

Norms: Every Church Has Them

Norms are largely unconscious for us most of the time. Our purpose in the evening of norm identification is to work together to make our norms conscious. If they are under the table (not in a sinister way), we are going to try to put them on top of the table with those we are already aware of. There we can look at them and analyze them. We can even decide what is healthy and worth keeping, and what we may want to jettison as unhealthy or unhelpful.

A parish is a type of family system. Its parts are unavoidably interconnected, and together these parts form a whole. It is vital that we think systemically about our congregations. No one person is “the cause of all the trouble around here.” No pastor is “the reason we did so poorly then.” All of us—all parts of our congregational system—think, feel, and act the way we do as a result of our interactions as members of this system.

Family systems therapists refer to “family strategies,” which largely go unnoticed by outsiders and that frequently are unstated and not always understood by the participants themselves. Nonverbal exchange patterns between family members in particular represent subtle, coded transactions that may transmit family “rules.” Norms are those unwritten psychological rules that govern the way any human community behaves. They are generally unconscious, especially for people who have been part of the community for a long time. People are not *trying* to keep “secrets” from one another. Norms simply are *by definition* unconscious and therefore unspoken.

At one church, the usual entrance is through the back door because that door is right off the parking lot. The official entrance, through the narthex, is large and inviting and leads right into the nave of a beautiful church. But the entrance people actually use leads into a dimly lit hall

with five, shut black doors. "Everyone" knows those doors lead to important places (or a closet), but there is no way for a newcomer to know that. One norm is that "everyone" is expected to know where each door leads. Another norm is that people are expected to keep all the doors shut in the winter to conserve heat. All this makes sense to the initiated, but a newcomer feels like the character in "The Lady and the Tiger"!

The longer we live with our parish norms, the more unaware we become of their very existence. The norms become "just the way we do things around here." Newcomers are most cognizant of parish norms. The interesting thing is that the newcomers themselves come equipped with their own set of norms, which may have come from their last church home or the one where they grew up. At first newcomers expect your congregation's norms to be similar to those they are used to. When they discover the differences, they might feel surprised or sometimes even experience pain. Worse yet, they might feel anger or disgust. Their immediate—though unvoiced—question usually is, "Why do you do it that way?" You can learn a lot by interviewing your newcomers. They are the ones most able to tell you which norms make you attractive and which are a turn-off. Once you become aware of your norms, you can make an informed choice to change or alter destructive norms while enhancing and emphasizing the positive.

A large, wealthy, downtown church made just such a discovery about its norms for newcomers. This norm was at work: During the coffee hour, held in a large, well-appointed room with tables for four, it was perfectly all right for members to play catch-up with their friends while strangers stood alone on the sidelines, coffee cups in hand. People in the church had done this for years. It was almost like a "hazing" newcomers had to endure if they wanted to become members of the parish. For years this parish touted many members on the city's "who's who" list. When asked, newcomers said that to join the church you had to run the gauntlet of humiliation and embarrassment. At one time people had been willing to fight their way in because they wanted to belong to this prestigious church. Unfortunately, both the church's reputation and its membership had seriously declined in the past ten years. The norm that left newcomers standing on the sidelines was going to have to change if the church was going to have a run at reversing the trend.

You can find the roots of a parish's norms in its history. In the last all-parish event, "An Evening of Historical Reflection," you had the opportunity to review the history of your parish. By doing that, you laid

the foundation for uncovering both the positive and negative norms at work in your congregation. Out of that exercise came prioritized meaning statements. Examine them again. They are probably beginning to look like goals. At the end of the norm identification process, you will have again the opportunity to develop goals that capitalize on your positive norms and that alter or minimize destructive norms.

The point is to work on goals that are primary, not secondary. Primary goals—and the norms that address them—have to do with the quality of your community religious life. Secondary goals and their spin-offs address the sort of issues you find in business plans or five-year plans: How much shall we raise the budget this year? Shall we repair the roof? Does the organ need repair or replacement?

Identifying Norms

The great temptation when identifying norms is to engage in a certain amount of denial. “We would never do *that!*” we protest. Actually, we might do that, and we would do well to make ourselves conscious of those things about ourselves—norms—that are destructive and constructive. Then we have a solid basis for helpful change.

Every parish has unwritten rules related to a number of groups of people or issues. Here are several typical categories:

- Children

How are they viewed and treated?

What behavior is expected of children and parents?

What does our “adult space” say about our attitude toward them?

What does our “child space” say about our attitude toward them?

- Men/Women

In what ways are they treated the same?

How are they treated differently?

What behavior is expected of men that is different from that expected of women, and vice versa?

What expectations are positive and what expectations are negative?

- Conflict

How are differences of opinion dealt with or resolved?

What confrontational behavior is expected?

What topics are taboo?

With whom may you disagree and with whom may you not disagree?

- Money

How much money are people expected to give?

How is money managed and spent?

Which efforts have higher priority than others?

Who gets to decide how money is spent?

- Treatment of Clergy

How are clergy addressed?

How well are they paid?

What behavior is expected of them? of their families?

When are they expected to be taken seriously and when not?

How do congregants have a right to abuse them?

- Newcomers

Who talks to them?

What behavior is expected of them?

What limits are placed on their power?

To what extent are their foibles forgiven?

Who is welcome here? (Do not fall into the trap of answering,

“Everyone, of course!” All congregations are naturally and unconsciously more welcoming to some people than to others.

A telling exercise is “Welcome Rating,” pages 51-52 in Roy M.

Oswald, *Making Your Church More Inviting, A Step-by-Step Guide for In-Church Training* [Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1993]).

Other matters for which your congregation might have norms include use of the building, timeliness, dress, language, and expectations of members.