody an ethic of peacemaking, that learning dialogue might make congregations the space in which the swords of the culture wars are turned into ploughshares. For Phelps, this is a call for 'grassroots' transformation, for a kind of micro-politics. Phelps understands dialogue as a practice of learning and building upon the insights of others--especially adversaries. He defines it as: "an ongoing conversation between Christians of differing convictions who recognize their human limitations and who believe that God can use our various moral and theological conflicts to teach and re-form the church for holy living" (27). For Phelps, dialogue is not mediation, debate (too adversarial, with a winner and loser), collaboration, or compromise. Rather, he argues that it emphasizes a kind of teamwork for the sake of seeking truth, where potential adversaries work together to gain greater understanding. As such, dialogue depends upon both parties gaining a great deal of trust from one another. It is grounded in hope. Phelps encourages potential meetings to begin by clarifying both the issue at stake and ground rules for participation such as first person speech, patience, listening, openness, teamwork, respect, and risk. Phelps suggests that the hoped-for result, the learning created by dialogue that proceeds on these terms is a deeper understanding of the other position so that the two positions can learn the strengths of the other, as well as the weaknesses inherent in their own. Phelps turns to polarity management theory to describe how this might look.

Discernment in Action (8)

Bill, J. Brent. "Encountering God through a Shared Silence." *Congregations* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 41.

As Quaker minister and vice president of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, Bill points toward the importance of silence in the Quaker practice of spiritual discernment and notes the difficulty that most congregations have with sustained silence. He argues that the practice of corporate, shared silence "provides space for asking, seeking, and knocking together" (41).

Branson, Mark Lau. *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004.

Branson helpfully brings the processes of Appreciative Inquiry into congregational change/transformation literature. Branson argues that AI brings a helpful process for cultivating cultural change in congregations through intentional and sustained conversation, remembering, and story-telling throughout the congregation.

Burkholder, J. Lawrence. "The Peace Churches as Communities of Discernment." *The Christian Century* 80, no. 36 (1963): 1072-75.

In this short appeal, Burkholder anticipates what will become a widespread notion in Peace-church ethical thought through the work of John Howard Yoder by asserting that Peace Churches must recover their ethical distinctiveness, an alternative way of life. The dual challenges of encroaching secularism and incoherent pluralism demand it. But unlike Yoder, Burkholder identifies this alternative way of life as constituted by a kind of deliberation that he calls discernment. For Burkholder, the practice of discernment sustains the alternative witness of the Peace Church, for it is discernment that can bring "the scattered moral sentiments of the members" to be "gathered, informed, disciplined, and concerted into action" (1073).

Cormode, Scott. *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.

Cormode helpfully brings sensemaking literature into the realm of congregational leadership. As made evident in the work of Karl Weick and others, sensemaking articulates the fluid and constructed nature of organizational (and personal) identity. For Cormode, this means that leadership is exercised in relationship to processes of meaning-making, story-telling, and the interpretation of surprising or new events. One problem with the book, however, is that Cormode fails to acknowledge the way in which

leadership, itself, is a constructed and fluid role within any organization; thus he assumes a kind of interpretive power for leaders that may or may not actually exist. The real insight of sensemaking theory--as Weick helps to articulate--is the way in which power, interpretation, authoritative stories, and meaning-making are all inherently and irreducibly social; that they emerge in and within the ongoing interaction of persons rather than from the guidance of a single leader (or researcher).

Hahn, Celia A. "Congregational Spiritual Companions: Walking with Churches on Their Faith Journeys." *Congregations* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 6-9.

A follow-up to Hahn's book. Reporting on the consultant as a kind of spiritual director for congregations. It makes one wonder, however, 'what are the limits of thinking of congregational identity/spirituality as a kind of corporate person?' Does the concept of personhood transfer? What is gained by this? What is lost?

Johnson, Abigail. *Shaping Spiritual Leaders: Supervision and Formation in Congregations*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007.

An argument for leadership formation as spiritual formation within congregations.

Olsen, Charles M. *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1995.

An argument for discernment to be the primary practice for church boards rather than parliamentary procedure. How is it that church boards can be communities of spiritual formation rather than only formal governing bodies?

Scarborough, Anjel. "We Look for the Resurrection of the Dead." *Congregations* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 31-35.

Story of a process by which a congregation discerned its closure.

Discernment Model (7)

Farnham, Suzanne G., Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. Rev. ed. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999.

Farnham et. al. provide a short and concise model for corporate spiritual discernment that comes from the work of Listening Hearts Ministries. They work with the Quaker tradition of corporate discernment by cultivating a model that moves between asking questions and listening for God's direction in silence. They insist that the hoped-for-result of such a model is consensus. They are careful to differentiate consensus that emerges in discernment and the kind of agreement achieved through parliamentary deliberation. In parliamentary forms of deliberation, agreement is achieved through rational wooing, through the give and take of arguments whereas discernment "reveals the new" in God--paths not previously envisioned (34). Their model contains several steps, but we might summarize it in three distinct movements: (1) Searching for questions before answers; (2) Engaging the creative imagination, which is the exploration of stories, symbols, and important data relating to the question(s) at hand; (3) Paying attention to the signs. The third and final movement is one in which the authors encourage patience, listening, and attentiveness. They offer four types of signs to look for: (a) God's peace, (b) Persistence; (c) Convergence; (d) Fruitfulness.

Frykholm, Amy Johnson. "Out of Silence." *The Christian Century* 124, no. 7 (2007): 34-38.

Frykholm presents a very concise model for congregational spiritual discernment that draws upon both the Quaker and Catholic (Ignatian) traditions. She holds that both traditions hold prayer, silence, patience, and consensus together. She encourages congregations--when faced with a question--to enter intentionally into discernment by asking whether the present issue is one for discernment. If the congregation does enter into discernment, Frykholm encourages that all comments be punctuated with silence as a general rule. This ensures that the speaker's words are heard, it gives a weight to each utterance while also allowing for reflective space. Finally, she encourages congregations to be clear that consensus is not 'do we agree,' but rather 'do we have a sense of what God is doing?' And she draws upon a few other models to articulate three different kinds of consensus: (1) Unanimity; (2) Some disagree, but decide they can live with it; (3) Disagree completely, but still can live with it--a difference of preference and not principle (36).

Hahn, Celia A. *Uncovering Your Church's Hidden Spirit*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001.

Hahn reports on discernment processes she led in a number of congregations. In each of these processes, she led the congregation in identifying and articulating a sense of its corporate spirituality, the "corporate personhood" of the congregation in order to identify the kind of spiritual journey the congregation is on together. For Hahn, discernment is a whole-body, whole-being exercise in which the congregation must live its way into

different thinking rather than thinking its way into new living. Hahn thus directs congregations to 'play' in relationship to texts, questions, concerns, stories, etc. Given this emphasis, Hahn creates a new set of activities for each congregational discernment process. Her model is heavily invested in the consultant as a kind of spiritual director for congregations. It is Hahn who crafts imaginative, whole-bodied exercises, who brings Scripture for reflection in relationship to one or other issue, and it is Hahn who often brings ends together to help the congregation interpret what has happened. Two strengths of Hahn's research, however, is how discerning a sense of identity can be related to the recovery of mission. She states: "A church living out of the power of its corporate spiritual identity may find itself strong at the broken places--places where suffering is revealed as 'the outer clothing of growth'" (7). Second, the metaphor of 'play' is insightful for thinking about congregational discernment processes in that it creates a sense of suspended reality as well as embodied, whole-being engagement with the question at hand.

Isenhower, Valerie K., and Judith A. Todd. *Listen for God's Leading: A Workbook for Corporate Spiritual Discernment*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2009.

Another product of Upper Room Ministries that works with the Ignatian tradition. For Isenhower and Todd, discernment is a transformative practice in which God reveals something new in the congregation; it is a practice for disclosing God's future to the congregation. As such, they instruct congregations in a long, intentional process where a small discernment team works to gather and reflect upon stories over a period of months with the hope of clarifying a set of actions at the end. They suggest three different movements. (1) Remembering and Listening: which works much like an Appreciative Inquiry process in that it aims at clarifying church identity. The discernment group invites the congregation to share stories through a timeline exercise and congregational interviews. The discernment group is also instructed to gather stories from the surrounding community as well. (2) Sorting: this is a process of identifying themes and naming congregational gifts and strengths. Here the discernment team is encouraged to participate in path-building, to begin considering what different options might look like. (3) Offering: this is offering the decision back to God, to ask 'God, what do you think?' Here the team is invited to pay attention to its consolation and desolation. They are to wait and rest, to step back.

Morris, Danny E., and Charles M. Olsen. *Discerning God's Will Together : A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997.

Morris and Olsen begin by differentiating Robert's Rules of Order (RRO) and discernment. RRO is adversarial, majority rule, and decisionist. It assumes one of two options must be chosen and results in a vote. Discernment, on the other hand, is

exploratory and open-ended. It assumes that a third option may be disclosed if the group is patient enough. It is a process in which the group decides to follow God's guidance whichever way it might emerge. As such, Morris and Olsen compare discernment to Senge's model of dialogue in "The 5th Discipline" as an open-ended suspension of commitment rather than conversation, which is built upon shared premises. The authors assert that the discernment process needs a facilitator with a large 'bag of tricks' to draw upon. It is necessarily messy with a lot of moving parts. They do, however, articulate four basic steps to their process. (1) Selecting the Seed: Framing. This is where the issue is clarified. (2) Planting the Seed: Grounding, Shedding, and Rooting. The issue is then 'grounded' in the values of the congregation. Why is this an important issue for us? What are the boundaries of this inquiry? Shedding involves an intentional laying aside of ego, personal preferences, etc. so that participants might be open to hearing from one another. This builds upon the 'holy indifference' conceptuality in Ignatian spirituality. Rooting is where the group begins to explore the issue in the biblical/theological tradition. (3) Cultivating the Plants: Listening, Exploring, and Improving. This is where the discernment group begins to gather information from a variety of different sources. Listening and Exploring involves gathering stories and testimonies from as wide a group as possible. As possible options begin to emerge, the group is instructed to prayerfully consider how each option might be improved. (4) Harvesting the Yield: Weighing, Closing, and Resting. So also, weighing involves prayerful consideration of each option perceived in its best light (improved...) The group moves to decision, to closure and articulates what it is that God has led them to. Resting is the final move where the decision is tested according to how it sits with each of the members, who are instructed to attend to feelings of desolation and consolation. Morris and Olsen insist upon consensus in decisions.

Olsen, Charles M., and Ellen Morseth. *Selecting Church Leaders: A Practice in Spiritual Discernment*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002.

A model for congregational selection of church leaders that is not based on a democratic polity, but rather prayerful discernment and consensus.

Stevens, Garrie, Pamela Lardear, and Sharon Duger. *Seeking & Doing God's Will: Discernment for the Community of Faith*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998.

Builds intentionally on Morris and Olsen's discernment model for Methodist congregations. Stevens, et. al. interpret Morris and Olsen in light of the Wesleyan quadrilateral; that Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience each provide a movement for congregational discernment. Of all the models, this is the most realistic about the challenges congregations face in practicing discernment. They argue that "discernment is not something that happens automatically. At a minimum, people must accept a basic

premise of discernment: God has a will for the life of the congregation and wants to make that will known. In addition, even people who have spent all of their lives in the church will probably not be familiar with corporate prayer that is essentially listening, with decision-making that is consensus-based, with storytelling that rehearses God's activity among the people, and with a recalling of Scripture that emerges from the group. Therefore, for people to participate fully in a discernment experience, a considerable amount of teaching and learning is necessary. Groups often need an extended time of practicing..." (27).

Research (3)

Bass, Diana Butler. *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004.

After attending to 50 different congregations who had experienced the renewal of identity, vocation, and mission, Bass argues that these "new old churches" are revitalized in and through an intentional re-engagement with the historic practices of the Christian faith. She calls these congregations "practicing" congregations, stating that they "experience new vibrancy through a reappropriation of historic Christian practices and a sustained communal engagement with the Christian narrative" (14). She draws a sharp distinction between the kind of renewal experienced by these congregations and the more typical service-based, therapeutic, and programmatic changes for which mainline congregations normally strive. Rather than providing service-to the church and neighborhood communities, Bass noticed that the intentional reappropriation of ancient Christian practices results in a kind of deep listening to Scripture, tradition, and the broader community. Faith becomes a "way of life in a community" that is responsive to its immediate context (18).

Bradshaw, Anita L. "The Church as Reconciling Community: An Assessment of Conflict Resolution Methods in Light of Theology." Ph.D., Luther Seminary, 2006.

In "The Church as Reconciling Community," Bradshaw describes, interprets, and critiques Peter Steinke's, *Church Innovations*, and the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center's conflict resolution models according to two different sets of concerns. First, she is concerned with what is at stake theologically in the models. In particular, she wants to know whether these conflict models understand the church as a reconciling and missional community? Do they take seriously the relationship between conflict, the Spirit, and mission; that conflict is also an opportunity for clarifying faithfulness to God's mission? As such, she argues that "conflicts are an opportunity for the community of faith to grow deeper into the reality of the church as a reconciling community and conflict resolution

methods should facilitate such growth" (6). Thus, she is concerned to evaluate conflict resolution methods beyond their ability to lower anxiety, but also according to how they orient the congregation toward mission. Second, she is concerned with how these models are experienced within congregations that have used and been trained in the model. What are the congregational outcomes from their work?

Kostad, Keith A. "Discerning God's Dreams: Clarifying a Congregation's Missional Vision through the Art of Discernment." D.Min., Luther Seminary, 2007.

A D.Min. thesis that attends to a congregational discernment process that drew upon the Upper Room, Listening Hearts model of discernment. Interestingly, this thesis also connects mission, conflict, and discernment.

Theoretical Resource (9)

Friedman, Edwin H. *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. The Guilford Family Therapy Series. New York: Guilford Press, 1985.

"Generation to Generation" is the classic text in pastoral care for understanding congregational life in terms of family systems theory. It is also a theoretical resource for many congregational discernment and/or conflict resolution models.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. 2 vols. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

Classic theoretical resource for moral/ethical action as emerging from within particular communities of dialogue. If there is such a public and communicative shape to moral frameworks, the questions 'who is present in the dialogue?' and 'how does power operate within the community of dialogue?' become essential for generating more just and moral actions. Habermas's move to a more social and communicative way of thinking about ethics is mirrored in much of the literature regarding open-ended, truth-seeking dialogue in congregations. However, these questions ('who' and 'how') are ones that congregational discernment and dialogue processes should (perhaps) pay more attention to.

———. *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001.

Hotchkiss, Dan. "A Discerner's Guide to Congregational Governance." *Congregations* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 15-18.

A good introduction into the move toward discernment as a practice of church leadership and governance. Hotchkiss traces what he calls the three innovations in congregational leadership/governance in the past twenty years: (1) Leader as visionary (Purpose Driven Church et. al.); (2) Governing boards that govern (drawing from non-profit models); (3) Congregations that discern together (drawing from Ignatian/Quaker models, but also cultural change and family systems models).

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

An important theological resource for thinking about congregations as communities of discernment. Johnson's argument emerges from two interrelated concerns. First, he states that there ought to be some connection between what an organization claims to be and how it does things. If the church claims to be a community of faith, how does its life together and means of governing/making decisions reflect this? Second, Johnson is concerned that when the church makes decisions, that the Bible is involved somehow in the decision-making. What follows, then, is a theological argument both for discernment as a necessary practice of the face-to-face faith community and for the way in which Scripture's authority is contingent upon its reading and interpretation in the church. For Johnson, discernment is necessary because faith itself is related to human contingency, it is a "perilous progress" of "responding in obedience and trust to God's word" (25). As such, the various narrative surprises in the life of the church--like when Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit--underscore both our contingency and the need to articulate our faith. What is God up to in this new thing? Moreover, Scripture--as the canonical text of the church--functions to mediate the church's identity and thus both interprets and is interpreted by these new narrative surprises (as what happens in Paul's ministry with the Gentile mission). When these two concerns are considered together, we can say that discernment is the practice of articulating the church's faith in God in light of the various surprises that the church encounters, which means "to let God be God, to say 'yes' to the work of the Lord, which goes before the church's ability to understand or even perceive it" (107). Johnson provides a way to practice discernment that alleviates the fear that such dialogue and discernment is simply a tool of liberal activism. For Johnson proposes that discernment in the church is guided by a formal consideration of edification, or building up. What this means is that discernment has to do with the identity of the community rather than individual behavior. It is not a process designed to shame--or excuse--one person's behavior. And second, Johnson proposes that discernment is to be guided by the material concern for holiness--which means that the church is to learn to

listen to one another's stories as a mark of the new humanity in Christ. Discernment begins by deep listening as a way to serve the needs of others, and thus to embody the holiness given in Christ. This holy listening becomes the data by which the congregation attends to the Scriptures and seeks God's guidance in articulating their faith, the new that is in Christ.

Moberly, R. W. L. *Prophecy and Discernment*. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 14. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

A biblical-theological resource for understanding discernment in relationship to prophecy in the biblical text. This book exposes how selective much of the congregational discernment literature is with regard to the biblical tradition. Moberly rightly points out that discernment emerges as an activity in the community of faith in relationship to prophecy--to discern false prophets.

Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. 1st ed. New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990.

Classic theoretical resource used in both discernment and dialogue models to talk about how open-ended conversation can open up a new future for an organization. Organizations learn through dialogue across various boundaries.

Tracy, David. *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Classic theoretical text for articulating the way in which open-ended conversation both reveals and helps communities make sense of the deep ambiguity of our historical-embeddedness and confusing plurality of our social life.

Weick, Karl E. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Foundations for Organizational Science. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995.

Classic theoretical text that articulates the way in which organizational identity--at some level--is a socially-constructed and fluid reality. We are, in a sense, disclosed in the conversation in which we participate. Some work needs to be done to connect this philosophically and theologically to congregational discernment and dialogue models, but it shares similar impulses and has begun to be developed by people such as Scott Cormode.