

## "Do You Have a Methodist Book on Strategic Planning?"

### Resourcing Godly or Ungodly



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What place does faith play in recommending resources? I believe that resource center directors, especially in ecumenical centers, are positioned to see and experience something profound in American religious life. On the one hand, we are moving away from the era of denominationalism and resources that are denominationally specific. It certainly makes no sense to speak of "Baptist" roof repair as something different from "Lutheran" roof repair. It probably makes no sense to speak of "Methodist" strategic planning as something separate from "Presbyterian" strategic planning. In this sense, our role as resource experts is to help people see past labels.

On the other hand, we should not throw out the "baby with the bath water." Parker Palmer observed of great teaching that it comes from our center and the fullness of our humanity, including who we are as religious persons. If the rising interest in spirituality has taught us one thing, it may be that we can't afford to default to a generic, secularized level of relating to each other in which the language of psychology, organizational development, and business dominates and in which we are cut off from the wholeness of who we are as people of faith. Do we really want to spend a day with each other in strategic planning if the process is not shaped by an understanding that we are meeting as people of faith? And who is to say that the act of repairing a worship building should not also be understood as a spiritual act, rooted in our understanding of the full faith tradition that makes a home in that place of worship?

#### **Into the Riptide between the Currents of Secularization and Spiritualization**

How do we avoid getting caught in a rip tide between these diverging currents? How do we take the tension between spiritualization and secularization as an occasion for deepening our practice as resource directors?

In the Congregational Resource Guide team, we often find ourselves struggling with this question. Such a question is also central to the work of both individual institutions where (like directors of ecumenical resources centers) we wish to work respectfully with people of many faith traditions but also wish to work in a way where we meet not on a generic secular level but as people of faith.

In trying to resolve this tension profitably (or at least to profit from this tension), it is helpful to begin with a rough, broad observation about the relationship between resources and religious traditions in America: If you look at innovation in American congregational life, the ideas are constantly moving across traditions. Overall, the bulk of theological innovation moves from left to right and the bulk of organizational administration moves from right to left. So, if you want the best example of something or if you want to know about what is new, it is very unlikely that you will find it in any one tradition. This is especially true considering what has happened to denominational publishing and curriculum development. This gives you three basic options:

1. **Live within a constantly shrinking world.** If you choose this option, you achieve a certain sense of solidarity and focus on your distinctiveness. If you really believe that everything outside the circle is basically to be rejected, you must in faith choose this option.

This option has merit. I fear the last two decades have left people of faith lulled into complacency about the dangers of worldliness. Yes, the good news must be preached in the language of contemporary culture. But who can go to a shopping mall at Christmas and not observe that a Christian ought to feel out of place there? Is it not true that an authentic, Christian celebration of Christmas must separate itself from a genericized, commercialized celebration of Christmas?

2. **Live in a world that is constantly becoming more generic and less soulful.** A woman the other day said to me that too many churches are becoming like rental apartments—no sense of a specific people on a specific journey with God. I suppose part of this comes from the influence of the seeker church model but it also can come from organizations that publish resources generic enough to fit everyone. The resources end up with a little spirit language at the corners while the language of business and organizational development does the heavy lifting.

But this option also has merit. I cannot say that the contemporary American idea of denominationalism is really a container in which Christian faith, or any faith, should easily fit. And, if faith shouldn't be made to fit in such artificial denominational containers, then surely we should let go of the languages and practices that press faith into such artificial containers.

3. **Live with some energetic approach to difference, where we use our differences to more deeply engage the center of who we are as people of faith.** I don't pretend to be neutral on this. By far the majority of my sympathies are with this third option. I believe that, on the whole, it is more fruitful to find energetic approaches to difference, where our differences become the tools we use to engage more deeply our spiritual centers.

## **Recommending Faith-Specific Resources**

How might we live out such a view in the daily work of assisting congregational leaders with resources? When I began resourcing work a few years ago, I found myself stumped by the calls that came in asking for a Lutheran approach to strategic planning, a Methodist approach to making a church accessible, or a Jewish approach to a seeker service (we have received that request).

What do I do with this?

In some measure, it is a question of knowledge and experience. When someone asks for a Methodist approach to accessibility, it is quite often that someone does not yet understand well the world of resources. The person is simply less experienced. I can be confident that, as they work more in congregational life, they will learn better. I know that, if I were to consult with Methodist leaders on that issue, those leaders would themselves advise the person that such resources don't need to be denominationally specific.

Sometimes, I take the question at face value. At least among the larger mainline denominations like the Lutherans and Methodists, the idea that there should be denominationally specific resources on everything is still lively enough that on major subjects like worship or evangelism you can go to the Augsburg or Cokesbury catalogs and find something.

Yet, in referring people to catalogues of denominational publishing houses, I know that it is rare for the denominational identity in those resources to be anything more than skin deep. And it is rare that the denominational resource on a subject would necessarily be the best resource available. All too often denominational resources are knock-offs: a slightly adapted version of an approach whose real source and best expression is elsewhere. Why not read the original?

To take an extreme example, Jewish congregations are increasingly influenced by an approach to outreach that originates in seeker churches like Willow Creek. I suppose I could find resources for Jewish outreach that had the Christian references stripped out and a Jewish veneer added. But, on the whole, I would prefer to send a Jewish leader to Hybels or to the Harvard Business School case study of Willow Creek.

I do this because I think that a synagogue would do well to only borrow from such models after thinking through how they are particularly Christian and how they grow integrally out of evangelical Christian traditions that ought to raise questions for a synagogue. Reading the original, all this will be clear to a Jewish leader. Also, it has a power and a subtlety that a knock-off cannot match. (As an aside, Robert Senge's book on creating learning communities is a better, more powerful book than any of the books written about how to make churches or synagogues into learning communities.)

## **Adapting or Recreating Resources**

As I have worked with this more, I have moved closer to thinking that the key thing is to do a much better job of adapting resources, or even recreating them for their own circumstance.

This comes in part from my work at the Alban Institute directing a project in evaluation. When I phone people across the country about how well this resource or that has worked for them, I have noticed an interesting division. Some people tend to say "yes, but" while others say "yes, and." This is true in a way that is surprisingly independent of the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the resources being evaluated. The world seems divided between "yes but" and "yes and" people when it comes to resources.

Some people, when you ask them about how a resource worked will say "yes it is good in a way but it is not Methodist, or not for a small church, or not for a black church, not for a Canadian church, not from an urban church, or not from a large church." In contrast to this, some people say "yes this was good and we found a creative way to rewrite the exercises to work with a smaller group, or we realized that the group exercises were better done through Methodist small group methods." People even say "yes this was good in its way and the biggest thing it did for us was to show us that to be faithful to where God is leading us in this place we needed to create our own resource."

Seeing this pattern was for me freeing. It makes it clear that—in the end—the request for resources specific to certain kinds of churches is a dead end. Maybe the Southern Baptist Mission Board can still provide a fair range of resources specific to the Southern Baptists. But what about small southern Baptist churches? Small rural Southern Baptist churches? Small rural Southern Baptist churches in Canada? At some point, a resource center director will need to turn from finding a specific resource to helping a leader to adapt the resource.

In the early days of creating our Congregational Resource Guide, our team faced the question of how to handle this. Some argued that we should set up our Web site to make different resource suggestions at least for different sizes of congregations. At the time, we resisted this suggestion because it felt like it would enlarge what was already a daunting task of coming up with resource recommendations concerning dozens of different congregational issues and challenges. Trying to make resource recommendations for each size of congregation on each subject would multiply the work beyond our capacity. Keeping up with resource recommendations in more than 100 categories is enough of a task without saying that we will come up with separate sets of resource recommendations for small, medium, and large congregations in each of 100 areas (100 x 3), for seven or eight religious traditions (100 x 3 x 8), for African-American, Asian, Hispanic and Caucasian congregations (100 x 3 x 8 x 4), for conservative and liberal congregations (100 x 3 x 8 x 4 x 2). If we had tried to go down this road, I don't know which part of our team would have given up first—the resource people or the technology people—but clearly a gasket would have blown somewhere.

If this is true for our Congregational Resource Guide (CRG), it is even more true for the ecumenical resource center director. The CRG is primarily a virtual project so we don't need to buy and store all the resources the way most ecumenical resource center directors must.

Faced with the impossibility of making individual resource recommendations for each type and subtype of congregation, we realized that our main challenge must be on how to help groups adapt, use, and even recreate resources. There is an important place for specific resources. Canadian churches long for Christian education resources where their experience is visible. African-American churches long for and

need resources that recognize the specificity of their experience. Large congregations rightly say that most church resources presume uncritically the situation of the mid-sized congregation.

Yet congregations are amazingly creative. Done well, resourcing can support this creativity by conveying an attitude of possibility and by helping congregational leaders view "something that does not fit" as an invitation to look beyond the ready-made solution and ask what God is calling their congregation to do in this moment. In the heyday of denominationalism (from World War II until the 1980's), buying resources ready-made in specific denominational colors and patterns was seen as an act of faith. Yet the art of adaptation and recreation has lived on. It has lived on among religious educators. It has lived on among leaders of smaller congregations or African-American or Asian congregations who assumed that resources were not made for them and had to be critically appropriated. In the future work of those who help congregations with resources, far more can and should be done to encourage this capacity for adapting and recreating resources for specific situations and faith traditions.

In broader scope, this fits with our recognition from other sources that the skill of using resources is at least as important as the initial selection of the best ones. It also fits with the recognition—crystallized in the new census—that identity is not only hyphenated but multiply hyphenated.

### Ten Suggestions

1. **Quit feeling bad about not having a Lutheran book on strategic planning.** Turn your attention to creating material on adapting resources. How about a rack near the entrance to your resource center with a series of handouts on "adapting Methodist resources" or "adapting African-American resources." On each handout, list people in that tradition who could be contacted. This would both help with specific questions and serve to honor different traditions using the center.
2. **Don't apologize about the resources you have but be willing to help people who may be struggling with perceived limitations.** You can often do this by asking people about what has worked for them in other areas and what authors or publishers they have previously found useful.
3. **Develop policies.** To the extent that there are theological or ethical limits to resources you collect or the issues which you engage, it is best that these be articulated in writing by the governing board center. This helps to eliminate issues of personal prejudices among the staff and provides an opportunity for points of view to be expressed and balanced.
4. **Don't hesitate to counsel someone out.** After you have heard and acknowledged what someone wants, and after you have listened actively, don't hesitate to say that the resource center has decided not to collect resources expressing a certain viewpoint, endorsing certain practices, or discussing certain subjects. This is done most graciously when you can also direct someone to a place (and if possible a person) that can assist.
5. **Don't allow yourself to get stuck in a tug-of-war match with someone saying "yes, but" to your resource recommendations.** When someone

- has said "yes, but" to more than two of your resource recommendations, shift the conversation to inviting the person to articulate what has worked previously, what might work, and where such a thing might be found or how it might be adapted from somewhere else.
6. **When in doubt, be an active listener.** Remember that the ticket to a resource center is a question about resources. Sometimes people most want assistance thinking through an issue or challenge. Often when they get this assistance through active listening, the original resource question changes greatly or even disappears entirely.
  7. **Don't cover up for the religious specificity or minimize the denominational specificity of resources.** If that is what you believe, observe how to you it seems that Rick Warren's *Purpose-Driven Life* is shaped by Baptist sensibilities and invite the person to consider how it might be best used or adapted for use in another faith tradition.
  8. **Understand that your skill is as much in helping people to use well as it is in helping people to choose well.** In most cases, how a resource is used is equally important as the quality of a resource. A great book on outreach read by the pastor and never discussed is not as useful as a mediocre book reach by the congregation's board and discussed chapter by chapter.
  9. **Pick your battles.** Realistically using resources well, and especially adapting or recreating them, takes time and creative energy. These are in short supply in a tired, harried world. Recently I heard of the term "steering wheel curriculum" to describe a curriculum that you could prepare to teach by reading it on the steering wheel of your car while driving to church. As people with passion for using resources well, we will naturally find ourselves at war with these trends. We need to pick our battles.
  10. **Find ways to do resource work from your personal faith center.** Sometimes this may mean recommending resource from your own faith tradition, but more often this will be manifested in the question you brought to the use of a resource. If you find a way to be articulate about this you will invite the other person to be similarly articulate from a centered faith perspective.