



Healthy congregations act flexibly and creatively

By Bishop Larry Wohlrabe

Exodus 18 contains one of my favorite leadership stories in the Bible. The children of Israel, having escaped from Egypt, are encamped near Mount Sinai for an extended time. Moses, their God-ordained leader, seems to be in charge of everything—even settling their petty squabbles.

Each day people come to Moses, begging him to settle their disputes with one another. During this time, Moses' father-in-law Jethro (a foreigner, by the way!) comes for a visit. He observes his son-in-law growing wearier by the hour. "What you are doing is not good," Jethro interjects. "You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." (vv. 17-18)

So Jethro proposes a creative solution: Moses needs to share leadership by enlisting others ("able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain," v. 21) to help him govern the people. Moses takes Jethro's advice—and it worked beautifully.

But why, I wonder, didn't Moses himself come up with such a solution? Why couldn't Moses be creative enough to generate this idea? The text of Exodus 18 doesn't tell us, but I suspect it's because Moses was so weary and uptight that he had developed tunnel vision; he had become rigid and brittle. Tension robbed him of the vision to see another way of doing things.

Stress and anxiety do that to us as individuals. We feel pain or angst, and we tighten our muscles. Pretty soon a dull, tension headache sets in, and a mental fog settles over us. We're sluggish, "stuck," no longer quick on our feet.

The same goes for congregations. Congregations that are highly stressed (by unmanaged conflict) or anxious (about any number of things—including their own survival) grow dull, rigid, and brittle. They lose their capacity for creative thought or nimble action. They lock themselves into tired old routines and fall back on the Seven Last

This is the sixth of an 11-part series on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

Words of the Church: "but we've always done it that way."

Healthy congregations are flexible. They see change as a manageable process—an adventure, even. Rather than blaming or attacking others, people in healthy congregations invest energy in problem solving. They're willing to learn and confident that things can change for the better.

Healthy congregations are creative. They make room for exploration, take time for innovation. They bounce back from adversity quicker. Realizing that they don't have all the wisdom in the world, they ask for help—they bring in resource persons from the outside (like Jethro, the foreigner, giving wise advice to his world-weary son-in-law!)

Healthy congregations are not deadly serious or uptight about everything. They have a sense of humor and a "lightness of being." You sense it when you walk through their doors. There may even be a little "holy mischief" afoot that keeps folks guessing, on the edge of their seats, wondering what's coming next!

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Think about your own experience of stress and anxiety. What bodily symptoms tell you that you're feeling tense? How does tension thwart your own flexibility and creativity?
2. In what areas of your congregation's life do you detect brittleness or rigidity? How is this holding you back from being faithful in God's mission?
3. What is the most creative venture your congregation has tried in the last five years? Recall a time when your church responded nimbly and flexibly to changing circumstances.

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