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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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What Is Your Unconscious Intent?

Alex Cross, chief detective in the movie, *Along Came a Spider*, says to his assistant, "People do what they are!"

Trying to agree with Cross, the assistant replies, "Life experiences mold your thinking and behavior. You are what you do."

"No," the chief detective says, "You do what you are! What you are on the inside always comes out!"

The technical term for Cross's adage is "unconscious intent." This phenomenon operates in every sphere of human life. For example, why does a new pastor try to move the congregation toward a new set of priorities? A fresh eye often sees reality more clearly. But the new pastor also has a different *unconscious intent* than did the previous pastor.

Do churches as a whole have unconscious intent as well? Yes, and that makes developing a compatible pastor-congregation leadership team incredibly complicated!

The unconscious intent of pastor and people inevitably differs!

Every congregation has unconscious intent. This invisible guidance system exerts more power than the bylaws, the mission statement, or any other document. Across the decades, congregations do what they are. What they are on the inside always comes out.

The core lay-leadership group is the custodian of that unconscious intent (that small group of influential elected and unelected laypersons who call the shots and can veto any new idea). This core lay-leadership group is a filter for truth, determining what the congregation believes and disbelieves, and controlling "how we do things around here."

Unconscious intent sometimes causes the core lay-leadership group to neglect the truth by focusing on the truth. Example: Some core lay-leadership groups retain a focus on ministries essential to the congregation's effectiveness three decades ago—and fail to provide ministries essential to today's circumstances.

Ancient "marks of the church" call for five ministries in every congregation:

- *Kerygma* (proclamation)
- *Koinonia* (community/fellowship)
- *Diaconia* (service)
- *Didache* (teaching)
- *Leiturgia* (worship/communal prayer).

Yet, one of those five is often more crucial to a church's ministry effectiveness than the other four *in a particular decade*—while another of the five is crucial to ministry effectiveness three decades later.

What if unconscious intent blinds the core lay leadership to that fact? They confidently lead the congregation forward to mediocrity or extinction.

This temptation to neglect the truth by focusing on the truth is more obvious in the hindsight of a congregation's history than in a congregation's present-day circumstances.

Examples:

- Prior to the Protestant Reformation, the 15th century Roman Catholic Church neglected the truth of Bible study by focusing on the truth of church traditions.
- The 18th century Church of England neglected the truth of Bible Study, personal experience with God, and caring about hurting people by focusing on the truth of church traditions enforced by a state church.



- Every renewal movement in history—from Martin Luther to John Wesley to current efforts in mainline denominations—sings a different verse of the same song: the tendency to neglect today’s truth by focusing on yesterday’s truth.

Every pastor has unconscious intent. Across the decades, pastors do what they are. What they are on the inside always comes out.

Some pastors focus primary energies on community-service (*Diaconia*)—while paying attention to the other four to a lesser extent. Some pastors focus primary energies on preaching (*Kerygma*). Some pastors focus on caring for members (*Koinonia*). Some pastors focus on ministries with children and youth (*Didache*). Some pastors focus on *Leiturgia* (worship/communal prayer).

The big question: which of these five most helps the pastor’s congregation connect people with Christ in this community at this point in history? Answered wrongly, the pastor neglects the truth by focusing on the truth.

The congregation and pastor blend their unconscious intents to create ministries in their community.

A few months or a year after a new pastor arrives, the “honeymoon phase” ends. Then, the “getting to know you” phase begins. During the next two-to-six years (the larger the church, the more years in this phase), the core lay-leadership group begins learning the pastor’s unconscious intent, and vice-versa.

In a good pastor-congregation match, compatibility emerges as the hopes and dreams of the two unconscious intents learn to live together.

In a bad pastor-congregation match, the incompatibility of those two unconscious intents results in growing estrangement and eventual divorce (the pastor relocates to another congregation).

The following seven sources of conflict are among the most common during these two to six years: (1) how to ask for and spend financial contributions, (2) sex and sexuality, (3) worship styles, (4) clergy leadership style—over-controlling, laissez faire, etc., (5) old versus new organizational structures, (6) a membership-growth attitude versus a church-survival attitude, and (7) internally focused ministries (taking care of our own) versus externally focused ministries (enthusiastically reaching out to the unchurched).

As they blend their unconscious intents, pastors and core lay-leadership groups that achieve compatibility learn to tolerate ambiguities. William McElvaney told a story from his experience as a student minister:

One of his duties was to visit convalescents and shut-ins. His list included two sisters who had lived together for many years—Ms. Godby and Ms. Godby.

During his November visit, one sister invited him into her room, quietly closed the door, and said in hushed tones, “I think my sister is trying to poison me.”

McElvaney’s first inclination was to protest. But he asked why she thought that. The reply: “She spends so much time in the kitchen, and I’ve never smelled those aromas before.” McElvaney offered a prayer for well-being and went on his way, hoping for the best.

When he visited in December, the other Ms. Godby came to the door and said, “I have a surprise for you. I’ve made some Christmas brownies, just for you.”

McElvaney replied that he wasn’t hungry right now.

But she insisted: “I made these especially for you, and you have never tasted any brownies like these before.”

He thought of three possibilities: If I don’t take one and they are poisoned, I save my life. If I do take one and they are not poisoned, I enjoy a delightful treat. If I do take one and they are poisoned, I may become one of the most undistinguished martyrs in Christian history.

McElvaney said, “I am happy to report that I took a brownie and lived to tell it.”

As clergy and core lay leaders attempt to mesh their unconscious intents toward a positive future for their congregation, they cannot escape months of ambiguity, complexity, uncertain outcomes, and the need for greater clarity. These are major construction components of the road to effective ministry in their community.

A variety of congregational planning tools are available to help facilitate this complex blending process, download free of charge a copy of a one such planning process (www.TheParishPaper.com).

Effective pastors and lay-leadership groups become as conscious as possible of their unconscious intents.

Richard Dunagin tells the story of a Russian Rabbi who became discouraged. One evening he took a long, aimless walk. Without realizing where he was, he strolled into a military compound. A guard suddenly confronted him with, “Who are you and why are you here?”

The old Rabbi, startled by the stern questions, replied, “What?”

The guard said more loudly, “Who are you? Why are you here?”

The Rabbi blurted out, “How much do they pay you a month?”

After the guard asked why he wanted to know, the Rabbi replied, “Because I need someone to ask me those two questions every day! Who are you? Why are you here?”