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# What Congregational Life Is Really Like

I wish you could see what I see

By Arthur E. Farnsley II

“Pastor, in this church, we pray for Israel.” In this United Methodist congregation, each Sunday morning people hand in prayer requests on 3x5 cards. On Sunday, October 8, 2023, the young pastor noted that three of the cards asked for prayer for Israel. He took it upon himself to broaden that to be a prayer for all victims of violence in the Middle East. During the audible prayer, one of the older members stood up and reminded him, in a clear voice, exactly what the card said.

But there is more to the story. That same older member had been a strong advocate when this pastor came out to his congregation as gay. As a community, they had decided this was a journey they would all take together.

This story does not neatly fit the “culture wars” model. As the director of the Congregations and Polarization Project, I hold regular interviews and focus group discussions with pastors, and I can tell you most congregations are not cultural combatants. Most pastors push back against that characterization of their work. As Aaron Brockett, pastor of one of the largest congregations in central Indiana told his flock early in 2024, “Jesus isn’t nearly as interested in who will reside in the Oval Office as He is in who will reside on the throne of your heart.”

Media stories often paint pastors as law-based and authoritarian, but most of them are focused on grace, character development, and relationship building—the things they call “discipleship.”

For every story of a conservative pastor railing against cultural relativism, there are multiple stories of pastors

being shown videos by conservative activists Charlie Kirk or Eric Metaxas who exhort their listeners: “If your pastor cannot denounce this or that lifestyle, then you should leave their church.” This creates a very difficult space for pastors. One pastor I know had a parishioner who wanted to use the church’s email list to recruit for a bus trip to D.C. for the January 6, 2021, protests that became a riot. The pastor declined.

You may think liberal pastors are out there insisting that everyone else is racist or homophobic, but what you probably don’t see is a young, female, pastor trying to make a lesbian couple feel welcome while still maintaining a connection to older, longstanding, members. You do not see middle-aged pastors who do not want to engage the “discernment” process about sexuality because their congregation is already welcoming, but members will leave if they take the next step. They hear younger, activist clergy pushing them toward action, but they know the cost could be insurmountable. Pastors agonize over these conflicts, even when the tension is relatively low.

In a recent survey conducted at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, only 23% agreed or agreed strongly that their congregation was politically active. Moreover, the congregations most likely to be engaged in activist work are highly progressive. The Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ are the most politically active among American Christian traditions and they are the two most liberal Christian traditions.

It is not the goal of this project to argue that activism is better or worse theologically. But it is our goal to

describe the landscape of congregations engaging a polarized environment. Congregations are not, on the whole, cultural battlegrounds.

So what are congregations doing? Most conservative congregations, and certainly the big churches of the Restoration tradition (sometimes called “independent”), emphasize discipleship and relationship. The pastors call their members to focus on their Christian walk. In one Restoration church not a mile from my house, members fasted on Thursdays in October of 2024 to remind themselves that despite a close election coming up, their primary obligation lay elsewhere.

Most liberal congregations are doing a similar kind of therapy framed slightly differently. They call their members to rest, tell them to back off from the market-based drive for efficiency and success. They give their members “permission” to change perspective and focus on spiritual goals.

We have noticed many different kinds of congregational responses, as noted elsewhere in our research reports. Yes, there are congregations who experience polarization internally and are searching for answers and there are congregations who take firm stands as partisans in the culture wars.

But there are many more congregations who respond much differently. Some are islands that make every

attempt to keep politics and cultural conflict outside their doors. Some are proudly purple, wearing their ability to worship together despite difference as a badge of honor. Still others are peacemakers, actively trying to bring red and blue together. These three types of response are much more common than internal conflict or cultural combatant.

Your own estimation of these types comes down to your assumptions about what they should be doing. If you think congregations must strive for moral clarity and social action, then you probably favor the internal conflict or the combatant responses. If you think congregations are meant to be harbors in a society created by the large forces of state and market, you likely favor one of the other approaches.

Analysis is complex. Congregations that today are stable might once have been conflicted. Congregations that are conflicted today may be stable one day soon, but that stability might come from the loss of members when the “losing” side walks away.

But if you could see what I see, you would know that most pastors, and most congregations, see themselves as places that promote healing, relationship-building, and spiritual priorities. Whatever you think about this, it is important to understand how unusual overt political action among congregations really is.

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