



## The congregation as the village

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*This article is based on portions of Chapter 2 and the Epilogue of the book, *The Voice of Our Congregation*, (Abingdon Press, 2005), by Terry W. York of Baylor University and David Bolin, Minister of Music at the First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas. Chapter 2 and the Epilogue are among York's contributions to the book. The Epilogue appears here in its entirety.*

**W**e are all familiar with the African proverb “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” For the next several pages we will consider the possibility of the congregation being that village for the children in its midst.

In 2005, David Bolin and I co-authored the book *The Voice of Our Congregation*, encouraging congregations to look within for direction and resources when contemplating changes in worship and/or music styles. Too often, congregations immediately seek to import some “successful” method, style, or strategy from outside sources when the issue at hand is considered to be imperative. A sense of fear or urgency can cause people to do things they would never consider under normal conditions. That need not happen. A note of caution and reason must be sounded.

Our book calls upon each congregation to consider its integrity as an entity (its “voice”), related to like communities, yet autonomous in many ways. It makes sense for congregations to learn from each other, even to cooperate and covenant with each other. However, losing sight of their unique giftedness (their “voice”) in a desire to imitate or “clone” another congregation can cause a worshiping community to also lose focus on Christ. “What congregation should we mimic?” and “What style shall we import?” These are dangerous questions for a congregation. “Who are we?” “What is our giftedness?” and “What is our stewardship responsibility of that giftedness?” These are the better questions; questions that acknowledge a certain discipleship being prepared and developed within their midst. This is the village (congregation) owning its identity and responsibility. A congregation cannot become the nurturing village it should be for its children until its identity and its responsibility in this regard are fully understood and embraced.

Consider the following excerpt from *The Voice of the Congregation* (York & Bolin, 2005, p. 23-32). It is offered here as one way to describe or understand the congregational village.

**CHAPTER TWO:**

**THE VOICE OF POETS AND PROPHETS**

God places poet/prophets in every congregation. God speaks through these persons or groups of people when God chooses to do so. The beauty of it is that it is not always the same person or group on every issue. Therefore, one of the tasks or responsibilities of the congregation is to develop a sense of discernment. Discernment requires great humility on the part of everyone in the congregation, clergy and laity alike. We are not good at humility. It is easier to import music and worship styles than to discover and develop our own authentic expressions. Further, we can trust God's voice to always be right, but we cannot always trust God's will and promptings to be expedient. We cannot trust God to sign on to our agendas and schedules. God is not in our employ. We are to serve God and one another. Therefore, humility before one another and God is absolutely necessary if the voice of God is to be heard in the voice of the congregation. Interestingly, courage is needed as well; courage to speak, courage to listen, and courage to act. But remember, humility and courage are more closely related than are brashness and courage.

The very words "poet" and "prophet" speak of this strange combination of humility and courage. They also speak of timelessness and strength. The words suggest truth and wisdom that is God-spoken through the poet/prophet's speaking or writing. But, they also evoke visions of unusual people; hermits or strange, out-of-touch misfits. That is an understandable, but unfortunate stereotype. It is an important breakthrough in our understanding of how the Holy Spirit works in a local congregation when we come to realize that there are poets and prophets in our midst. They

are not "angels unaware"; they are familiar folks whom we know to be dedicated to God and the congregation. They can be trusted.

It is good for us to remember that rhyme can be bent to serve our lies and oratory can be bent to serve a shady agenda, but poetry and prophecy speak the truth and resist manipulation. Respected members of the congregation (truly respected, not just the loudest or those with the highest profile) do not bend and manipulate. They speak truth and resist manipulation or being manipulated.

The congregation does not elect poets and prophets. They are not, necessarily, to be found up front on Sunday morning. Look for them out

among the congregation. Often, there are several in a congregation and they seem to be able to articulate what the congregation is thinking at a deep level. The very fact that these people exist and function in this way is evidence that a congregation is an entity with a voice and that the voice is clearly present in these persons, even if they represent the "minority report." The voice is recognizable at a deep level within the congregation and is unique to that congregation. In

a real sense, finding the voice of the congregation is finding God's voice in the congregation. This realization does not diminish the prophetic role of the pastor or others on the ministerial staff, but it does speak to the fact that God can and does speak through individuals in the community of worshipers as much as God speaks through those who lead in worship. The role of the pastor includes helping his or her congregation understand the power of the Holy Spirit at work in their midst; the power, the call, and the resulting voice.

**FINDING THE VOICE**

There is great wisdom in a group of people called together by the Holy Spirit and bound together by their brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ. It simply stands to reason that a commu-

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nity of Christ-followers with this kind of congregational awareness would also have its own voice for worship. Some songs and worship styles will fit this voice and some won't. That's true of any voice. Authenticity is the dynamic here. New songs can be brought into this repertoire, but only if they speak the truth and sound it forth in the authentic voice. Something that is fake or pretend is not only apparent to God, it is apparent to all who hear it. Even the singer knows such a song and the singing of it to be shallow. The poets and the prophets in a congregation will sense whether or not the song, old or new, can authentically come from this voice. Don't assume that all resistance is stubbornness or ignorance. Resistance may simply be the "INAUTHENTIC" alarm going off.

It must be said here, of course, that not all of the angry, vocal people who push back against change represent the voice of God in our midst. Again, discernment is important. Communal discernment becomes more reliable as an increasing number of people in the congregation come to understand the concept of a congregational voice. This voice can be heard in much the same way an individual can hear his or her heartbeat – through quiet concentration on the internal. The "still, small voice" is not a fairy tale. God the Holy Spirit is real, but does not shout, personally or congregationally.

What does it mean when we say that a writer or a performer has finally "found their voice?" It means that there has finally emerged from within them an authenticity that makes their performance, their work, their contribution, something new and of value, indeed, a contribution, no longer simply imitation. Who they are begins to shine through their technical skill. We cannot borrow music or art of any form from someone else and claim it is ours or expect it to speak of our soul unless it connects with who we are and can authentically be expressed by our voice. This is especially true in our worship of

God. We give back to God what God has given us. This gift will be unique in its combination of what God has given us and what we (not someone else) have done with it. Why is it that we can stand before one painting and "feel" nothing and then move down the wall a few feet, stand in front of another painting and suddenly realize we are weeping? Both paintings may be by recognized masters. Both may be priceless. But one may not connect with who we are. When that is the case, it does not call to our voice, thus our voice does not respond.

**POSSESSION OF THE VOICE**

The congregation possesses a common or communal voice that is the sound of God in their midst. The voice possesses the congregation. God is in them and around them. Au-

thentic worship, worship that is initiated by the voice of God and is expressed in the voice of the congregation, worship that pulls us heavenward, is not bigger than life; it is as deep as life. It must, of course, be that particular congregation's life. The poets and prophets among us won't let us forget that fact.

Poets and prophets often operate outside prescribed rules and popular trends. Every congregation has those members who, whether or not they are formally

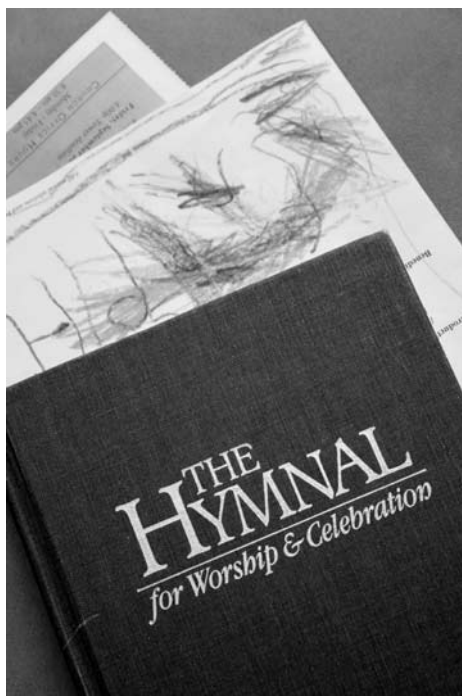
elected to places of leadership, are acknowledged as leaders who have the right to challenge popular impulses. That is an example of being aware, even subconsciously, that God's voice does not sound from the pulpit only, that God isn't restricted to our organizational charts and agendas. It is an example of what some traditions refer to as the priesthood of the believer. So, if the congregation is a voluntary gathering of priests, each with the capacity of speaking God's words, it stands to reason that that group would have a common (do not read "unison") voice. That voice is best expressed in songs (monophonic and polyphonic) that reflect its message, mission, and heart. The congregation may know a song

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the minister of music or worship leader doesn't know. Such a song is a treasure that they are not going to treat recklessly. They will not shout it above the songs selected for Sunday, but they will measure Sunday's songs against the treasured repertoire. The wise and caring minister will seek to learn the congregation's song(s) through the mining process of personal relationships and listening. At that point, the minister of music has "permission" to introduce new songs that, because they fit the voice of the congregation, will come to be treasured by them.

I was given some valuable advice years ago when I was considering taking a ministerial position in a church in Hawaii. A man in the inviting congregation told me that if I decided to accept the position, I should not change anything until I had learned to surf. As it turned out, I did not feel led to accept that position, but I have never forgotten the advice. He was telling me to be vulnerable, to "learn" the world and way of the congregation. He was telling me to take the time required to discern the voice of that particular congregation. When one has "learned to surf," any changes made will be in the context of that culture. The changes will be informed and cloaked in love. We will not come from our "mainland" to their "island" and attempt to make them like us. There is a voice and it is deep and quiet. It was humming before any of us arrived on the scene and it will be humming when we leave. Listen to the poets and prophets who express the voice most naturally, with a sense of reverence and respect for it.

I once became the associate pastor of a large congregation. Much of the day-to-day operation of the congregation's life and ministry was cov-



ered by my job description. It would be almost impossible to get to know everyone in that large community, but I needed to know the congregation's voice in order to fulfill my responsibilities properly. Though I wasn't the minister of music, I needed to know this particular community's "songs." I began my "voice lessons" by finding out who was the oldest living charter member of the 50-year-old congregation. Her name was Mrs. Davis. I called up one of her sons and asked if I could take his mother to lunch. I was delighted that he not only said "yes," but

that he offered to come along.

At lunch I asked Mrs. Davis a simple, but important question, "Mrs. Davis, what do I need to know about this church?" She talked more than she ate. I ate and listened. She and her son beamed as she related chapter after chapter of the congregation's story. I was hearing the story and beginning to discern the story's soundtrack; to recognize its song and its voice. She knew the poetry of it all; the little things that were important for me to know because they pointed to the big things for which I now had some responsibility. Her voice nearly sang as her eyes glistened. The word got out that I had had lunch with Mrs. Davis and that she did all the talking. The word got out that I wanted to know who these people were and what story I had been invited into, that I was purposefully tuning my ear to hear the voice of the congregation. Though we didn't use the exact words, the congregation knew that I knew they had a voice, a story, a song.

There were other similar lunches, but far beyond lunches, bits and pieces of the story were being offered to me as welcoming gifts; gifts from the congregation's poets and prophets, their wise men and women, the ones to whom the congregation listened for the final and practical word of

God in that setting. I felt a qualified permission to lead. I had been educated – not programmed, not handcuffed, but appropriately educated. Preach, if you will, from what you know. Sing, if you will, from what you know. That is why they have called you here, but if your words are to be effective, they must harmonize with the voice of the congregation.

The voice that we begin to discern in the congregation is a voice that has been tuned by years spent in the Bible, the hymnal, and the trenches. The words of the poets and prophets from across the ages have been sought out, heeded, taught, and sung in the midst of this congregation. Opinions and agendas have been allowed to roam freely in this arena, but the arena has parameters. God’s word through God’s poets and prophets (biblical and congregational), have set the parameters, giving focus, guidance, and an authoritative voice over the years. We learn through the biblical accounts and we learn through the life testimonies of the poets and prophets around us, who live their interpretations of the scripture, that the voice of the congregation and its biblical song possess us as much as we possess them. We know when our ventures into new music and new worship styles

have moved us beyond our authentic voice. We feel it in our bones, in our hearts. We often hear the admonition to congregations to move out of their comfort zone. That is a legitimate challenge because the voice of the congregation may well be a wider circle than the current circumference of their comfort zone. But we must never ask a congregation to move beyond the authentic expression that is their voice. Seldom do we hear a congregation say “no new songs.” More often we hear “not those new songs.” We must listen. We must lead. We must move forward. But we must not do so in disharmony with the voice of the congregation.

One of the characteristics of poets and prophets is that they are possessed by the message. When they hear God’s voice they can heed no other. We encountered this concept earlier. Let’s look a bit closer at it here. When a congregation hears God’s voice calling them back or forward to their authentic voice, some will choose to ignore the call. It is the poet/prophet(s) who will speak up against such ignorance (read that word carefully). The voice of the poets and prophets will remind the congregation of its voice and its responsibility to sound forth in subservience to God’s voice. God possesses





the congregation, individually and corporately. We are the Shepherd's sheep. The congregation does not possess its God. The voice of the congregation is obligated to say "yes" to the voice of God. The voice of God is still and small, but it exists in the hearts and heart of the congregation. We cannot escape it. We can ignore it and sing someone else's song, but we will be aware of the insincerity of such a song.

Finding the voice of the congregation is submitting our will to God's will, our way to the Shepherd's way. The song possesses us; we do not possess the song. We may want to sing higher, lower, faster, slower, newer, older, but "not my will, but thine be done" is our model.

Finding the voice of the congregation isn't just about music, just as worship isn't just about music. Finding the voice of the congregation is about bowing to God's will, loving God more than we love ourselves, and using the talents God gave us instead of acting as if we have the talents God gave someone else. To worship, work, and witness in the authentic voice of the congregation is to be a humble and grateful servant working with what we have been given in the field to which we have been sent. We are up to something questionable when we disguise our voice. We are trying to get out from under the requirements and responsibilities of who we are when we disguise our voice. For a moment we want to be someone else, so we hide the evidence that identifies us until the charade is over. To use our voice is to admit to who we are. That's true for individuals and for congregations. Are we not to worship in spirit and in truth? (John 4:23). Listen to the poets and the prophets in your congregation, be they few or many. The poet/prophet always calls us to speak, sing, and live the truth, back onto the path, forward on the Way. The song that is sung authentically from the voice of the congregation owns us. We do not own it. There you have it, one approach to identifying and describing a congregation, the congregation that

has an obligation to its children and young parents to be their "village;" to help them find their voice. The application possibilities for families are obvious: "Who are we to be as a family, them or us?" "Who am I to be, him, her?" Many of the comparisons and lessons of the congregational concepts transfer easily. Others may take a bit more thought and commitment, even courage.

Now let us consider something of what the congregational village might teach its children. Although children are present throughout the book, the Epilogue to *The Voice of Our Congregation* (York & Bolin, 2005, p. 111-116) focuses specifically on the congregation's responsibility to the child. The Epilogue is presented here in its entirety.

**The voice of poets and prophets will remind the congregation of its voice and its responsibility to sound forth in subservience to God's voice.**

**EPILOGUE**

Our stewardship of the voice of the congregation requires us to teach our children that there is such a voice. It requires us to help them know and discern the voice. Our stewardship of the voice of the congregation requires us to transfer ownership of the voice to our children as they mature in Christ and in churchmanship.

What, then, shall we teach our children?

Our children belong to God. Our parenting and teaching, therefore, are acts of stewardship. As stewards of these precious gifts from God, we are to train our children in the context of our obedience to God. This does not mean that we are to mold them into the image of God. We read in Genesis that God has already done that. Our additional attempts would border on the idolatry of creating an image of God. We are, however, to train our children toward Christlikeness. Do you see the difference? We are to train our children toward Christlikeness. There is an important distinction between molding our children into the image of who or what we want God to be and raising them up toward Christlikeness. Do we want our children to grow up acting like they are God Almighty or humbly praying to be more Christlike? Do we want them to use worship or to be transformed by worship? Do we want them

to pretend in worship or to be authentically present in worship? Of course, we want them to be authentically present in worship.

What shall we teach our children? We will answer that question here and now and then spend the next several pages explaining the answer. What shall we teach our children? The answer is this: Let us teach our children what we used to know, but have somehow forgotten. I apologize for any unintentional echoes of Robert Fulghum’s (1999) book, *All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*.

We have somehow forgotten that worship is about God and that God is worthy of the very best we have to offer. We have forgotten that what worship costs us is more important than how worship comforts us or how it serves our agendas. We should not lift up to God worship or any other offering that costs us nothing. Let us remember, and then teach our children, that if worship costs us nothing but is fashioned to comfort our needs and preferences, it may not be worship at all. We know that, but it seems we have somehow forgotten it.

Let us remember, and then teach our children, that a congregation is a community and that in a community we must learn to give and take, not just take. This includes singing songs that are the favorites of others, even if they are not our favorites. Let us remember, and then teach our children, the importance of humility and respect toward other people. Let us remember, and then teach our children, that God can and does speak through individuals in the congregation and through the congregation as a whole, as well as through the pastor. We know that, but many congregations and pastors seem to have forgotten it along the way.

In a community, some laugh and some cry. It shouldn’t always be the same people doing either one. Further, everyone shouldn’t be expected to laugh or cry at the same time. We know that, but somehow, in the context of a congregation’s

work and worship, we have forgotten it. So let us remember, and then teach our children, the importance of authenticity in worship rather than pretense.

Let us remember, and then teach our children, that we don’t know, and will never know, all there is to know about God. We seem to have forgotten that God is God, beyond formula, definition, and lists of do’s and don’ts. Let us teach our children that admitting there is more to God than we understand is not weakness on our part nor aloofness on God’s part. Rather, admitting that we don’t know all there is to know about God is an act of submission to our Creator and

King. It is the first step into the great mystery of God, a mystery that opens our hearts to growth rather than shrinking our hearts into indoctrination. We know, but have somehow forgotten along the way, that we should be suspicious of and watch out for those who claim to know all there is to know about God and who question the Christian faith of those who have questions.

Let us remember, and then teach our children, that Christian heritage and Christian tradition matter; that we didn’t invent Christ-

following or worship or church music. Let us remember, and then teach our children, that old paradigms are the foundation of what we do today, that tradition helps define us and gives us a story to take into the future.

In a time of racial profiling, suspicion, and fear, let us remember and then teach our children, “Jesus loves the little children of the world” (Warner & McGuire, 1860). Fear and hate will have to be overcome in order to accomplish this. Let us teach our children faith in God and confidence in the life and teachings of Jesus. Let us remember, and then teach our children, that the Bible is the sword of the Lord that pierces our hearts, not the sword of the self-righteous that pierces only the hearts of the “bad guys.”

Let us remember, and then teach our children, that forgiveness is a sign of strength, not

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a sign of weakness, that constraint is a sign of power. Let us teach our children to trust the truth of Jesus' upside-down teachings.

In a time of terrorism and war, let us remember and then teach our children, that Jesus' love is "a fountain flowing deep and wide" (*Deep and Wide*, n.d.). It never stops flowing. It covers the whole earth. It covers all sin. "Deep and wide, deep and wide, there's a fountain flowing deep and wide" (*Deep and Wide*, n.d.) and that Jesus' teachings must be believed and his love lived. Let us remember, and then teach our children, that Jesus loves our enemies as much as he loves us.

In a time of unbridled consumption of resources, let us remember and then teach our children, that "this is our Father's world" (Babcock, 1851-1901). Train their listening ears to the truth that "all nature sings and round us rings the music of the spheres" (Babcock, 1851-1901). Let us remember, and then teach our children, to "rest in the thought of rocks and trees, of skies and seas," that it was God's hand these wonders wrought," and that "all birds their carols raise" (Babcock, 1851-1901) (even the edible ones, and the ones whose nests get in the way of our expansion). Let us remember, and then teach our children, the importance of humility and moderation toward our planet and those with whom we inhabit this planet. Somehow, we have forgotten that much, maybe most, of what we are given, is given to us to share, not to consume. We have somehow forgotten, but let us remember and then teach our children, that sharing is not only Christlike and biblical, it is an investment in our future. Individuals and nations don't hate us for generosity, they hate us for greed. Sharing is a Christlike way of turning swords into plowshares.

Let us remember how, and then teach our children how, to learn from one another without being copycats. Let us remember the phrase our parents taught us, "I don't care if everyone else

is doing it," and then let us teach that phrase to our children. This will keep them from following other churches into imported, and thus meaningless, worship styles. It will teach them to say "no" to political and social groundswells that get in the way of true Christ-following. It will teach them to say "yes" to thinking for themselves in the context of the life, work, and teachings of Jesus. It will keep them in touch with the voice



of their congregation. We know all this, but somehow, along the way, we've forgotten.

Let us remember, and then teach our children, that life's poetry is as important as life's prose, maybe more so. This is more than teaching our children that play is as important as work. It is teaching them to see poetry in their work and in the diversity of humanity and in the beauty of nature and in the mystery of God. There are too many people in our churches who see their relationship to God as one of God's policemen, pointing out who is thinking and acting out of line. There are too many people in our churches who are invigorated only by what they are against. There is no poetry in their lives, only the prose of lists and labels: lists of what to do and what not to do, lists of who is right and who is wrong, lists of what sins are acceptable and what sins are not, labels that signify the other person's deficiency. There are too many people in our churches who are afraid of the Bible's poetry, focusing only on its prose, as they interpret it in the context of their own agendas. God spare our



children from a life of seeing the Bible and their faith as nothing more than a list of rules and a theology of works.

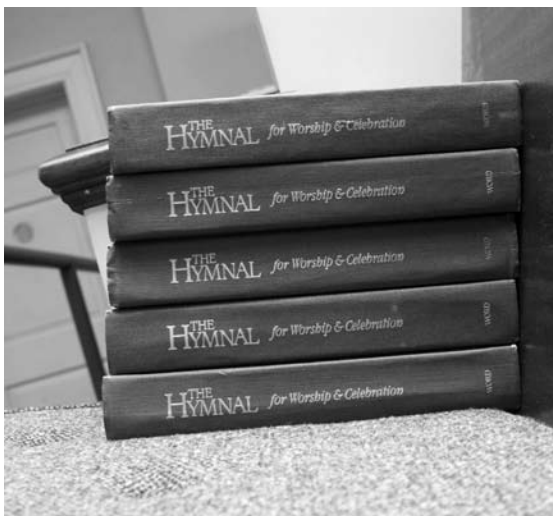
Let us remember, and then teach our children, while they still know how to play, that Sabbath is not sloth, but is, in fact, an act of obedience. We are not called to produce results in worship.

Therefore, we need not deny the voice of our congregation in order to accomplish something. Let us remember, and then teach our children, that being a workaholic not only fails to impress God, it is a form of idolatry, giving God's time to someone or something else. We know that, we've simply forgotten it along the way. Perhaps this thought is best expressed by saying we should let our children teach us about play, and imagination, and the need for naps (Sabbath).

Along those same lines, let us remember, and then teach our children, that silence is not something they should fear, rather it is a place to find themselves and God. Silence is a place to come clean with God. Let us teach them that coming clean before God is a momentous project. Let us teach our children to cherish silence when they bump into it and to create it when none is to be found.

Let us remember, and then teach our children, that the cross of Christ was not and is not painted red, white, and blue; that there is a difference between being a Christian and being an American, that patriotism and discipleship are not synonymous, that while we stand when we hear the National Anthem, we bow when we hear the voice of God. The voice of the congregation is to be in prayerful dialogue with the voice of God; silent after voicing prayer to hear the voice of God.

Let us remember that these precious young lives are not meant to be our clones, carry-



ing on our agendas. Rather, they belong to Jesus and we are to help them open their hearts toward Christlikeness, even if their Spirit-led life paths don't lead them toward the money, popularity, and comfort we would wish for them. Let us teach them that they are not to mimic another congregation's voice in an attempt

to make their worship profitable.

What shall we teach our children? The question causes us to examine our own Christ-following and worship in the deepest recesses of our own hearts. For, if we are to be authentic worshipers and disciples, we must teach from that depth. We will find ourselves teaching ourselves while we teach our children. There is nothing more frightening than a teacher who has ceased to be a learner, unless it is a messenger who has forgotten his or her voice, or a worshipping congregation that is pretending to be what they are not.

What shall we teach our children? Let us teach them what we used to know, but have somehow forgotten.

Dear God, let the things we shall teach our children bring us to our knees and to tears, crying for mercy and singing your praise in the authentic voice of our congregation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

God bless you as you seek to discover, recover, trust, share the good news in, and worship authentically in the voice of your congregation.

Thus ends the Epilogue and the book, *The Voice of Our Congregation*.

## CONCLUSION

It becomes apparent that focusing on what is being taught to its children will help a congregation stay in touch with its own identity and

mission. This is the nature of community. Good done within and for any facet or segment of the community enhances and enriches the whole of the community. Think on these things.

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## Application to the church

by Randall Bradley



Terry York's thoughtful and reflective piece offers broad application for the church or agency that is seeking to assist caregivers in the formation of their children, and it offers helpful insights into the church leadership and decision-making processes.

Following are specific ideas regarding the implementation of this article into the life of the local parish or into the mission and operation of an agency.

#### PARENT/CAREGIVER FORMATION

Often when working with parents and other caregivers, we assist with parenting problems and offer little help in the area of Christian formation; i.e., many parents are not able to guide their children toward appropriate goals and behaviors because they are not deeply grounded themselves. This article provides a discussion of some of the core values of Christian family units and could be used effectively as the backbone for a conference or study on parent/caregiver formation. This article could be discussed weekly within small groups and could form the core of a weekend retreat. Additionally, this article might be reprinted and distributed to parents who turn to the church for guidance with their children. A synopsis might also invite continued discussion by printing it as a series in a church or agency newsletter.

#### CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

As a means of initiating discussion among a Christian education advisory team, this article could inspire healthy dialogue about what is important in the Christian education of children and could serve as a broader philosophical template for some of the areas/issues that are sometimes neglected. For example, Christian education programs may teach biblical material, i.e., stories and scripture without giving adequate attention to broader issues such as respect, kindness to others, and reaching out to those who are different.

#### ANALYZING DECISION MAKING

Every church needs to reflect on how it makes decisions. Churches establish patterns that become the norm for congregational decision-making; however, these patterns may fail to reflect genuine Christian community. This piece serves as a call to think carefully about how decisions are made. Does the majority always rule in your church or organization? Should it? Do the loudest voices win in every discussion? Are church/organization-wide decisions made out of fear? Is change embraced without appropriate discernment? Are changes that affect the life of the church imported from other congregations without appropriate