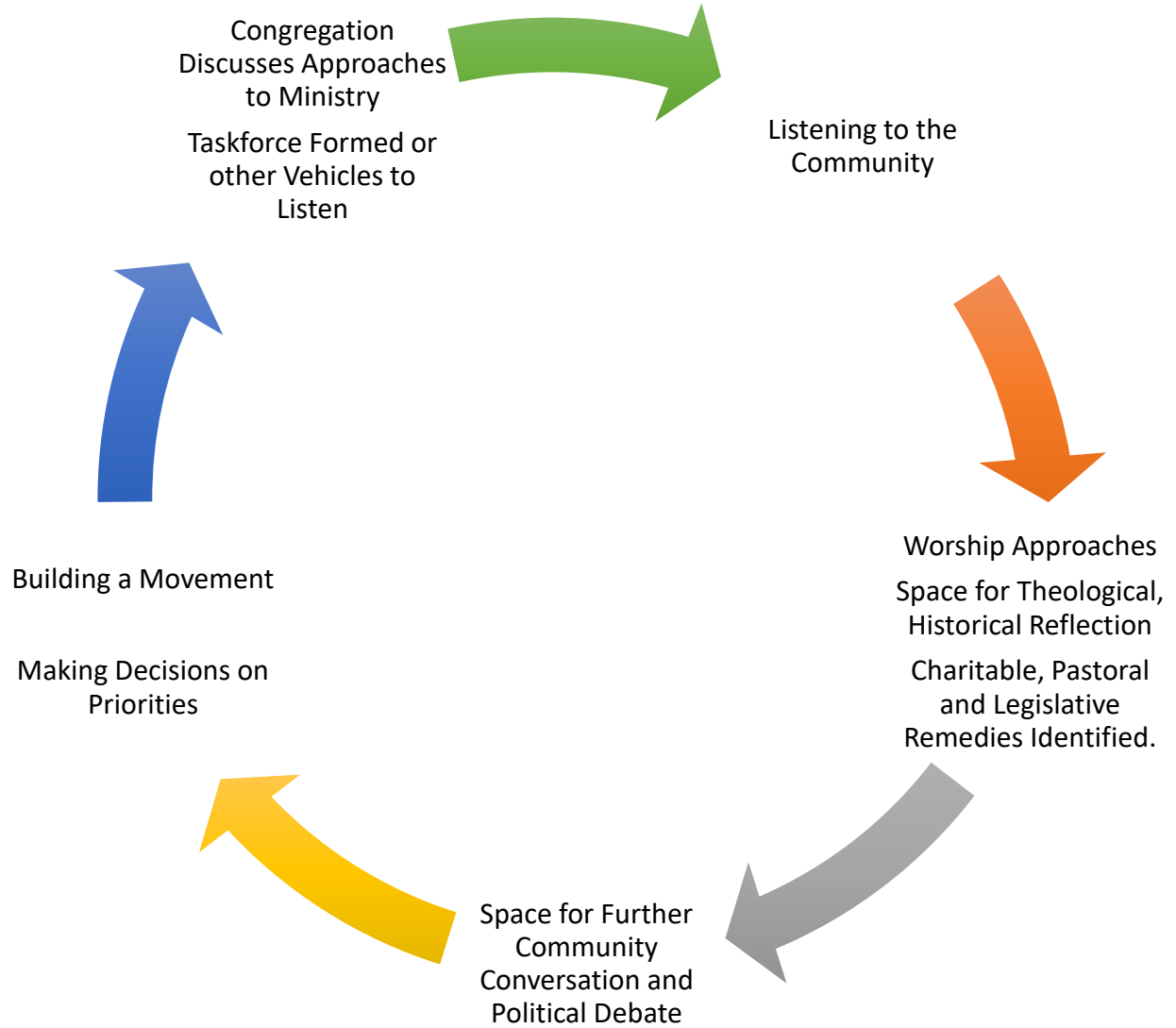


BRIDGING THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE POSSIBLE MODEL FOR MINISTRY



BRIDGING THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE

The Bridging the Urban Rural Divide Conference has gathered as consultants to advise a congregation about how they might do better ministry in their community and meet human needs. The following model proposed to the Conference for its consideration. The Congregation asks what is good about their approach and what might be better improved?

CONGREGATION DISCUSSES APPROACHES TO MINISTRY

Your congregation remembers the good old days when people came to church because it had a big Sunday school and wonderful music. Attendance, however, has declined and finances are strained. Pressure mounts to get more people to come to church to solve the church's problems. Other members believe the church should reach out to the neighborhood and meet the people who are there. The first goal in their view is not to bring them to church but to bring the church to them and listen well. A few parishioners came to this conclusion after spending several months delivering food to people who were housed in nearby motels with no kitchen facilities. They also discovered a few of their fellow parishioners lived in those motels.

Video clip:

https://www.facebook.com/NewYorkStateCouncilofChurches/posts/1633320600065764?notif_t=feedback_reaction_generic¬if_id=1500303000040792

Given this reality, a debate ensues at a Council meeting where some say the church should take care of their members before reaching out to others. Others think that the church should be out meeting people in the community and attending to their needs first. They ask the pastor to call on legislators to increase funding for hunger programs and homeless assistance. Others counter that the pastor and the church should stay out of politics.

What should the church do?

A decision is made to not resolve the disagreement but live with the tension. A decision is also made to set up a way for congregants to learn more and build relationships without taking sides on this disagreement. A taskforce, comprised of 9 people and the pastor, is formed to facilitate the relationship building process. Members of the Taskforce represent different perspective in the congregation. It also includes a couple of non-members. Members assume different organizing roles. The Taskforce is charged with personally meeting with people in the church and out in the community one on one and in small groups. They will also encourage other parishioners to go with them to have these conversations.

Opening questions:

Should the church proceed forward with the Taskforce before resolving the disagreement about the purpose of the church in the congregation?

Is there a better and more informal way to reach out to the community instead of a Taskforce? Perhaps a crisis or opportunity of some sort becomes a catalyst to get a significant group of people together to do ministry. The Taskforce might get in the way and ends up having a gate keeping function. Maybe we do both?

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

Taskforce members begin to meet people in the community while listening to the concerns and struggles of people in the congregation.

The pastor, careful to preserve confidentiality, reports she has been approached by several parishioners spending more than 50% of their income on housing. In addition, some have high costs for childcare. One person she believes is close to bankruptcy. One of the parishioners breaks down at a Taskforce meeting and confides their struggle.

Some Taskforce members attend a zoning board meeting where commissioners are considering an application from a developer who has proposed building an affordable housing development in town. Some neighbors complain that the development will destroy their property values because it will attract the wrong people to their neighborhood. A few of the complaining neighbors go to your church---one of whom is an especially large giver.

Task Force members meet with CEO's of several local companies who say that they are really struggling to find enough people to work in their factory. The starting hourly rate is 18 an hour plus benefits. When asked why it is such a struggle, they complain that half of the last group of applicants fail a drug test while others do not show up for the interview. One company tells you out of 100 applicants they could only make one hire and still have many vacancies.

One CEO says they have had good success hiring refugees from a nearby town. Their employees, however, don't always have reliable transportation and must rely on one of the workers to drive in a car pool. One week, Taskforce members learn, the driver of one of the cars got sick and the workers in his car pool could not get to the job site for over week.

A re-entry counselor from the local prison tells the Taskforce there are prisoners getting out on parole who needs jobs. He talks about the vocational programs they have in the prison.

The congregation meets with members of a local union who are on strike against one of the companies in town. The president of the union is a member of the congregation.

A family in the congregation is worried about their mom who is in a nursing home. They have spent down all their assets and now rely on Medicaid to pay their nursing home bills. They explain that they are afraid about proposed cuts to the Medicaid program in the Congressional legislation.

A family in the church reports that their son was picked up for selling drugs and landed in the county jail. They come to the pastor's office looking for money for bail and help to find an attorney who will defend him. Coming up short on bail money, the son remains in the County jail for several months pending trial.

Members of the Taskforce decide to attend the monthly meeting of the county Republican Party with several parishioners who are active in the organization. Frequent complaints are made about high property taxes.

A group of people in town have been gathering outside a local Congressman's office to protest proposed cuts to health programs. The pastor shows up at the rally and speaks up as several of your fellow parishioners cheer her on. Based on this experience, these parishioners decide to join a statewide organizing effort to defeat the health care legislation and publish what

they are doing in the church newsletter. They cite several denominational statements urging people to defeat the health care bill.

A group of parishioners gather for their weekly church breakfast and Bible study and use the occasion to grumble that their church and its pastor are getting way too political and should stick with the Gospel. Two other parishioners strongly disagree and wonder how the church can possibly preach the Gospel and not attend to people's needs for health care.

Questions:

Imagine you are on the Taskforce. What do you hear?

How does the Taskforce gather up these conversations and describe what they have seen and heard with the congregation?

Two groups of people form—one to deal with the health care crisis and another to work on a creative partnership to help employers find more workers. Some taskforce members feel like the church is not ready to act without further study. Other feel the Taskforce should just bless these efforts and get out of the way. What is the way to go?

WORSHIP AND THEOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL AND CONSIDERATIONS

Worship

One Sunday morning, the pastor preaches a sermon which describes some of the tensions the church has encountered as they meet the community.

During the prayer time, space is allowed for people to express their concerns for others and ask for God's healing and guidance. One person asks for prayers for the zoning board to approve the new housing development.

Together, everyone gathers around the communion table. The pastor explains that communion is emblematic of a good meal where all are included.

At the end of the service, in the greeting line, two parishioners tell the pastor they don't come to church to hear this political stuff and should stick to telling feel good inspirational stories preaching on the Bible. They also did not like the prayer about the pending zoning board decision. The pastor knows one of those parishioners has his son in jail awaiting trial for drug dealing. Two other parishioners thank the pastor for having the courage for telling it like it is and encouraging the church to get out of itself.

Later that week, at the urging of the union president, the pastor conducts a worship service on the strike line. The worship service is covered in the local paper.

Questions:

What is your understanding of what a preacher should do and say from the pulpit? How do you preach with a congregation where there are strong disagreements about whether the pastor should speak to social issues or avoid them altogether?

What function does worship have to help a congregation imagine how to be a community and to meet people's needs?

Theological and Historical Exploration

The Taskforce convenes a Lenten study series with the pastor who leads a reflection.

The Taskforce has invited several people from the community with whom they have spoken and church members to tell their story. Care is taken to listen to a variety of experiences.

What needs are identified? Are there immediate needs which require attention? What legislation do people talk about the most that needs to be changed or avoided?

As the group considers what they hear, there is a theological reflection.

One statement examined is that God's revelation is made known in the particulars of the incarnation. We must be careful not to let political labels like "red" or "blue" or "liberal" or "conservative" "rural" or "urban" get us disconnected with reality and prevent us from listening to the concrete needs of people in our parish and community.

Several offer an oral history of what it was like to grow up in the Great Depression.

The pastor reflects that we sometimes have a romanticized view of the past by cultivating a belief that we were better off when churches, through their charity, did a more adequate job of caring for people before the government intervened. While the church has a charitable role, churches historically called on the government to assume work that the church could not bear alone. This is illustrated in the experience of congregations in the Mississippi Delta during the Great Depression who advocated for the New Deal. Another reflection looks at the historical support the denomination of the congregation has offered to the union movement.

Questions:

Where in our history has the church called on the government to intervene? Do any of us rely on government assistance? When are charitable efforts of the church more appropriate than Government intervention? How do we decide what is more important?

How should the church address those needs? Should the emphasis be placed on personal salvation and transformation? Or should the focus be on impacting doing justice by the church mobilizing members to change laws and social policy?

What would God call us to do as a congregation? It is it our place to do anything?

SPACE FOR POLITICAL AND MORE COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

A local advocacy group for health care reform approaches your pastor and asks if the church would host a forum to discuss pending health care legislation. They would like to invite the local Congressperson to attend and field questions. The pastor brings the request to the Task Group. The Task Group agrees to move forward and decides to begin with a prayer service followed by a dispassionate presentation of the pending legislation followed by comments from the Congressperson and someone who sees it differently.

The League of Women Voters asks the pastor if they could host a candidate forum in the sanctuary. There is a debate about whether holding such a forum would compromise the churches 501 C3 tax exemption. Some argue that the church should stay out of politics. Other

argue that the church is a very appropriate place to hold political conversations. The county republican organization is all for it. The county democratic organization is not so sure.

Questions:

Should the church say yes to one or both of these requests? What are the rules on 501C3's anyway?

MOVEMENT BUILDING

The church is faced with several choices about how to be responsive to what they hear.

The Congregation could sign on with the campaign to institute a single payer health program, Medicare for All. Organizing meetings are held weekly at the church.

The church decides to initiate a community conversation process with Interfaith Works of Central New York.

After the proposed housing project in town failed, the church could dedicate some of its own property to build a 100-unit development.

The church could hold an annual ecumenical revival to help people grow in personal and social holiness.

A church decides to adopt a local public school to tutor kids and advocate for its adequate funding on the local and state level.

The church agrees that the pastor has the freedom of the pulpit to preach and teach the word of God as he or she sees appropriate. The role of the pastor is not to sell people on his point of view but to provoke people to think more deeply about their own faith and discipleship.

The church will make available alerts to help people become aware of pending legislation and how they could act.

The church decides to be a sanctuary congregation.

Questions:

Can you think of other initiatives?

In light of what you have heard, which one of these initiatives might get the highest priority? How will congregants and community members get involved? How many people do you really need to go forward?

What is your picture now of what the church should do and be in bridging the Urban-Rural Divide?