



Emergent Wholeness: Congregations in Community

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THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE WE CALL “CONGREGATION” IS FREQUENTLY THE OBJECT of misplaced despair as well as inappropriate expectations. Nearly given up for dead in the 1960s, the American congregation now seems to be the answer for fixing everything that is wrong with our society: schemes for housing, safety, education, public health, homebound caregiving, and the rebirth of neighborliness. The only thing left off the list seems to be spirituality itself. The hundreds of books on the subject hardly ever mention the congregation! At the other end of the spectrum, down near the level of cells and molecules, there is also great optimism about how religious beliefs and practices affect individual health. Congregational leaders, especially clergy, seem to welcome the attention, if not the high expectations.

I. BUILDING COMMUNITY BY ALIGNING STRENGTHS

I have mixed feelings about this surge of interest in religion. I remember a

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Congregations can use their enduring strengths to help build community in the public arena. Accompaniment is one of those strengths; it is essential both to individual children and to groups of children with particular needs.

meeting at The Carter Center six years ago after Newt Gingrich had led what turned out to be a short-lived electoral revolution based on a “Contract for America.” Each of us program directors were asked to comment on what the contract might mean for our program, with the implication that we should be able to fit in somehow. In my role of getting faith groups to increase health, the link was obvious: much of the idea of releasing federal responsibilities presumed that religious groups would step in and do the job, maybe even better. I questioned whether there was any link between the withdrawal of federal agencies from their responsibilities and the increase in the number of congregations engaged in efforts to prevent or alleviate suffering of the poor. Those politicians most enthusiastic about the capacity of the religious structures had not been in a church in years, any more than most clergy had been in a welfare office to know what they were expected to take on. President Carter, annoyed, said, “Gary, you know that most congregations aren’t even breaking a sweat! It’s about time they do.” Roughly two years later, I thought of my response: “If Jesus can’t get them to break a sweat, I don’t think Congress can, either.”

Although political fashion has shifted, the question remains on the table: How can the thousands of congregations scattered across the landscape increase the quality of life of their communities? Are they capable of heavy lifting? I am not concerned about living up to congressional expectations. I am very concerned about how our twenty-first-century congregations might bring their communities more into alignment with *God’s* intentions for wholeness, health, and shalom. I do not think that happens by focusing on someone’s lists of needs. Rather, I think we may get there by focusing on developing their inherent strengths and aligning them with God and other partners God might use in the community. A leader of a congregation can contribute by helping it to understand and develop its strengths through expressing them and by learning how to align those strengths in the community.

This business of strengths and alignment can sound very abstract. It actually comes to life in the most mundane and tangible acts of care that any child can see. Indeed, children are just the right point to start understanding how a congregation contributes to the emergence of God’s intended wholeness. To be concrete, let me describe my own reality as I see it in the life of my youngest daughter, Kathryn, and, at the other end of the social scale, the lives of the 119,000 children in my state of Georgia who are currently without health insurance (probably the most useful marker for social marginalization). How does my congregation contribute to the health of my youngest daughter, Kathryn? And how might the congregations in Georgia contribute to the health of the children who do not even have health insurance?

This might seem to pose two highly disconnected questions. Both involve aligning resources and systems but at quite different levels. However, the congregation can only respond by offering its particular strengths to the social equation. I

will suggest that the same eight strengths are what it draws on as it seeks to respond to human need at any level. Congregational leaders are all too often asked to give what someone else has denied, and many clergy spend most of their time trying to mend their congregations' weaknesses. Thus the question of strengths is hard: What strengths *do* congregations have that pertain to the health of individuals and communities?

II. EIGHT ENDURING STRENGTHS

Congregations have eight enduring strengths that are relevant to the health and wholeness of the community,* whether that community is the face of my one daughter or her 119,000 brothers and sisters across her state. Congregations have inherent strengths to:

- *accompany*: to show up in each other's lives, personally and physically; to visit, care, be present, attend, and listen, one human with another
- *convene*: to gather in groups of appropriate size around coffee tables and stadiums to engage opportunities and challenges of finding God's intentions for people and communities
- *connect*: to create webs of relationship among the complex lives of members and communities so that resources can be engaged, accessed, and aligned. As I'll suggest below, this is a critical strength for children who cannot be expected to cope with the highly complex institutional systems that create, manage, and control critical resources needed for development.
- *frame or tell stories*: to place in context experience and data so that people can recognize and play their role amid their complex relationships with other humans and God. Congregations have the strength to answer "Who am I?" without dumbing the question down to a set of statistics, labels, and legal obligations. Note that stories are told not only with words, but actions, especially those repeated over time. Again, this is of obvious significance to the health of children.
- *give sanctuary*: to create safe spaces for important programs and services that can be critical for individuals and for important dialogues necessary to align the social and political systems that determine health at community scale
- *bless*. People, especially children, grow in the direction of that which blesses them and looks like life. Congregations have enormous practical power to bless. Indeed, it might be that this power is what links all the other strengths.
- *pray*: to help people live at the boundary of human and holy with a rich menu of vocabulary, symbol, ritual, and religious practice. Children might appropriately ask for evidence of the value of such prayers at personal and

*See Gary R.Gunderson, *Deeply Woven Roots* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

social levels. What kind of prayers might result in 119,000 children gaining participation in insurance programs, for instance?

- *endure*. Congregations are built for slow change, long-term mundane discipline, growth and development throughout the cycle of life. This gives them quite different accountability than almost any other social structure; it might even give them patience for the countless unremarkable things a child, or a hundred thousand children, might need in order to grow as God intends.

III. MOVE TOWARD COMMUNITY

This framework of strengths locates the congregation in a social context, not primarily a personal one. This is a small, but radical, move in our day of private consumerism. The modern question is: “What list of things can the congregation do for *me*, now, to advance *my* personal health, wealth, and sense of well-being?” I think the modern question is itself pathological, but I admit I am in a minority, even (maybe especially) among the clergy trying to grow a congregation. Having said that, let me turn back to my child and to the children of Georgia.

To understand how these strengths play out in life, imagine these eight strengths as one axis of a grid. Along the other axis, lay out the social units one is interested in (Jesus might prefer “has compassion for”). You might begin, as I do, with your own children. The number of social units is vast, once you begin thinking of them: individual family members, the nuclear family unit, extended family, neighbors, church, extended social networks, city, county, and so on, to include the entire created order. One can disaggregate social units down to very fine grains, of course. The grid could quickly overflow this journal and do so usefully. It is highly empowering even to begin to think of one’s strengths over against the many kinds of groups one relates to. In fact, I recommend covering one wall of your church fellowship hall with paper and drawing this grid over a few months as a sort of congregational visioning experience. For our immediate purposes, let me artificially confine our grid to only one strength—accompaniment—and to two units, my younger daughter Kathryn and the group of uninsured children in our state.

Congregations accompany children. Literally, physically, they are places to go and people with names. Congregations are social spaces filled with others beyond the family that know and call the child’s name. They can be the living link between a faith in a loving God (who gathers people) and the wondrous process of human development that children experience as they grow amid a nutritious stew of not just physical, but social, moral, and spiritual relationships.

There are all sorts of odd experiments trying to prove that prayer works at a distance, even in double-blind anonymity. If successful, the results will still be but a minor footnote compared to the obvious strength a congregation has systematically to make sure that nobody within it or even within visiting distance of it is left isolated and unloved. A Methodist congregation in southern Delaware called an as-

sistant pastor who had been a medic in the army. As a health professional and soldier, he was used to following clear standards. When he arrived at the congregation he was surprised to discover that there was no “standard of care” at all. So he adopted the Army’s: “Leave nobody behind.” Although a child of the antiwar movement, I have to confess that I can’t think of a better one and know few congregations that can live up to it! This pastor understood that a congregation should be held accountable for its strength to accompany and should thus systematically organize and train to achieve this standard. This means creating visiting committees, phone-trees, and other simple disciplines to make contact every day with anyone *likely* to be left behind. The strength to leave nobody behind is expressed in thousands of unremarkable actions.

Kathryn is now 11 and has been part of our little congregation since Karen was pregnant with her, even known by name as soon as the ultrasound identified her as a girl. It is easy to remember a hundred stories in which her development has benefited from the accompaniment that she has already experienced. If Kathryn no longer had Karen and me, the congregation would probably continue to accompany her in all the unremarkable ways that would make her life possible, from finding her a safe place to live to helping her remember who she is and who loves her.

IV. FROM INDIVIDUAL NEEDS TO PATTERNS

When one tries to relate the strengths of congregations across the axis to larger social units one thinks of groups defined by their pattern of socio-economic experiences. Being uninsured is one such pattern, one that has many and great consequences for the children. Nobody knows exactly, but in Georgia there are between 119,000 and several hundred thousand children in this group right now. They are deprived of any stable relationship to health professionals and their institutions of healing, prevention, and development. Many uninsured children in Georgia are not members of congregations, but they are still in relationship with them in varied ways. Think of a continuum of relationship running from Kathryn’s at one extreme (almost every Sunday since birth!) to a child merely down the street from the church or perhaps a bus-token away. The congregation is part of their socio-political world, even if only a passive or dysfunctional member.

How does a congregation accompany a group? While one might accompany an individual with a personal relationship, a group demands a *system* of relationships. A system is still personal in the sense of involving people, but the relationships are designed to be appropriate to a pattern of relationships. Congregations have the strength to create, nurture, and promote social spaces in which such relationships begin and grow. Congregations acting alone and in connection to each other have the strength to accompany groups of children in many ways. Indeed, much of what we try to do is best understood as systemic accompaniment. Summer Bible school, recreation ministries, mothers’ morning out, respite care of dif-

ferent kinds, and “simple” visitation are all ways to form relationships with children—to accompany them.

The strength to accompany weaves deeply with the other strengths, of course. Accompanying a group of uninsured children leads immediately to the public square in order to advocate for getting them insured. In Georgia, as in every other state today, extant public programs of differing qualities already provide free or very low cost insurance for every child. So accompaniment means systematically partnering with public structures to be sure that every child is actually enrolled in the programs. That system of partnering will draw on all the other congregational strengths. For instance, the power to connect is the essence of compassion. The Samaritan connected the wounded man to what he needed. The statesperson connects systems in ways that reflect justice and mercy. The congregation has relevant strengths at both ends of the scale.

V. WHAT MATTERS AND WHO MATTERS

It is helpful, if somewhat artificial, to distinguish between *what* matters and *who* matters. The functions, services, and material resources needed by individuals and groups are what matters. This list will emerge from any community needs assessment. It is also the kind of list that typically emerges as the social worker interviews an “at risk” child. Asking who matters is a less obvious, but more important, question, for it clarifies the critical relationships across which everything actually flows. One can see in the following chart how the single strength of accompaniment plays out in the life of who and what matters for Kathryn and the uninsured children of Georgia.

Asking who matters makes visible the power of congregations because a congregation is best understood not as a set of ideas or services but as a constellation of roles into which people voluntarily grow. For instance, the pastor has one role, which in our time is cluttered with a vast and conflicting range of expectations. The pastor’s role usually includes some aspect of accompanying people. Indeed, many sick members do not consider themselves accompanied if not visited by the pastor. However, that is only one role that incarnates accompaniment. Imagine the ways in which the church secretary ensures accompaniment by how she listens on the phone, refers and organizes the flow of information and people.

Most of the accompaniment that children experience in church is in their relationships in education and child care. Kathryn knows many members in our church because she sat on their laps in the nursery when she was two years old. As they grow, children are accompanied through youth ministry, recreational experiences, camps, and music participation, all of which occur by means of distinct and stable adult roles. The eight enduring strengths of congregations do not call for eight committees. Rather, the strengths are literally embodied in the roles played by members of the congregation—all the congregation. Every single role in the

congregation expresses some aspect of all eight strengths, each of which becomes stronger and more evident as the role is developed to maturity.

STRENGTH TO ACCOMPANY

Kathryn		Uninsured Kids	
What Matters	Who Matters	What Matters	Who Matters
my name	blood relationships	understanding	anyone in potential contact with any child in Georgia
silent confidence	love relationships	available programs	anyone in a position to communicate reality to the public
against abandonment	social network	accompanying decision makers, administrators, rule-makers, funders	anyone capable of reaching out and explaining programs to kids or family
being present to make all other strengths accessible and real	any caring adult	access to systems for food, health professionals, public health, police, mental health infrastructure, shelters, day care, abuse havens, school nurse, and social work	anyone in a position to create, protect, improve, and sustain community-scale systems
food	any friend/peer	non-profit and church outreach systems	whoever can explain the religious mandate for this
safe housing	official roles: Sunday school teacher, pastor, deacon, coach, music minister, etc.	advocacy for above systems	
knowing that God loves me	anyone connected to anything that matters		
secure and stable access to health professionals of all kinds	paid providers (assuming a way of paying)		
safety from violence or fear of violence	whoever can explain the religious mandate for all this		

VI. LEADERSHIP LEVERAGE

This is where the leadership leverage rests: in building the understanding and capacity of these existing roles. This happens most often by helping the people in these roles understand how their strengths are relevant to God’s intentions for community in the highly particular ways that their roles allow. The music minister has strengths to relate to uninsured kids in ways that the secretary and pastor cannot.

The adults in the various roles may have many strengths that reflect the complexity of their lives outside the congregation, too. This richness feeds their capacity to express the particular strengths of their roles within the congregation. Imagine how the church secretary’s capacity to accompany is expanded by previous experience with other institutions, such as the welfare office or elementary school. Now imagine how the entire congregation’s strength grows in highly practical ways as its members develop relationships of trust and transparency so that each member’s particular capacities become woven together and available to each

other as might the various members of a body. The strength of the entire congregation to accompany is orders of magnitude greater than just the simple sum of the strengths of its various members. I can see this as vital and powerful in the life of my own daughter.

I have, however, not yet seen this to be true in the relationship between the congregations of Georgia and the uninsured children. I fear that, if anyone cared to ask them, the children might name the churches of Georgia as “people for whom we are waiting.” But it would be a dramatic mistake to ask the congregations merely to help enroll the children in a public insurance program and go back to slumber. Such a project would be a partial answer to President Carter’s accusation that they are not even breaking a sweat. But sweating to fulfill someone else’s request is letting them off too easily. How much more appropriate it would be to hold the churches of this state accountable before God and the children for their strengths to *accompany* the uninsured children and then, as an inevitable consequence, to bring to bear their other strengths so that God’s intentions for the children might be fulfilled.

Why should any clergy want to encourage such a strenuous enterprise? Most will not, of course, no matter what Jesus, Congress, or President Carter say (much less what I say). But those that do may find that the oldest possible promise is true: “If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the hopes of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will show you the way and satisfy your own hope and make your bones strong” (adapted from Isa 58:10-11 RSV). ⊕