

A PARABLE OF WHAT NOT TO DO AND WHAT TO DO WHEN CREATING CULTURES OF EXCELLENCE

AN EXCERPT FROM: APPRECIATIVE MUTUAL MINISTRY VALUATIONS

Rev. Robert J. Voyle, Psy.D.
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robvoyle@voyle.com

*There is nothing
so useless
as doing efficiently
that which should not
be done at all.*
— Peter Drucker

*We are here on earth
to do good for others.
What the others
are here for,
I don't know.*
— W. H. Auden

*We were too busy
mopping the floor to
turn off the faucet.*
— Unknown

*The man who really wants
something finds a way; the
other man finds an excuse.*
— E. C. Mckenzie

A Parable of What Not to Do: A Good Intention Gone Bad:

A congregation calls a pastor without any clear understanding of their purpose or goals, other than a vague hope or desire that the congregation grows. For the first couple of years most of the people are happy with the new pastor's ministry. At some point, while most people are happy, a few complaints with the pastor's ministry begin to arise. Perhaps people have been overlooked pastorally or people feel the pastor is not supportive of their perspective on a social or theological issue. Sometimes complaints may have little to do with the pastor's actual performance but are about an aspect of congregational life that is being neglected or is ineffective, such as poor attendance at youth group or Sunday school.

While these complaints may be listened to they are essentially ignored as they don't represent a large section of the congregation. In one case we know, rather than passively being ignored, the complaints were actively rejected by a misuse of the appreciative approach. Parishioners were told they were "being negative and that we don't focus on problems because we are using appreciative inquiry." (An appropriate response to critiques will be provided later in this section.) In another situation complaints were actively ignored by the pastor because "the people don't really understand the theological nature of ministry and what I am called to do."

Over time the people with the complaints will feel alienated and will become "louder" in order to have their complaint really heard and taken seriously. They are also likely to engage more people in their process to create a louder complaint. At some point someone will request a "performance appraisal be done on the pastor."

During the evaluation most of the pastors strengths are ignored and the complaints become the focus of attention. While intense in their criticism little efforts is put into discovering what the pastor would need to do to actually perform the desired behaviors. The outcome of the review is that the pastor becomes demoralized and their performance begins to slip even further. Little energy is given to the area of complaint because the pastor is both resentful and unequipped to actually perform the task that is being asked of them. Overall the pastor's performance declines and now others are drawn into the complaint, or have other complaints. The following year another performance appraisal is done, and the pastor is taken to

task for their failure to modify their performance following the last review.

The pastor becomes even more demoralized and their performance continues to decline. Now well intentioned people start turning up at the church to “check” that the pastor is actually in the office working. The presence of these “checkers” creates anxiety and physical distress in the pastor. These feelings become associated to the office and the pastor finds it less distressing to avoid the office unless they are required to be present for a meeting.

Now the complaints become much louder and generalized across the congregation. In a grand attempt to create reliable data on the pastor’s performance an anonymous survey is created to assess the pastor’s performance on a variety of competencies. As part of the survey people have an opportunity to write narrative comments. Some comments go beyond comments of the pastor’s ministry to vitriolic personal attacks on the pastor’s integrity and family life. The outcome of the survey is that the people are polarized and open conflict erupts. In this atmosphere of anger and hostility the congregation’s worship becomes strained and life-less. The pastor becomes even more demoralized and less able emotionally to respond to the congregation’s needs, which in turn validates the findings of the survey.

Consultants are contracted to mediate between the pastor and the congregation. An analysis of the conflict is undertaken by interviewing members of the congregation. Blame and judgment for the conflict are apportioned. Classes on “how to fight fairly” are held and mediated conversation between the parties is held. The people however have become entrenched in their views and little reconciliation is achieved.

The most common outcome is that the pastor resigns or is fired. In a best case scenario a severance package is agreed to and to save face people on both sides of the argument say that the pastoral relationship “wasn’t a good fit.” In a worst case scenario the people become litigious. Many people leave the congregation to avoid being party to the conflict. A severance package that severely cripples the much smaller congregation’s future is established and the pastor leaves. The congregation is labeled a “clergy-killer” and finds it difficult to attract competent clergy. The pastor decides to withdraw from ministry and takes a secular job.

Ask not what your pastor can do for you.

Ask what your church can do for your community and then ask what do we need in a pastor to help us do that?

The worst thing in American business is the annual performance appraisal. It evokes fear and robs workers of the right to pride in their workmanship...

— Edward Demings

Does your employee manual describe why your organization is the best place in town for someone to work?

*We need to discover the
root causes of success
rather than the
root causes of failure.
— David Cooperrider*

*Even if you are on the
right track you will get run
over if you just sit there.
— Will Rogers*

*Defining identity by
comparison is found at the
heart of all human conflicts,
and the path to resolving
those conflicts is always to
start focusing attention on
the similarities that unite
the two sides, noticing
all the ways they are the
same, instead
of the ways in which they
are different.
— Steve Andreas*

A Good Intention Gone Right:

A Parable of What to Do

Imagine a congregation has determined that part of their core purpose is to provide a place for people to worship God. They create a worship committee, of the pastor, music minister, choir director, a graphic artist who is responsible for preparing the bulletin and audio visual aids, and several parishioners who have a keen interest in worship.

The worship committee first spends time to define the purpose of worship. To accomplish this initial task they gather a group of interested parishioners and engage in a time of story telling about people's best experience of worship. The committee pays particular attention to the people's best experiences and what the experience enabled the parishioners to do. The committee also divided their attention to two types of services, special events or festival services such as Christmas and Easter and regular Sunday worship. From this time of discovery the committee discerns that people deeply value three things with respect to their Sunday worship experience:

- They want to experience a time of transcendence, a time when they feel connected to the Spirit.
- They want to feel restored and re-energized to go into the world refreshed and inspired to live according to their Christian values in the world as they go about their daily tasks.
- They want to connect with friends and spend time talking about their families and interests that they have in common.

As they discussed these three needs they discerned that their core purpose for worship is to connect and reconnect: they want to feel reconnected to God, themselves, and their neighbor.

The worship committee uses this understanding of connection and reconnection to organize their life and work. Because worship is a weekly activity and a core priority of the church the group meets on a weekly basis to creatively develop the congregation's worship. They understand that one of their primary tasks is to be connected with one another if they are to have any integrity in creating "worship that connects" and the weekly meeting provides this opportunity to connect.

The pastor preached a series of sermons on "being connected" and regularly reminded the people of their commitment to provide

worship that created opportunity for people to connect to God, their neighbor and themselves.

The committee also began to reflect on each aspect of the Sunday worship experience, from the bulletin, the greeters, the music, the sermon, communion, the final blessing, and the coffee hour through this lens of connection. They explore each aspect with two basic questions:

- What is valuable about what we are doing?
- What can we do to make it more valuable?

From this review they created several strategies to improve their worship. They created a training program for readers and worship leaders, they moved the announcements from the middle of the service to the beginning with a greater emphasis on welcoming people to the service and to other church programs. A longer term goal was also established to remodel the narthex and gathering area to make it easier for people to transition to the coffee area.

In addition to these specific plans they spent time at each meeting reviewing the previous Sunday worship experience and preparing for future Sunday services. For this work they modified their basic questions to:

- What worked well last Sunday?
How were people connected to God, their neighbors and themselves?
- What do we want to do better next Sunday?
- What do we need to do it better?

The committee was also open to hearing from parishioners who had ideas of ways to improve their worship. Their primary focus was to learn what they could do to improve the quality of "connection" in the parishioners Sunday worship experience. They decided not to receive any anonymous feedback and sought to make it safe for parishioners to personally offer. They developed a five step listening strategy for responding to criticism.

- They listened to the complaint and made sure they understood the person's concern.
- They then inquired of the person what they wanted to see in the future in place of the concerns.
- When people offered comments that they wanted to return to

If you are coming to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you are coming because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

— Australian Aboriginal Woman

However beautiful the strategy we should occasionally look at the results.

— Winston Churchill

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.

— Charles Darwin

*The most beautiful things
in the world cannot be
seen with the eyes,
but only with the
human heart.*
— Helen Keller

*To create a better world we
don't need
better people;
we just need to help
the people we have
discover and be
their best.*

*Light attracts butterflies
and mosquitoes.
Wisdom is knowing
the difference.*
— David Bojorquez

*Everything works except
when it doesn't.*

former styles of worship they inquired why that would be valuable to the person. Often this required several steps of questions to discover the deeper value embedded in the parishioners desire.

- They brought the concerns to the committee as a whole and decided how they would respond in the light of their commitment to create an opportunity for connection.
- They reported their decision of what they would or wouldn't do back to the person.

As they developed their own process of connecting with one another and designing worship their trust developed and they were able to laugh, rather than go into defensive shame, when things didn't work. They found that there was much to delight in and that as they delighted in what was working their joy and awareness of God's presence in their creativity increased. This awareness of God's presence seemed to permeate out into the congregation who in turn grew in their appreciation of the committee's work.

Out of this spirit of acceptance and a desire for competence and excellence the pastor decided to spend their continuing education funds and time on a course in advanced communication skills to improve their preaching. This was an expensive secular course that was partially funded by gifts from appreciative parishioners who wanted to help the pastor, an already accomplished preacher, to grow their strength and enrich everyone's worship experience.

At the end of the year they gathered the wider community to review what was working well in the worship and to take time to celebrate God's presence and the power of reconnection in their lives. They also used this time to create plans for the coming years worship. In addition to this overview, each of the smaller ministry groups within the Sunday morning experience, such as greeters, worship leaders, music ministers, altar guild, and hospitality met to review what specifically was working in their area of responsibility and to consider their goals for the coming year.

The Folly of Feedback

Before reading this section take a moment and reflect on whether you think it is important to give people feedback on their behavior. if you do think it is important then ask yourself why it is important?

For several years I (Rob) worked in a secular setting training executive coaches. One of the things that many coaches believe is that it is

important to give clients accurate feedback on their performance. A similar belief can be found in employers and their belief that employees need to be given accurate feedback on their performance.

This raised three questions:

- What exactly is feedback?
- What is the purpose of feedback?
- How effective is feedback in achieving that purpose?

From my work with the coaches I discovered that feedback is commentary on previous performance. It could be negative criticism of failed performance or could be positive criticism which was called praise about successful performance.

When I asked them as to the purpose of feedback the majority of the coaches reported that people needed to know when they were failing. On some rare occasions the coaches reported that people also needed to know that they had been successful. Both responses left me wondering why it was so important to tell people when they had failed or succeeded. Since the past is done and gone I could not understand why it was so important to give people this information. It would take repeated inquiry before someone would say that it was necessary so they could improve their future performance. Since we will spend the rest of our lives in the future the idea of improving future performance made a lot of sense to me.

Once this goal of improving performance was established we began to explore the effectiveness of providing feedback to improve future performance. One of the common forms of systematized feedback in work settings is the annual performance appraisal. In my work with the coaches I would ask: "How many of you have been given a performance appraisal that left you inspired, motivated and equipped to do a more effective job?" On average less than 10 percent of people asked respond in the affirmative. The general response to the appraisal, rather than equipping people to be more effective, led to people looking for alternative positions or feeling resentful and demoralized that resulted in poorer performance. Often the appraisal led to minimal performance to achieve the required level but anything more was considered wasted effort for an ungrateful boss.

Clearly feedback was radically ineffective in achieving the desired goal of improving future performance, yet despite this overwhelming evidence of its ineffectiveness the coaches clung to the idea that

Without a vision the people perish.

— Proverbs 29:18

Be a servant of your congregation's future, not an expert on its past.

A pile of rocks ceases to be rocks when somebody contemplates it with the idea of a cathedral in mind.

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Can your average parishioner describe your church's mission in 60 seconds or less?

*Sometimes
the road less traveled
is less traveled
for a reason.
— Jerry Seinfeld*

*It is a very sobering feeling
to be up in space and
realize that one's safety
factor was determined by
the lowest bidder on a
government contract.
— Alan Shepherd*

*The only change outcomes
that are sustainable over
time are changes that
result in and from deeper,
mutual acceptance of self
and others.*

*Anonymous surveys will
rarely prove helpful as they
violate one of the core
values of being a Christian:
That we are known by
name.*

providing feedback was of fundamental importance. Some suggested giving up on the idea of performance appraisal but that did not provide a coherent plan for improving performance.

The Wisdom of Feed-Forward

A leader in the coaching world, Marshall Goldsmith, reported a similar finding regarding the ineffectiveness of feedback for improving future performance. He found that what was very helpful and effective was to provide **feed-forward**. He described feed-forward as advice on what to do differently in the future to improve performance.

Simple Valuation Questions to Get Feed-Forward

In a process of continual improvement we seek to make things and processes more valuable. Therefore we need to continually focus on what was valuable and how we can grow that value. Two simple future focused questions are:

- What do you value about what you did or was done?
- What would make it more valuable?

Following these questions several resource oriented questions could be asked:

- What shall we keep?
- What shall we do differently next time?
- What else do we need in order to be successful?
- What else has our success inspired us to?

Creating a Mutual Ministry Valuation Process

If we compare the two contrasting parables several things become readily apparent.

What Not to Do

Focus on individual performance
Global, general focus
Atmosphere of punishment.
Atmosphere of judgment
Surveys: a club to persuade
Anonymous
Unsafe to discuss
Annual reviews
Past oriented

What to Do

Focus on purpose
Focus on specific ministry
Atmosphere of learning.
Atmosphere of celebration
Story telling to discover
Open conversation
Safe to explore option
Continuous improvement
Future oriented