



## Three Congregations

© 2007 by Gary Simmons, Th.D.

There is a phenomenon associated with the internal psychology of a church community that is indicative of the minister-centric church. This phenomenon, sometimes called the 80% / 20% rule or Pareto's Principle<sup>1</sup>—where 20% of the congregation provides 80% of the resources—is characteristic of a church dominated by a family social system.

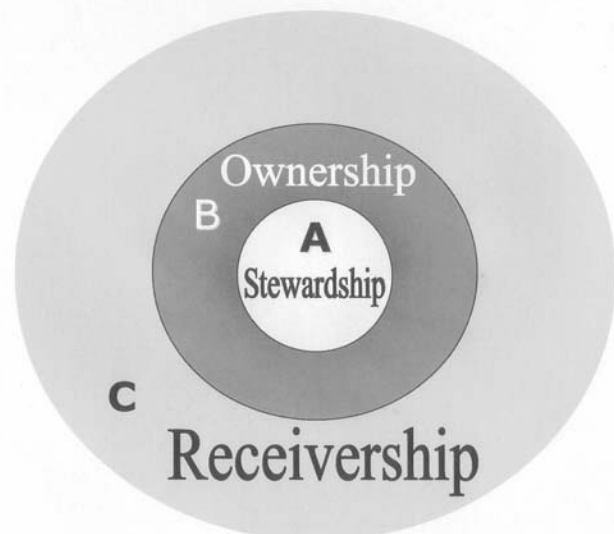
Regardless of size (Family, Pastoral, Program, Corporate, or Mega) there are typically three nested congregations—three distinct part / whole systems (holarchies) or cultural dynamics, each possessing unique attributes and each having specific needs in their relationship to the minister and other church members.

*Congregation A* (cA) is the congregation defined by the relationship between the minister and the board of trustees of the church. Their cultural identity is one of *stewardship*. This group is socially and psychologically different from any other group in the church.

*Congregation B* (cB) is the 20% of the total congregation that provides 80% of the resources needed to fund and energize the organization (financial support, meaningful

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1906, Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto created the distribution of wealth in his country, observing that two percent of the wealth. Later, quality management pioneer, Joseph M. Juran, calling it the principle of the “vital few and the trivial many,” something is always responsible for 80% of the result: the 80/20 Rule. (Accessed online: <http://management.about.com>)



involvement, and critical feedback). Their cultural identity is *ownership*. Their presence and participation underwrites the operations of the church. By comparison, *Congregation C* (cC) is the remaining 80% of the community. Its cultural identity is one of *receivership*. Those in this group are not as concerned with organizational issues. They are present to be fed, nurtured, and supported by the church community.

These three congregations and their corresponding relational dynamics form an interlocking matrix of cultural and social imperatives that govern the internal psychology of the community. The following is a topology of each cultural system, their interrelationship, and systemic behavior (the devil in the demographics) when triggered by unmet expectations or needs typical in the pastor / flock model of ministry.

### **Congregation A & the Culture of Stewardship**

**Congregation A** (the minister and board) has two basic needs linked to its cultural identity: 1) it needs to have all of the money necessary to take care of business; and 2) it needs to have those in cB happy with how things are. When there is an abundance of money and praise for how the leadership is functioning, the relationship between the minister and board is generally harmonious and collaborative. However, when there are financial issues, such as declining funds or attendance, or when established members become critical of the minister and threaten to leave or withhold their support, tensions arise.

### **Congregation B & the Culture of Ownership**

**Congregation B** is the relationship between the minister and the inner circle of established members who provide 80% of whatever is necessary to support both the community and the organization. They also have two basic needs linked to their cultural identity of ownership: they need to know that they are *valued* by the minister; and that their presence matters in the community. Those in cB are givers and receivers. There is an intrinsic benefit associated with their involvement in the church. Giving is receiving.

On a deeper level, however, there is often an unconscious expectation that what is received will come in the form of some tangible evidence that their presence (and giving) matters in the life of the minister. Because the social system is structured to replicate familial patterns within the community, emotional ties and interconnectedness ostensibly is projected onto the minister / congregant relationship. The minister is often in the role of surrogate parent in a church dominated by family system dynamics.

### **Congregation C & the Culture of Receivership**

The most distinguishing attribute of cC is that they are primarily *receivers*. They come for the “loaves and fishes”. They are the tippers, not the tithers. Their energetic contribution is only 20% of what is required to keep the organization functioning and yet, their numbers represent 80% of the community at large. In this group, there is a low tolerance for conflict of any kind. The moment their church experience becomes reminiscent of their family of origin they exit the system. This explains why churches with *drama* have a high turnover of first-timers. Even under normal circumstances, it is not uncommon for 90% of those in cC to move on within a year. We can appreciate this because it is cC’s nature to *receive*. Once a need is met, or the belly is full, or the soul mate is found, individuals in this group are likely to move on.

### **Dynamics of Congregation B**

Caring is a natural extension of ownership. When you care about something or someone, you are invested in and concerned for the well-being and health of that which is valued. In addition to these ties that form the stable network of reliable stakeholders within the church, there are the emotional bonds of intimacy tethered to the minister and his or her role as primary care-giving in the social system. In the minister-centric church, the minister will—or is expected to have—a care-giving relationship with everyone in cB.

A person's gift of time, talent and treasure also represents an unspoken and unconscious entitlement—what is given will maintain or enhance one's connection to the minister. To the extent that these bonds are preserved and repaired when necessary, mutuality and commitment are demonstrated. However, for whatever reason, if someone in cB has cause to question of the congruence between their giving and receiving, tension arises between the individual(s) and the minister. An unequal exchange between what is given and what is expected is often associated with not feeling valued, appreciated or heard. The minister rarely knows what someone's validation needs to look like in order for them to feel appreciated. For some, all that is needed is a smile or a gentle touch. Others may be inordinately needy, requiring the minister's time and personal attention in order to feel that their presence (giving) matters. For this reason, criticism from members of cB directed toward the minister should be understood as symptomatic of unmet expectations linked to the need for connection, intimacy or validation. These individuals are likely to "test" the integrity of the relationship by packaging their concern, issue, or need in the form of an accusation or a judgment. If the minister becomes defensive or needs to be "right" they fail the test. The test may be about: *do I matter to you?* rather than the content of the issue. A failed test contributes to the evidence gathering tactics of a disgruntled person or group. While this is an oversimplification of the more complex dynamic in the minister/ congregant relationship, it can be generally asserted that tension in cB mirrors a real or imagined disconnect between the minister and those in cB.

## Dynamics of Congregation A

The minister / board relationship is complicated by the fact that the minister and board have dual roles: the minister is both the pastor to individual board members and employee of the church; the board is both a part of the congregation as well as employer of the minister. When a new board member enters cA, they likely experience culture shock. Having come from cB where they have been insulated from the responsibilities of stewardship, they must now contend with objectifying their relationship with the minister in order to properly assume the responsibility of trustee. The

awkwardness of dual roles often exacerbates the group's capacity to deal effectively with fluctuations in financial support and the attrition of established members.

Imagine that you are a new board member. You are delighted and honored at being selected by the minister and the board. You agreed to board service because you love the church and you care deeply about its well-being. Now imagine that you are on the board, and like many churches, you are faced with declining funds. You begin to notice how first-timers don't become second-timers. Add to this some concern over friends leaving the church. How do you feel now? What do you do with that discomfort?

Now from a different perspective, imagine you are the church's new minister. You are filled with energy, enthusiasm, vision, and a love for people. You are an excellent speaker, a gifted writer, and have a master's degree in business management. In a previous life you were a corporate executive. Fast forward and imagine coming to a time when finances are a concern. How do you feel when there is tension around money or when attendance is an issue? What do you do with your discomfort?

People instinctively separate from whatever is the perceived source of their discomfort. If you are a board member in cA you may resent the situation and the underlying tension you are forced to deal with. You may think: *this is not what you signed up for when I agreed to serve on the board*. And because you can't abdicate your responsibility to deal with troublesome issues, you begin to separate from others including the minister. You may unconsciously wonder if the minister is doing everything possible to keep people happy or to grow the church. You may recall a past conflict or a disagreement that seems connected to someone who no longer attends church. At the same time you feel uneasy within yourself, guilty for having thoughts about whether or not the minister is doing a good job. Wanting to be helpful you may discuss the importance of raising the prosperity consciousness of the members, or recommend that the minister spend more time in the office, perhaps keep a log of calls and visitations, or suggest that she check into why some established members have left the church.

If you are the minister in cA under these circumstances, you may become defensive if your board implies that the decline is linked to your performance. You may become judgmental of your congregation, sensing that the problem is a lack of commitment. Unconsciously, you too may begin to gather evidence—linking micro episodes of past moments to needy or demanding congregants that perpetuate a lingering culture of dysfunction—all the while secretly feeling unappreciated. As a result, you may have difficulty resisting the temptation to make the board your enemy.

### The Problem is Cultural

Given this particular glimpse into how cA manages tension, what future can you see unfolding? And, what is the real underlying problem?

Left unchecked, the minister / board partnership will degrade. Mutuality and collaboration will wane. While part of the problem is *how* the minister and board manage tension—by trying to separate from it, only to separate from each other—the other contributing factor is the culture itself. Because cA's identity is embedded in the role of stewardship, declining funds and attendance trigger alarm. Identity is entangled in having not enough. But more importantly, the situation (decline) is driving the relationship. The well-being of cA and its capacity for coherence is linked to an external qualifier. In other words, cA has confused itself with its experience. Its well-being is dependent upon what it has or what happens in the outer, rather than a clear sense of vision and purpose. Vision and purpose is about being who you have come here to be, not about what you have.

The pivotal issue is how a particular culture relates to tension when it arises. Do they push away their discomfort and then attach it to something or someone in their experience, or do they stay connected, embrace the tension, explore it, and then let their experience awaken their capacity to demonstrate *who they have come be?* Without an understanding of how the culture of cA eclipses the interpersonal dynamics within the minister / board

relationship, the culture of the entire church community escapes scrutiny and remains intact. The community and the organization perpetuate the systemic dysfunction of being driven by external circumstances.

### **The Egalitarian Social System—the Community Centric Dynamic**

At a deeper level, the cultural dynamics of cA and cB are rooted in the social system where the structure for intimacy and care-giving is patterned after familial dynamics. In an egalitarian system, intimacy and care-giving is a function of the community rather than the primary role of the minister. Pareto's principle jumps to a higher orbit where 20% of the congregation provides 80% of the pastoral care and support needed to meet the needs of the cC. The culture of cB changes from one of ownership to *servant leadership*. While giving and receiving are still a currency in the social system, it is not associated with maintaining or enhancing intimacy with the minister. The social order does not orbit the minister, but rather encompasses cC. Giving and receiving is all about ministering to cC. Consequently, a new cultural matrix emerges as Congregation C partitions into two distinct groups—the culture of receivership and the culture of *discipleship*.

In the community-centric church, the value of belonging and the organizational structure of voting member are clearly differentiated. When someone joins the church (moves from cD to cC) they enter a discipleship program—a deepening of their relationship to their own spiritual journey through education, service, and spiritual practice. In time, discipleship may lead to membership in the organization (cB) and meaningful influence in shaping the mission and vision of the church.

These cultural shifts affect the cultural identity of cA. While the function of stewardship remains, the cultural imperative of cA is grounded in the purpose of the organization rather than its circumstance. This shift creates a new framework for dealing with the challenges and opportunities of ministry. Situations are view as feedback to a creative process rather than problems to solve.

