

# Part One

## Exploring Parish Vitality Today

### 1. A Parish Vitality Inventory

*How well does each indicator describe the vitality of your parish community?*  
(Rating Scale from 1 = not very well to 5 = very well)

1. Our parish is spiritually vital and alive.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Our parishioners are growing in their faith and feel the congregation meets their spiritual needs	1	2	3	4	5
3. Our parishioners are spiritually prepared to live the gospel in their daily lives.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Our parish offers a wide variety of opportunities for parishioners of all ages (from children through adults) to grow spiritually and in their Catholic faith.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Our parish offers a wide variety of opportunities for families and households to grow spiritually and in their Catholic faith.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Our parishioners experience God's presence, joy, inspiration, and awe in worship services and feel worship helps them with everyday life.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The liturgies at our parish are prayerful, reverent, and spiritually moving.	1	2	3	4	5
8. The preaching at our parish connects Scripture to daily life and inspires Christian living.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Our parishioners participate fully and consciously in the celebration of the liturgy.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The music at our liturgies inspires prayer and worship of God.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Our parish is a welcoming and hospitable community.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Our parishioners have a strong sense of belonging and have close friends in the parish.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Our parish is a supportive community where people care for one another.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Our parishioners are involved in the life of the congregation.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Our parish offers a wide variety of opportunities for parishioners to become involved in parish life and ministry.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Parishioners are personally invited to engage in parish leadership and ministry.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Parishioners are involved in sharing their faith with others and inviting friends or relatives to worship at the parish and participate in church activities.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Our parish is engaged in outreach and service to the poor, locally and globally.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Parishioners are involved in social service or advocacy activities and work to make their community and world a better place to live.	1	2	3	4	5

20. Our parish attends to the needs of the sick, homebound and bereaved.	1	2	3	4	5
21. Our pastor and pastoral staff are energized and enthusiastic about their ministry.	1	2	3	4	5
22. Our parish effectively communicates information about ministries, activities, and events.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Our parish recruits and retains high quality parish staff.	1	2	3	4	5
24. Our parish invests in the ongoing training and formation of the pastor and pastoral staff.	1	2	3	4	5
25. Our pastor and pastoral staff work together as a team, where members are empowered to use their gifts to advance the mission of the Church.	1	2	3	4	5
26. Members of our parish pastoral council collaborate with each other and the pastor.	1	2	3	4	5
27. Parish leadership consults parishioners in decisions that affect parish life.	1	2	3	4	5
28. Parishioners feel committed to the congregation's vision and are excited about the congregation's future.	1	2	3	4	5

## 2. Research Findings: Parish Vitality

### Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations: 2008 US Congregational Life Survey

*(A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations; www.uscongregations.org)*

1. **Growing Spiritually:** Worshipers are growing in their faith and feel the congregation meets their spiritual needs
2. **Meaningful Worship:** Worshipers experience God's presence, joy, inspiration, and awe in worship services and feel worship helps them with everyday life.
3. **Participation in the Congregation:** Worshipers attend services weekly and are involved in the congregation.
4. **Sense of Belonging:** Worshipers have a strong sense of belonging and say most of their closest friends attend the same congregation.
5. **Caring for Children and Youth:** Worshipers are satisfied with the offerings for children and youth and have children living at home who also attend there.
6. **Focusing on the Community:** Worshipers are involved in social service or advocacy activities and work to make their community a better place to live.
7. **Sharing Faith:** Worshipers are involved in evangelism activities and invite friends or relatives to worship.
8. **Welcoming New People:** Worshipers began attending in the past five years.
9. **Empowering Leadership:** Worshipers feel the congregation's leaders inspire others to action and take in account worshipers ideas.
10. **Looking to the Future:** Worshipers feel committed to the congregation's vision and are excited about the congregation's future.

## Parish Vitality Indicators: Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project

(<http://www.emergingmodels.org/article.cfm?id=28>)

*Indicators rated on a 1-7 scale with “7” being the highest score. All items listed below are 5.0 and higher.*

### **Liturgy:**

- The preaching at our parish connects Scripture to daily life and inspires Christian living. (5.81)
- The liturgies at our parish are prayerful, reverent, and spiritually moving. (5.66)
- The music at our liturgies inspires prayer and worship of God. (5.43)
- Our parishioners participate fully and consciously in the celebration of the liturgy. (5.26)

### **Responding to needs of people:**

- Our parish attends to the needs of the sick, homebound and bereaved. (5.79)

### **Pastoral Leadership:**

- Our pastor and pastoral staff are energized and enthusiastic about their ministry (5.70)
- Our parish effectively communicates information about ministries, activities, and events. (5.54)
- Our parish recruits and retains high quality parish staff. (5.28)
- Our parish invests in the ongoing training and formation of the pastor and pastoral staff. (5.06)

### **Caring Community**

- Our parish is engaged in outreach to the poor. (5.63)
- Our parish is a supportive community where people care for one another. (5.52)

### **Collaboration**

- Our pastor and pastoral staff work together as a team, where members are empowered to use their gifts to advance the mission of the Church. (5.51)
- Members of our parish pastoral council collaborate with each other and the pastor. (5.43)

### **Parishioner Involvement:**

- Our parish offers a wide variety of opportunities for parishioners to become involved in parish life and ministry. (5.42)
- Parishioners are personally invited to engage in parish leadership and ministry. (5.35)

### **Prayer and Spirituality:**

- Our parish is spiritually vital and alive. (5.38)
- Our parishioners are spiritually prepared to live the gospel in their daily lives. (5.13)

### **Parish Mission and Vision:**

- Parish leadership consults parishioners in decisions that affect parish life. (5.13)

## Vital Congregations Research Project 2010 (United Methodist Church)

([http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CV\\_PRESENTATION.PDF](http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/CV_PRESENTATION.PDF))

The four key drivers of the indicators of vitality (small groups, lay leadership, worship service, and the pastor) are consistent regardless church size, predominant ethnicity, and jurisdiction.

1. **Small Groups** (small groups include study, fellowship, and service)
  - number of groups
  - number of programs for children and youth (classes and other programs)
2. **Lay leadership**
  - effectiveness of lay leadership
  - lay leadership demonstrating vital personal faith
  - rotating lay leadership
  - % of attendees serving as leaders in past 5 years
3. **Worship Service:**
  - mix of Traditional and Contemporary service
  - using more topical preaching in the Traditional service
  - using more contemporary music in Contemporary service
  - using more multi-media in Contemporary service
4. **Pastor**
  - focusing on develop, coaching, and mentoring to enable lay leadership to improve performance
  - influencing the actions and behaviors of others to accomplish changes in the local church
  - propelling the local church to set and achieve significant goals through effective leadership
  - inspiring the congregation through preaching
  - length of appointment

## Eight Quality Characteristics (Natural Church Development)

([www.ncd-international.org](http://www.ncd-international.org))

### Empowering Leadership

Effective leadership begins with an intimate relationship with God, resulting in Christlike character and a clear sense of God's calling for leaders' lives. As this base of spiritual maturity increases, effective pastors and leaders multiply, guide, empower and equip disciples to realize their full potential in Christ and work together to accomplish God's vision.

### Effective Structures

The Church is the living Body of Christ. Like all healthy organisms, it requires numerous systems which work together to fulfill its intended purpose. Often churches have to keep in mind a multitude of complex forms and regulations which may have been useful at the time they were instituted, but which lost their functionality over time. Each must be evaluated regularly to determine if it is still the best way to accomplish the intended purpose.

### Gift-based Ministry

The Holy Spirit sovereignly gives to every Christian spiritual gift(s) for the building of God's kingdom. Church leaders have the responsibility to help believers discover, develop and exercise their gifts in appropriate ministries so that the body of Christ "grows and builds itself up in love."

### **Holistic Small Groups**

Holistic small groups are disciple-making communities which endeavor to reach the unchurched, meet individual needs, develop each person according to their God-given gifts and raise leaders to sustain the growth of the church. Like healthy body cells, holistic small groups are designed to grow and multiply.

### **Inspiring Worship**

Inspiring worship is a personal and corporate encounter with the living God. Both personal and corporate worship must be infused with the presence of God resulting in times of joyous exultation and times of quiet reverence. Inspiring worship is not driven by a particular style or ministry focus group, but rather, the shared experience of God's awesome presence.

### **Loving Relationships**

Loving relationships are the heart of a healthy, growing church. Jesus said people will know we are His disciples by our love. Practical demonstration of love builds authentic Christian community and brings others into God's kingdom.

### **Need-oriented Evangelism**

Need-oriented evangelism intentionally cultivates relationships with pre-Christian people so they can become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who are actively participating within the life of the church and community. Using appropriate ministries and authentic relationships, believers can guide others into the family of God.

### **Passionate Spirituality**

Effective ministry flows out of a passionate spirituality. Spiritual intimacy leads to a strong conviction that God will act in powerful ways. A godly vision can only be accomplished through an optimistic faith which views obstacles as opportunities and turns defeats into victories.

## **3. The Importance of Congregational Culture**

A dictionary would define culture as the sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguish one group of people from another. Its root meaning is shared with the world agriculture, referring to the soil that has been tilled and by extension a set of traits that have been plowed into a group's way of life. Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through language, material objects, ritual, institutions, and art.

In *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out*, Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro write, "The idea of church culture is often ignored, in part because so little material is available about it. Yet we believe culture is to the church what a soul is to the human body. It is an overall life force that the Holy Spirit uses to give energy, personality, and uniqueness to everything a body of believers says and does." Church culture influences everything you do. It colors the way you choose and introduce programs. It shapes how you select and train leaders. "Your culture is the lens through which you view your life. If you change the lens, you change your outlook. Changing the culture, and everything else changes, including the future."

Nancy T. Ammerman, professor of sociology at Boston University, has researched and written extensively about American congregations and the role of congregational culture. In her essay "Culture and Identity in the Congregation," she explains what a congregational culture is:

Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in. It is the predictable patterns of who does what and habitual strategies for telling the world about the things held most dear. A culture includes the congregation's history and stories of its heroes. It includes its symbols, rituals, and worldview. It is shaped by the cultures in which its members live (represented by their demographic characteristics), but it takes on its own unique identity and character when those members come together. Understanding a congregation requires understanding that it is a unique gathering of people with a cultural identity all its own.

Congregations draw their culture and identity from their specific religious tradition. What each congregation cooks up, then, is always a mix of local creativity and larger tradition. What we see in a given locale is that group's selective retrieval of their own theological heritage, along with the local inventions that have been necessary to make sense of life in that place. . .

A congregational culture is constructed out of theological and denominational traditions, expectations from the larger culture, patterns of social class and ethnicity, and the like. All those things are carried into the congregation by its members and leaders. Whenever any of those elements changes, the congregational will inevitably change as well. . .

Congregational culture is more than the sum of what people bring with them and more than a mirror image of the theological tradition they represent. It is a unique creation, constructed out of their interaction together over time.

The dynamics of congregational culture at work can be seen in this analysis of the genius of black congregations by Robert Michael Franklin in his essay "The Safest Place on Earth: The Culture of Black Congregations."

In order to understand the genius of black congregations, it is important to understand how the congregation's entire culture does the work of empowering parishioners for mission. Central to that cultural work is the pivotal role of pastoral leadership in its manifestation of theological convictions, rhetorical skills, and practical wisdom. Most portraits of black congregations emphasize the role of clergy. This is understandable, given the elevated office of ministry in most black communities. A more careful examination of black congregational culture, however, requires attention to the array of practices that are sustained by the laity—style of worship, singing, ecstatic rituals (shouting, altar prayer), and politically relevant religious education. Effective congregational mission actually flows from the dynamic interaction between qualified, gifted leadership and an empowering congregational culture. Black clergy are, in the first instance, servants called to nurture and maintain a healthy congregational culture. Once progress in this task has been demonstrated, then they may be authorized in the public arena.

The characteristics of black congregational culture according to Franklin include: (1) full engagement of the senses in worship, (2) intimate prayer, (3) cathartic shouting, (4) triumphant singing, (5) politically relevant religious education, and (6) prophetic, imaginative preaching. Franklin concludes his analysis with these insights:

The entire culture of the black church thus works to create the sensibilities necessary for public mission. Black church culture is a rich and vibrant ensemble of practices that offer praise to God and hope to oppressed humanity. Clergy are expected first to maintain and then to mobilize this culture for Christ's mission in the world. Maintenance and mobilization are dialectically related.

Preaching is the ecclesial practices most central to the sacred oral culture of African Americans and most essential for mobilizing and sustaining people for public action. Good black social preaching names and frames crises creatively, analyzes them in biblical perspective, describes solutions using indigenous symbols and images, prescribes specific plans, and offers hope via celebration.

## Example of Cultural Characteristics: Visionary Congregations

(From *Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary*. Isa Aron, Steven Cohen, Lawrence Hoffman, and Ari Kelman. Alban Institute, 2010)

Visionary synagogues have six characteristics in common:

- **Sacred Purpose**
  - a pervasive and shared vision infuses all aspects of the synagogue.
- **Holistic Ethos**
  - the parts are related to each other and the whole
  - ritual, learning, caring, social action, and community appear in several areas of functioning
  - lay and professional leadership function cooperatively
  - boundaries within and around the community are more porous and fluid
- **Participatory Culture on All Levels**
  - congregants, lay leaders, professionals, and parents engage in the work of the sacred community.
- **Meaningful Engagement**
  - achieved through repeated inspirational experiences that provide genuine meaning to people's lives
- **Innovation Disposition**
  - marked by a search for diversity and alternatives
  - a tolerance of failure
  - ability to address and overcome resistance to change
  - a willingness to abandon less function ways of doing things
- **Reflective Leadership and Governance**
  - Marked by careful examination of alternatives
  - a commitment to overarching purpose
  - attention to relationships
  - mastery of detail
  - planful approach to change

## Example of Cultural Characteristics: "A Culture of the Spirit"

(*The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*. Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto. EYM Publications, 2010. [www.exemplarym.com](http://www.exemplarym.com))

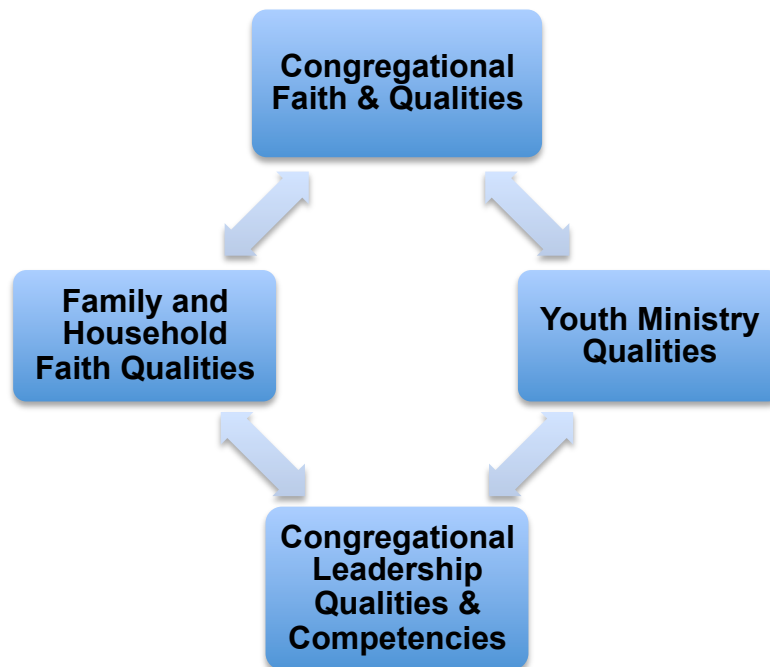
While confirming the power of several well known youth ministry practices, the "Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry Study" pointed to a congregational culture of the Spirit—something more basic and central in establishing vital faith in youth. The research points to the value of a congregation's culture endowed with a palpable sense of the living, active presence of God at work among the people of the whole congregation, its ministries with youth, its parents, the ministries of the congregation, and its congregational leaders (pastor, youth minister, youth and adult leaders) as providing the most powerful, pervasive influence these congregations have on young people long-term. It is the communal awareness of participation in God's presence and action that permeates the values,

relationships, and activities of these congregations, giving rise to an atmosphere, a *Culture of the Spirit* focused on mission and the transformation of life that seems to make them so influential in the lives and faith of young people.

The congregational *Culture of the Spirit* generates four spheres of relationships and practices that intersect and powerfully impact the lives of young people in the EYM congregations.

- First, these congregations’ basic ministries are thoroughly intergenerational. Young people are welcomed and expected to participate and lead in church-wide ministries, including worship, education, fellowship, outreach, and decision-making.
- Second, these congregations have developed age-level youth ministries marked by trusted relationships and custom-designed ministry practices and activities within a caring atmosphere of high expectation. There are multiple nurturing relationships and activities intentionally planned to create an atmosphere of respect, growth and belonging.
- Third, these congregations educate parents in the faith and equip them for at-home caring conversations, prayer, ritual, Bible reading, and service; and parents and many families are engaged in faith practices at home.
- Fourth, these congregations are blessed with competent, faith-filled, leadership from the pastor to the youth minister to the youth and adult leaders who are committed to young people and developing their faith lives.

Aligning and integrating the intergenerational ministries of the congregation with adolescent age-level ministries and the families/households of the young people, supported by competent, faith-filled leaders (pastors, youth ministers, and youth and adult leaders), generates intersecting arenas of influence that seem to make the work of these congregations so significant in the lives of their committed Christian youth.”





## 4. Identifying Your Church's Culture

### Viewing Your Church as an Outsider

Begin by analyzing your church's culture through the eyes of an outsider. Imagine that in the last month people from your community participated in your church's worship services, sat in on church programs, met several core people, and learned a bit of the history of your church. The goal in this first set of questions is to describe your church's invisible cultural "megaphone" as it is perceived by an observer.

1. What values are communicated most strongly when someone approaches your church from the outside?
2. What would an outsider, after sitting through several worship services, say your church values most?
3. What are outsiders' two or three leading perceptions of your church, after they have participated for a month in a variety of your church's programs and ministries.
4. How would an outsider describe the spirit (or attitudes) most prevalent at your church?
5. Read over your impressions, and sum them up. List a handful of values that the church seems to be broadcasting. How surprised are you by how they compare to what you want to be known for?

### Analyzing Your Church's Current Culture

Consider each of these ingredients carefully, and write your assessment of it.

1. **Look at leadership and values.**
  - Who are the culture setters in your church (pastor, church staff, volunteer ministry leaders, community members)?
  - What are the primary values exhibited by those who lead (pastor, church staff, volunteer ministry leaders boards/councils, influential members of the church)?
  - What are the real values coming from each major leadership group? How much unity exists between these groups? In what ways do they clash?
2. **Look at the vision statement of your church.** Write your assessment of your vision statement, and how you are or aren't living it out.
  - Is your vision expressed in a serious written document that leaders and the congregation know and embrace?
  - Does your vision statement communicate what you really believe and live?
  - If it does, what are the cultural values it clearly spells out? If not, where are the gaps?
  - If you don't have a written mission statement, what is the implied or assumed vision.
3. **Look at your symbols, ceremonies, and celebrations.** Write your assessment.
  - What symbols do you see when you look around your church facility? What do these things say about what you really value? What do they communicate about your culture?
  - What ceremonies and traditions does your church honor? How popular are they with the congregation?
  - Who are the heroes in your church—the members who are most celebrated, honored, and emulated? What cultural values do those heroes represent?

4. **Look at yourself as a leader.**

- What do I really value?
- What am I really trying to do and build here at this church?
- Is it my passion to build a kingdom culture that honors and serves God, or a culture that rewards me?
- What are my measurements of success as a leader? Do they match up with what I say my real values are?

## The Bottom Line

Answer the following questions with some short, highly descriptive phrases.

1. How would I describe our church's current culture?
2. Now it's time to boil it down. As I look over the list I just made, what two or three phrases stand out as the key values that presently drive the culture of our church? Are these the values I am passionate about and the ones our leadership team believes that God wants for our church?

(Adapted from *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out*, Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005)

## Visions of the Sacred Community

by Isa Aron , Steven M. Cohen , Lawrence A. Hoffman , Ari Y. Kelman

Congregational leaders who embark upon change efforts develop contrasting images of the qualities they seek in their congregation and of the characteristics they hope to shed, transcend, or avoid. They aspire to become what we call *visionary congregations*, those that most effectively develop, nurture, and apply powerful, widely shared, and widely understood visions of the sacred community. In contrast, they distinguish their communities from what we call *functional congregations*, those that may excel at performing discrete functions that satisfy their consumer-members but tend to fall short of genuinely achieving an integrated sense of sacred community.

The composite images we draw here emerged clearly from interviews with the lay and professional leaders of eight transformed congregations. Not only can these leaders point to their currently held view of their congregation's ideal features, some can also point to the time when their dreams began to take shape and when their dissatisfactions came into sharper focus. All engaged congregational leaders had to face their congregations' shortcomings and envision the ideal state to which they could realistically aspire. Dissatisfaction with the seemingly adequate, functional present was a necessary prelude to envisioning the extraordinary congregation they wanted to become. We found that functional congregations had six characteristics in common.

- *Consumerism*: the fee-for-service arrangements provide consumers with discrete services, in particular, education of children for ceremonial celebration of bar or bat mitzvah and clergy officiation at life-cycle ceremonies.
- *Segmentation*: programs stand on their own, with little integration of worship, learning, caring, social action, or community building.
- *Passivity*: professionals exercise firm control over congregational functioning; worshipers sit passively; parents drop off children for religious schooling; boards deal with marginalia.
- *Meaninglessness*: rote performance of scripted interactions, with little genuine significance or feelings of transcendent connection with Jews and Judaism.
- *Resistance to change*: the routine is supreme, preventing diversification and serious consideration of alternative modes and structures.
- *Nonreflective leadership*: focuses on program and institutional arrangements rather than purpose and vision.

The synagogues we studied successfully challenged their congregants to be life-long, year-round, thoroughly committed and practicing Jews. We call these synagogues "visionary." Through the course of our interviews, our key informants provided contrasts between "the congregation we once were" and the "congregation we have now become." Some spoke of *them* (other, more typical congregations) versus *us* (a very special congregation), distinguishing the ordinary and mediocre congregation from the extraordinary and vital congregation. Visionary synagogues have six characteristics in common.

### Conversation

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- *Sacred purpose*: a pervasive and shared vision infuses all aspects of the synagogue.
- *Holistic ethos*: the parts are related to each other, such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. *Torah, avodah, and g'milut chasadim* are intertwined throughout synagogue life.
- *Participatory culture*: on all levels—congregants, lay leaders, professionals, and family members of all ages—engage in the work of creating sacred community.
- *Meaningful engagement* is achieved through repeated inspirational experiences that infuse people's lives with meaning.
- *Innovation disposition* is marked by a search for diversity and alternatives and a high tolerance for possible failure.
- *Reflective leadership* and governance are marked by careful examination of alternatives, a commitment to overarching purpose, attention to relationships, mastery of both big picture and detail, and a planful approach to change.

At the heart of the visionary congregation is an overarching commitment to sacred purpose, a commitment that suffuses all aspects of the community. Where the functional congregation delivers specified services to consumer-clients, its visionary counterpart provides sacred experiences to members of a holy community.

Visionary communities maintain a holistic ethos where the parts are integrally related to the whole. This ethos attempts to minimize boundaries between people, programs, institutions, groups, and space and to promote cooperation between and among the various domains of the congregation. It rejects dualisms such as education versus entertainment and study versus action. It rejects the segmentation of functions common in most congregations, such as compartmentalizing worship, learning, caring, and social action. It also rejects an atomistic view of the congregation as separate from everyday life, the larger Jewish community, and the larger society.

For leaders, clerical or otherwise, of visionary congregations, a highly participatory culture signifies not loss of control but success in leadership. Congregants' participation, initiative, and leadership are not seen as impinging upon the prerogatives of leadership; they are signs of its effectiveness and success in making engagement with the congregation truly inspiring and meaningful.

A major theme in American religion over the last twenty years or more has been the rise of meaning seeking on the part of Americans of all faiths. In Robert Wuthnow's terms, religious adherents have increasingly shifted from the mode of "dwellers," where extant religious structures are sufficient, to that of "seekers," where the journey is an end in itself. Current and potential congregants choose to affiliate and to become more or less involved in congregational life based in part upon the extent to which such involvement provides them with genuine meaning. Congregations are challenged now more than ever to provide environments and experiences where meaning making can happen. As people and culture continue to diversify and evolve, the objective requires ongoing innovation. As Alan Wolfe observes, "All of America's religions face the same imperative: Personalize or die."

The leaders of the visionary congregations with whom we spoke cast themselves as change agents who promote innovation but carefully pace and monitor change. Given the complexity of instituting and monitoring innovation, a visionary congregation requires a leadership and an organizational culture not merely predisposed to innovate but also committed and capable of engaging in genuine reflection.

For years social scientists have been tracking the ever-quickenning pace of change in technology, culture, and society. Management experts have been nearly unanimous in proclaiming that corporations and the people who lead them need to develop the tools to make sense of the changing world around them, to recognize emerging obstacles and opportunities, to manage adaptation and innovation, to assess their successes and failures, and to adjust their responses in light of these assessments. Innovation demands ongoing reflection and attention.

No congregation performs perfectly as a visionary congregation in all aspects. Rather, we envision the six characteristics shared by visionary congregations as continual, in which the core distinction of a congregation is that it is always in pursuit of sacredness over consumerism, holism over segmentation, participation over passivity, innovation over routine, meaning over rote interactions, and reflection over inattention.

Behind these characteristics lies the larger story, the story of how the synagogues themselves were transformed, from "limited liability" institutions to sacred communities; from shuls with schools to congregations of learners; from having clergy who made hospital visits to having congregants who visit one another; from having a small and somewhat beleaguered social action committee (or no social action committee at all) to joining a citywide social justice coalition that engages a broad range of congregants.

By making such changes, these synagogues have joined a national trend in churches, too. The news is filled with stories featuring evangelical megachurches transforming the face of American religious consciousness. But quietly and with much less fanfare, mainline churches too are starting to move into the twenty-first century with a new sense of intellectual, spiritual, and prophetic excitement, reaching far beyond the small band of regulars and into the very heart of the church's membership rolls. If religion in America has a future beyond just its conservative right wing, it will depend on this kind of transformation of church—and synagogue—culture.

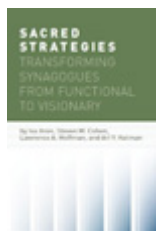
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## FEATURED RESOURCES



**[Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary](#)**  
**by Isa Aron, Steven M. Cohen,  
Lawrence A. Hoffman, and Ari Y. Kelman**

*Sacred Strategies* is about eight synagogues that reached out and helped people connect to Jewish life in a new way—congregations that had gone from commonplace to extraordinary. Researchers Aron, Cohen, Hoffman, and Kelman write for synagogue leaders eager to transform their congregations, federations and foundations interested in encouraging and supporting this transformation, and researchers in congregational