

## Understanding Your Congregation as A System *George Parsons & Speed B. Leas*

In their book, *Understanding Your Congregation as a System*, George Parsons and Speed B. Leas offer an approach to understanding the congregational process and systems that draws from their years of experience as **conflict-management** consultants. Their approach **combines an understanding of systems theory and organizational architecture**. Parsons and Leas developed the Congregational Systems Inventory (CSI) to help leaders see the bigger picture, discuss and explore what is going on and “respond to changing times and new challenges.”<sup>1</sup>

### I. **Parsons and Leas Systems Theory Axioms**

Parsons describes the consequences when a **church gets stuck in its successes**. He calls it “The Tyranny of Successful Habits.”<sup>2</sup> The past accomplishments of many congregations lead to an institutionalizing of “organizational patterns and habits that no longer serve them well.”<sup>3</sup> The institutionalizing of past successes can have devastating consequences on the health of the congregation. He says such churches “continue to exercise the same set of muscles while the rest of the body atrophies.”<sup>4</sup> He describes such behavior as a **learning disability**, noting “Congregational leaders are vulnerable to these learning disabilities, which include a tendency to maximize our habits.”<sup>5</sup>

Parsons and Leas identify three popular ways to approach conflict management: **the difficult people approach, the problem-solving approach and the systems approach**. Parsons and Leas favor the systems approach. They acknowledge organizations do have difficult people to work with and “technical” problems to solve, but the Systems Theory approach embraces these concerns and more. Parsons and Leas assert that “something in the patterns and relationships of the organization itself” creates and reinforces unhealthy behavior in individuals.<sup>6</sup> Parsons and Leas are not interested in simply solving the problem since the underlying problem may be related to certain parties who are incompetent, angry or remain antagonistic.<sup>7</sup> Parsons and Leas describes the systems theory approach “observes the reactive patterns or non-conscious agreements or ‘understandings’ that people have about how they are supposed to act.”<sup>8</sup> The systems approach recognizes the possibility of individuals and organizational processes as potential problems, but also seeks to understand the relationship interconnectedness, process and patterns.

### II. **Congregational Systems Inventory (CSI)**

The Congregational Systems Inventory (CSI) is used to measure six dimensions of congregational life, on **seven scales**, each providing a score between one and ten. The CSI is a 70 question survey to be

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<sup>1</sup> Parsons, George & Leas, Speed B., “Understanding Your Congregation as a System.”, (The Alban Institute, 1993.), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

completed by the leaders of the congregation. Parson and Leas recommend a specific number of leaders to complete the inventory, based on the size of the congregation using Arlin Rothauge's four congregational size categories. The resulting scores illustrate an approximation of the congregation's healthy tension between excess on either end. Parson warns, "A loss of tension indicated by very high scores or very low scores on the inventory will suggest needed change in the life of a congregation."<sup>9</sup> Chapters VII – XII offer recommended strategies to "move out of excess" on either end of the various scales.

The seven scales measured by the inventory are: *strategy, authority, process, pastoral leadership, relatedness, lay leadership, and learning*.<sup>10</sup> A brief definition of each is provided below:

1. **Strategy** is the way congregations put their vision into practice.
2. **Authority** is the ability to influence decision making in the congregation.
3. **Process** measures both information-sharing and decision-making procedures in a congregation.
4. **Pastoral Leadership** is the way the pastor goes about generating intended change.
5. **Relatedness** measures the way members of the congregation work together, especially if their work is done cooperatively or independently.
6. **Lay Leadership** is the way lay leaders go about generating intended change.
7. **Learning** measures a congregation's orientation to the past or the future as it experiments with improving its life and ministry.

Parson and Leas use the "tight-loose" concept to describe a well-functioning organizational system. They say an organization should have the ability to "lighten up" or "tighten up."<sup>11</sup> Parson defines rigidity as going in both directions, that is, "Rigidity can be either 'over-controlling' or 'under-controlling.'"<sup>12</sup> Chapter 5 provides a guide along with examples to understand how to assemble and interpret the congregational leader's scores. The goal of a healthy organization is to have tension between excesses on either end, but not to remain stuck in the middle. A healthy organization is able to adjust according to a changing environment.

### III. Change Strategies for Reclaiming Tension

In chapter 6, Leas makes the unfortunate observation, "When organizations change, they are usually adapting to something that has happened to them rather than consciously deciding that such-and-such would be good to do."<sup>13</sup> He concludes that during transitional times of ministry there can be a great "boon to congregational life"<sup>14</sup> depending on how the organization responds. He recommends six "change" strategies: (1) capitalizing on the environmental forces; (2) becoming conscious of the tacit contracts that have been established among the parties in the system; (3) keeping contention alive; (4) re-contracting; (5) disturbing the equilibrium; (6) training.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 25 – 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 66.

The second change strategy (“becoming conscious”) is invaluable during the IIM Joining Phase and continues throughout the IIM process. Leas describes, “Most students of organizational theory believe that insiders (members, staff) may not be able to see the contracts they have made with one another to keep the organization at the loose or tight end of the scale.”<sup>16</sup> Knowing the organization’s insiders face this challenge, Leas recommends someone from outside the organization is needed to help assess what is going on. At the end of the IIM Joining Phase, I provide the congregation with a 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter Report. This report includes an outside perspective of the congregation’s “tight-loose” patterns and behavior. Also, during the joining phase, change strategy number 6 (“training”) begins with the senior staff and lay leaders. The training begins early to start “facilitating intervention in systems locked in excess.”<sup>17</sup>

#### IV. Theological Reflection and Application

Throughout the book, the authors assert the concept of behavioral polarization in congregations. Such polarization exists both in individual believers and the congregation. The example the authors use is the polarities of order and freedom saying, “The tension of order and freedom have birthed the great stories of the Bible and framed the historical struggles of the church.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus entered the world in between the tension of fulfilling the law and setting free those who have been crushed by it. And His divine work continues today in the individual believer and the church (law/gospel ministry).

Tension can also be better tolerated when there is an appreciation that God has gifted us all differently in order to fulfill different, and complimentary, roles in the one body of Christ. During the Joining Phase my role is to assist the members in becoming aware of these tensions and help to promote and understand them.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.