

SOLUTION-FOCUSED CONGREGATIONAL CHANGE:
AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE CHURCH
LEADERSHIP

A PROJECT REPORT AND THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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To the Dean of the Brite Divinity School:

I am submitting herewith a project report and thesis written by Christopher James Hayes entitled "Solution- Focused Congregational Change."
I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content and recommended that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Ministry.

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ABSTRACT

Project Director: Dr. Nancy Gorsuch. This project proposes an alternative way of facilitating congregational change. Initially, the project outlines a theological understanding of what the church is, and who people are as created persons of God. Then the project asserts that by combining Solution-Focused individual care with understandings from congregational leadership theories and styles, there will be a new way of thinking about the congregational change process. This project researches current methods of congregational leadership, and looks in-depth at the Solution-Focused individual care model as it attempts to combine these two important fields of work and study. In conclusion, the project suggests that using the main tenets of Solution-Focused care on a congregational level can create a healthy model for ministry. Solution-focused congregation change therefore is recommended and offered as a new way of thinking about congregational systems and leadership through an ever changing reality.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Congregational life and the ministry of the church are among God's greatest blessings to the human experience here on Earth. For centuries people have found meaning in their lives through the connection to God and to one another learned and nurtured in the Christian church. Throughout time, individuals who care passionately about the church have attempted to guide and direct this human organization instituted and created by God. In the twenty-first century United States, however, it has been increasingly difficult to lead congregations through effective processes of growth and transformation in order to stay relevant and passionate for the world.

Mainline denominations in the United States have been in decline since the late 1960s. Although there are exceptions to this rule, as a whole neither individual churches nor denominational judicatories have found effective solutions to this reality. When speaking of growth and/or decline there are issues beyond numeric values. The purpose of the church is not simply to grow the number of people who gather in one place at one time during the week, but rather to increase the number of lives transformed both within the church and in the world. Statistically, attendance numbers are much easier to examine than other components of effectiveness within the life of a congregation simply by the quantitative nature of numbers, and generally attendance numbers can be linked to the effective influence the ministry of a congregation offers. Greater worship attendance is certainly not the only measure, however, if more people are exposed to worship and the proclamation of God's word,

then the hope is that this equates to making disciples for Jesus Christ.

Church effectiveness is more than numeric figures, and productive church leaders can best be defined as leaders who find the effectiveness definition of their particular setting. Context and setting of ministry is crucial to the understanding of church and ministry success. Effectiveness can and should be gauged against a particular congregation's vision and mission as well as the community in which the church offers ministry. It is unrealistic to assume that the same measures of effectiveness would be used in rural Arkansas as in inner-city New York. Ministry and measures must be localized and specific to a particular setting. Some point to the changing social priorities of the country and allude to the fall in Christendom (Christian faith by virtue of birth and location) as the primary reason for the decline seen in local church attendance. Although there certainly is truth behind this idea, there are other reasons why many churches are not experiencing growth. Churches have experienced a great disconnect from the communities they serve and the world as a whole. A portion of this reality can be blamed on the church for not finding new and effective ways of communication and connection to the current reality of the world around. For churches and Christians to thrive, there must be a future with hope and a model for ministry that allows focus upon hope-filled possibilities.

Clergy and laity in church contexts must learn and implement new models for effective ministry and leadership to offer this future hope. Change is a part of God's created world, and change is inevitable, however the productive use of change and excitement around change are often rare in the church. Solution-focused

congregational change offers an effective alternative to traditional leadership options that could prove to be a useful tool for those who wish to help congregations experience a more hope filled and effective future of ministry. Currently, one of the main proposals offered to combat declining membership is the guidance of an expert either as pastor or consultant. It is often believed that if the right pastor could be found, or the correct consultant hired, then everything would work as God desires. The flaw in this theory lies in the individual nature of each community of faith and in the shortcomings of any individual expert or leader. Congregations need to accept the possibility that God has blessed them as a church, with the tools and resources that they need to offer effective ministries to their congregations and communities. Solution-focused theory is based on the premise that each individual brings solutions and competencies into the pastoral care relationship and can be guided to find effective responses for him or herself. Expanding this theory of personal change to the larger context of congregations offers a possible alternative to the expert approach of leading important congregational change. Combining the theory of solution-focused individual care with congregational leadership may provide a healthy model for church growth and redevelopment in mainline denominations in the United States. Growth and redevelopment are not simply numeric figures, but rather represent an infusion of hope and excitement about the future of the church.

The desire to offer a new model for ministry comes from two perspectives. First, there is a deep desire from a pastoral perspective to offer the Good News of Jesus Christ to a hurt and broken world; the church has lost effectiveness in

accomplishing this most basic mission. Second, there is a theological perspective on humanity and the church that calls us beyond the expert consultant approach and into the realization that God created all humans in the image of God and the true leader of the church is Jesus Christ. If our ecclesiology (beliefs about the church) assumes the Lordship of Christ, then how can an expert become the savior of the broken church system? Pastors, teachers, lay leaders, and consultants should therefore be in the role of discerning God's leadership and looking for abilities already present, but perhaps underutilized, in the church system.

Along with this ecclesiology, a theology of creation and humanity leads to a deep understanding that all people are created in the image of God and therefore have creative ability, problem-solving capacity, and the capability to discern God's direction and call. For one person to assume that a congregation or denomination must have her or his special wisdom and insight to be changed for God's will is not only egotistical but perhaps heretical. As God's created children, all are blessed with the ability to think creatively and work through difficulties to find future possibilities. The role of leader must therefore be transformed from someone providing the solutions into someone helping those in need seek God's guidance by looking to the discernment within each person and group. Too often consultants, pastors, and academics assume that special insight and knowledge can work as a "fix all" for the troubles of the world and the church. This leads the experts to frustration over why people will not simply listen and implement their profound ideas, while it leaves those in the struggle with a feeling of helplessness and insufficiency. God created

humanity with the ability to connect with the Creator and to be like the Creator in many ways. This does not imply that finite humanity can obtain the status of God during this life, but that God places within each created human the ability to strive into God's likeness and reflect God's goodness and wisdom. Human choice and free will allow for an individual to deny their likeness with God and reject their ability or the abilities of others for creatively responding to life and its challenges, however, this choice does not negate the reality of God's gift for humanity. The role of pastor and/or leader can become that of encourager, helping people discover the gifts and abilities God has given. This theological statement and practical implications are cornerstones of the solution-focused congregational change model.

Solution-focused individual care offers a theory of care giving that is based on behavioral psychology and supports the humanistic understanding described above but in its purest form separates the theological underpinnings from that rationale. Unlike many other theories and models of change, in solution-focused care the pastor or therapist would never assume that he or she needs to impart wisdom and answers to the parishioner or client. Instead there is a relationship between the caregiver and care receiver that accentuates the strengths and looks for exceptions to the problem while envisioning more effective outcomes in the future.

Therefore out of a deep passion for the congregational life given to us as a gift for sharing the love and grace of God, it seems necessary to attempt a new model for congregational leadership. This model is based on the theology of God's creative spirit, humanity's goodness as created in the image of God, and the possibility of a

hopeful future for the church of Jesus Christ. This theory of fostering congregational change will be best seen through a foundation of theology, followed by an explanation of the individual model of change offered through solution-focused counseling, and concluding with the theory and practice of that change model on a congregational scale. In my ministry, I have been blessed to see solution-focused congregational change work well, and it offers me hope for what our churches may become in a future filled with God's hope.

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT FOR SOLUTION-FOCUSED CONGREGATIONAL CHANGE

All work in this project is founded in Christian theology and an understanding of Divine interaction and participation within the world and with individual human beings. The starting points for this theory and rationale are a God “who created and is creating”¹ and the assertion of Genesis 1:26-28 that all humanity was and is created in the image of that God. These two understandings are foundational for the work presented here and are assumptions that are made in faith and tradition within the church for whom this project is offered.

Along with these points of origin, there is also a theological component that supports the need and possibility for a new theory for congregational and organizational change. This idea is founded in a deep appreciation for and understanding of the role of the church. Ecclesiology differs among many traditions, but most Christian theologians agree that the church is a vehicle for offering the Good News of Jesus Christ in the world. To expand upon this thought, there is a role for the church to play in a world full of chaos and frustration. The church can and should be the light in the darkness, not because a church itself produces light, rather because it reflects the light of Christ into the world. If the church hopes to offer light, which can be described as God’s love, God’s grace, God’s forgiveness, God’s hope, God’s

¹ The United Church of Canada, Service Book (The Committee on Worship: The United Church of Canada, 1969), 310.

joy, or simply a realization of the Divine presence, then the church must examine how it can do so effectively. Too often the church reflects the darkness and hopelessness of the world rather than the light of Christ. This is not intentional or because of ill-intentioned people, but simply because the church operates like every other sector of the world. Problems and difficulties become focal points rather than maintaining focus on hope and church can then look eerily similar to the world it is called to transform.

A theological perspective on creation is crucial to the work of congregational change. It informs those who are leading the change as well as the organization or church that is working through the change process. Three aspects of creation theology are most important for this work. First is an understanding of God's creation as an ongoing process throughout time, not something set in motion once and ignored thereafter as some suggest. God not only created in the story of Genesis, or at the beginning of all things, but God also continues to create; each day we awake to the newness of creation. Creative thought, innovation, and ideas are part of God's ongoing creation, in which humanity is invited to participate. Second, there must be an understanding and a belief in the goodness of God's creation. This is not to suggest that creation is not corrupted or has not fallen, rather it is to suggest that ultimately what a good God creates, especially humanity in God's own image, is good. The important work of redemption that must happen for a fallen creation does not negate the goodness inherent in the creation. There is certainly no argument that humanity, or even God's creation, is perfect in its current state, but it is important to

assert that even tarnished treasure remains valuable. What God created as good is good, even if fallen and imperfect. Finally, the creation of humanity is set apart from other creation as something special and important. The Bible describes this special creation as the image of God and offers a way of describing the humanity God created, not as something completely foreign from the characteristics of the Creator, but like the Creator in some way. This should impact how one thinks of others and how one believes in oneself.

Creation is not simply defined as the grand scale of Genesis beginnings, but also as the changes that take place throughout the world and throughout a lifetime. Daniel L. Migliore's foundational book on theology, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, states, "when the creation of the World by God is set in the context of the whole activity of the triune God, we are able to describe creation not as something past and finished but as still open to the future."² Seeing God's creation as an ongoing process by which we are affected and changed is critical to any theory of change and hope for the future. Migliore also describes how "Christian Faith is expectant faith," meaning that hope for change and creation should never be lost.³ This theory and understanding of God's ongoing work helps set the reason and perspective for any theory of organizational change and offers hope when the difficulties of this world are faced in very real ways by churches and organizations.

Infusing a system or group with this deep theological foundation helps that

² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 106.

³ Migliore, 330.

organization be ready for new creation and change, therefore allowing acceptance of what the future might hold. To foster a process of change, there must be an understanding of God's ability to create and to work in and through creation for a more hopeful future. This theory of congregational leadership and change offers the work of God as a cornerstone to theory and practice. Many churches and parish leaders suffer from a lack of hope in this future creation. Some dismiss that God can do new creative things in the world and in the local church; others wish God would not do new creative things because they find comfort in the known. Growing into an understanding of God's ongoing creation can be frightening, but the benefits of this theological understanding are worth any initial hesitations that may be experienced.

Besides God's continuing work of creation, it should be asserted that God's creation is good. Migliore writes, "if God is good, then for all its limitations, transience, and fragility, the gift of life God gives is good" and he goes on to assert that "creation is good."⁴ This understanding of God's creation as good is important on several levels for the assertions made in this project and for congregational change and leadership. One of the main reasons this concept is important is because it asserts that God's creation and specifically God's people are not innately or completely flawed, useless, or helpless in this life. There is no question that although God's creation is good, it is not as good as God intends for it ultimately to be; however, humanity and creation retain goodness because of the Creator.

This changes the way a pastor, congregational leaders, and congregations as a

⁴ Migliore, 103.

whole, enter the conversation about change. If the church and individuals within are God's good creation, then although they are not living into God's fullness and perfection they are still capable of reflecting God's goodness. In addition, it seems important when offering hope with change that current goodness and grace not be overlooked. Beginning with health and goodness, instead of with flaws and inadequacies, offers much more hope and incentive for the change work that will be suggested here. Howard Stone writes about the theology of acceptance when he asserts that we should "affirm the person who is, but also appreciate[s] who that person can become in Christ."⁵ This idea is just as true with an organization, group, or congregation as it is with individuals. Those who desire a new way of supporting congregational change must accept what is and hope for what is yet to be created. These leaders must also educate and infuse this dual understanding of acceptance into congregational life and belief. This attitude and approach require an understanding of God's goodness and the goodness imparted to God's creation, as all are created in the image of the divine.

Finally, God's creation of woman and man in God's own image reveals a desire for the creation to have characteristics of and likeness to the Creator. In *Constructive Theology* we are reminded that "theologically, the sameness among human beings is in their being created in the *imago Dei*."⁶ That sameness and

⁵ Howard Stone, *Theological Context for Pastoral Caregiving: Word in Deed* (New York: Hawthorn, 1996), 120.

⁶ Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 80.

consistency across the human race means many different things and certainly speaks to individual value. One of the greatest images of God's nature is the nature of Creator. It can therefore be asserted that creativity and the ability to create is a portion of the *imago Dei* that has been passed onto the creation. Having genuine ideas and new thoughts is a common part of the human experience, but far too often we attribute these talents only to scholarly work or individual intelligence and/or abilities, all of which are tools by which the creative nature of God in humanity may be reflected at least in part. Because they were created in the image of God, humans are creative and have varying degrees of creative thinking and abilities. All who are created in God's image are in small part gifted like the Creator.

Part of this creative understanding comes from the innate need and desire for growth and change. As Migliore describes, "being created in the image of God is not a state or condition but a movement with a goal: human beings are restless for a fulfillment of life not yet realized."⁷ Within churches, organizations, and individuals, there is a fundamental desire to grow and change. This is often suppressed by fear, anxiety, and other cultural influences, but at the core of the human experience is a desire for creation. John Wesley, the founder of the United Methodist Church, describes the journey of life as a process of sanctifying grace. Migliore states, "sanctification is the process of growth in Christian love."⁸ This journey of faith and life is inevitably intertwined with growth and a process of creating. In this

⁷ Migliore, 147.

⁸ Migliore, 239.

understanding of Christian faith, those who are faithful are always changing in growth and moving towards God's likeness. Building upon this understanding of creation and creative ability, and being a part of Divine nature passed to humanity as the *imago Dei*, combined with a process that continues through time, it can be asserted that supporting creative change in organizations and churches is part of the God-given purpose of life. Churches were not created to be the same throughout time and location but rather were created to adapt, change, and creatively invite the newness of a God who created and is creating. These theological assertions are the backdrop against which the theories of change and growth henceforth to come in this project are based.

SAMPLING OF CURRENT CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Walk into any Christian bookstore and you can quickly find an entire section of church leadership models. There are so many offerings on how to lead congregations and how to be in charge of changing the church, that I questioned the need for an additional theory and model. I have read many of these texts and found some of them very helpful. However, most of these texts have a couple of things in common that set them apart from the solution-focused congregation change model suggested here. First, most of these texts are about what you as pastor or lay-leader can do to fix the church. Solution-focused congregation change asserts that there is a different task before those who wish to lead congregations. Fixing congregations with the latest techniques is not the same as offering hope and engaging in a process of creative possibilities. Second, many of these texts look at the problems pastors or churches experience and try to diagnose with great detail what went wrong with the church and what must be done in order to cure the pathology within. A solution-focused congregational change model offers the possibility that there is more benefit to dreaming about the future than examining the past. An orientation towards hope and a “future story” leads this model away from many of the other offerings.⁹ That said, however, I have been greatly influenced (and often in a very positive way) by

⁹ Andrew D. Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

the helpful works available on congregational leadership and church change. Jim Herrington, Herb Miller, Lovett Weems and others offer insightful suggestions and descriptions of the leadership process.

Perhaps the influx of books and articles written about congregational leadership is evidence of another flaw in the current understanding of many leadership materials. The most common answer to our problems within organizations and churches is to hire an expert or read an expert's opinion about what we should be doing differently. Experts offer many good suggestions, and everyone can learn something from them, but at the same time the church is called upon to be different from other organizations. Revelation 21:9-10 refers to the church as the bride of Christ. Through the loving relationship Jesus has with the church, there is mutual love and concern. Just as a wife should know her husband better than anyone else in the world, and offer greater insight into his life, so Jesus Christ offers the greatest information and input into the life and workings of the church. Jesus Christ is the only true expert on church function. The revelation offered to humanity is often spread among us all, not offered individually to one person over another in secretive or selective fashion. The people who make up a congregation, if they are attuned to God's leading, need to be understood and valued as the greatest experts for that particular church. Many theories and models of congregational leadership attempt to diagnose problems and hand out solutions from an outside perspective. Much can be gained from a trusted outsider who can help those within a given system see things more clearly, but ultimately if those in the system do not find solutions for

themselves, then the process of congregational change and problem solving is limited.

Another major problem with reliance on an expert, whether the expert comes in the form of a book or consultation, is that it creates a dependent relationship upon that outside source. In order for churches to be truly effective and offer the ministry of grace and love that most hope to provide, they need the internal ability to deal with difficulties as they arise and more importantly to find solutions to those challenges. If the only solution a church or organization is ever able to find is from the outside it will have long-term issues and problems related to the lack of resources and help when they are needed. I certainly do not want to negate the great minds of research and the scholarly work available today; I believe them to be very helpful in many circumstances, but I do wish to promote a way of thinking that would require churches to look to God and within themselves for solutions and hopeful possibilities before turning to an expert. The role of a solution-focused helper is not like that of the expert who has and gives special revelation and secretive information, but rather as a guide to help the congregation in need find solutions and hope for and within its context.

There are many good resources in print to help with the ideas of congregational change, and Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, write a helpful understanding of the congregational change process in their book, *Leading Congregational Change*.¹⁰ In this work, there are good descriptions of how a

¹⁰ Herrington, Jim, Mike Bonem and James H. Furr. *Leading Congregational Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

congregation and pastor must work collaboratively on the very difficult process of change. The authors state that the pastor or congregational leader cannot make all of the changes and impose them upon the congregation, but instead must work together with the congregation. This is a very helpful understanding of collaborative leadership and an agreed upon idea between this book and solution-focused congregational change theory.

In *Leading Congregational Change*, there is a great focus on what areas the leader must direct the congregation to deal with and think about. In one chapter the book focuses attention on the need for the leader to “generate and sustain creative tension” and also talks in depth about the need to create and highlight urgency in the congregational system.¹¹ This call to look at the tensions and problems within the system, as well as the urgent needs and issues, begins to diverge from the solution-focused model that will be presented in more detail later. Solution-focused change assumes gifts and abilities and attempts to focus on the things that are working and can be celebrated, rather than creating tensions and lifting-up problems. Harrington, Bonem, and Furr’s book is very helpful in many ways and is an influence in some of the concepts of collaborative leadership that will be found in this new theory of solution-focused congregational change, but it seems to fall short in offering agency to the people of the congregation and turning attention to the leadership of God.

Thomas G. Bandy is another great author in the current realm of

¹¹ Harrington, 100.

congregational leadership materials. He makes many excellent points about what new leadership models need to look like and what they should not look like. He has already made a shift away from the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) model of congregational leadership that was so prominent just a decade ago, and he discusses the idea that current leadership models must look more like fly fishing (casting vision out into the stream and see what takes a bite) rather than the potter with clay that forces the clay into being something it does not desire to be.¹² However, with that very important point made, three pages later in Bandy's book *Coaching Change* he states that the congregational leader's "imagination, self-discipline, commitment, intuition, readiness to risk, incredible patience, intense concentration, crazy audacity, indifference to size, and irrational joy" is what can "inspire and coach" congregations and individuals into God's direction.¹³ Can you hear how much pressure and value is placed on the leader or pastor? This assumes that the pastor has been given great knowledge, wisdom, and understanding that outweigh that of the congregation. Bandy's approach assumes and asserts that without the strong congregational leader it is not possible to move into a more hopeful future of God's vision. A solution-focused congregational change model will set a drastic opposition to this way of thinking by suggesting that change is inevitable and that the congregation itself has within it the gifts and hope needed to move into a more hope-filled future, therefore altering the important role of its leadership.

¹² Bandy, Thomas G. *Coaching Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 180.

¹³ Bandy, 183.

Ronald A. Heifetz does not write in the world of congregational leadership and change, but is a strong voice in the secular world of new leadership models. In Heifetz's book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* he does a masterful job at showing the difference between the old style of autocratic leadership and a more collaborative approach. Heifetz invites the reader to "imagine the differences in behavior when people operate with the idea that 'leadership means influencing the community to follow the leader's vision' versus 'leadership means influencing the community to face its problems'".¹⁴ He goes on to suggest that his model uses an understanding of the second approach that helps empower and involve the community in collaborative leadership. Solution-focused congregational change would certainly agree that the second image brings a healthier approach to leadership than does the first option of forcing the leader's vision, however, the second approach still suggests the community's leader is the one who can and must identify the problem and get the community to focus in the right direction. Solution-focused congregational change suggests that neither the vision for the future, nor the problems at hand, can be well defined without the cooperation and input of the community. Heifetz brings many helpful ideas to the leadership table, but it is still up to the leader in his work to help show the incapable community what they need to see and focus upon. A solution-focused approach focuses on the capabilities and strengths given by God to individuals and communities of faith.

¹⁴ Heifetz, Ronald A. *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1994), 14.

Education and sharing of ideas and possibilities is vital to good leading and finding solutions. Many great offerings of ideas and information have come from the academic world and from those who claim to be experts in certain fields. This information should not be ignored, neither should it be discouraged as a future way for leaders and concerned individuals to share and struggle together with new thoughts and ideas. The problem arises when the experts and books are the only source for solutions and ideas. When the church and its leaders become dependent upon outside sources and offerings for ministry needs and solutions, the church often becomes less effective. In addition, there is a danger in implementing any process or idea out of context. Every expert and author writes from a particular perspective. That perspective and context may or may not match the realities and needs of a local church or organization. Even though this is known, there are many cases whereby the church attempts to use a book's recommendations and strategies and then becomes frustrated by the lack of results. This is not because the theory was flawed (at least not always) but often because the congregation and its leaders did not take into account the very important differences between the author's context and their own. There are many great ideas and true geniuses writing in the areas of organizational and congregational leadership, and much of that work should be used and appreciated, but none of it should be taken as complete solutions for a local community of faith. To find effective solutions for congregations, Christ must be seen as the community's leader, and the pastor must encourage the process of change to be seen as an opportunity to grow into a hopeful future.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED THEORY OF CHANGE

Solution-focused care is a theory of change and a model of care giving that makes several important assumptions as it strives to find ways forward with individuals who are troubled. Solution-focused care always looks at solutions first as Charles Allen Kollar describes: “When we visualize the outcome first, we become solution-focused rather than problem-focused. The outcome dictates the process, rather than the process dictating the outcome.”¹⁵ The first assumption of this effective model is an orientation towards outcomes and solutions, as opposed to an orientation towards pathology and exploration of problems. This assumption and understanding changes the practice and theory behind the care that is offered and changes the focus of the process.

A second major assumption of the solution-focused model is an assumption of strength and ability. Kollar states that “solution-focused pastoral counseling teaches that the counselee has all the resources he [or she] needs in God.”¹⁶ Obviously, Kollar writes from a faith-filled perspective that asserts the God-given resources of an individual, but no matter the source, solution-focused approaches believe in the client’s abilities and strengths rather than focusing on his or her weaknesses and shortcomings. Jan James writes, “working from the assumption of strength, attention

¹⁵ Charles Allen Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 17.

¹⁶ Kollar, 44.

is given to exceptions to the problem.”¹⁷ Many theories of care and change would investigate deeply into the problems of someone seeking care and would look for all possible manifestations of each problem before offering possible ways forward, but solution-focused thinkers look for the times and places the problem does not manifest itself and ask the care-seeker to focus on these times and the differences surrounding the preferred scenario. This change of focus and differing approach to care offers a set of assumptions that will be vital to the outcome and the process for care giving. The assumption of strength and ability rather than pathology and incapacity will be explored in great detail as we switch focus to a congregation rather than an individual. However, the importance of this assumption is more easily understood initially in one-on-one care, and therefore I offer this story as a way of illustrating the different response that solution-focused perspective can offer.

Jennifer¹⁸ lives a relatively normal life as a working mother in a suburb of a large city. She wakes up in the mornings and gets her 7- and 9-year-olds dressed and ready for school. She makes breakfast for herself and the kids, but her husband Doug is usually already gone for work. When Jennifer gets to work each day she feels a bit frustrated by the amount of work to do before she leaves to pick up the kids from their after-school program. By the time Jennifer gets home at night, she is exhausted, frustrated, and feeling as though she has not done anything very well during the

¹⁷ Jan James “The Power of Valuing in Brief Pastoral Counseling,” in *Strategies for Brief Pastoral Counseling*, ed. Howard W. Stone (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 26.

¹⁸ This is a composite illustration used to demonstrate elements of a solution focused approach and in no way refers to a real or particular individual or congregation.

course of the day. She feels her work is slipping because she wants to be involved in her children's lives and that she is not being a good mother because she does not spend enough time with her kids and when she does it is always hurried. In addition, she cannot figure out what has happened to her and Doug, because they do not really talk about anything but the schedules of life and problems with parenting and work.

Jennifer made an appointment to see a counselor because her problems had become overwhelming in her daily life. She told the therapist that the everyday tasks of life, in addition to some problems with her relationship with her husband, were keeping her from being happy and fulfilled. In fact, her boss had recently offered her stern words during an annual evaluation because he felt that she was no longer engaged in her work. This well-intentioned and highly trained counselor began to explore with Jennifer what she was doing wrong in all the areas of her life. She met with the therapist six times over a month and a half and never discussed anything except the details of her failures. She gave great time and attention to what she, and the therapist, thought she was doing wrong as a wife, mother, and professional, but in all of their conversation, solutions and possibilities were never really explored. Jennifer became increasingly frustrated at her sessions, and although she liked the counselor she was seeing, she felt more depressed and frustrated each time she went for a session. Therefore she stopped going and resigned herself to the pain and struggle of her frustrated life.

A full year later when she decided that life was just not bearable this way, she made an appointment with her pastor, who was trained in solution-focused pastoral

care. Jennifer did not know what a pastor could do for her, but she thought all of her problems probably had some spiritual component because that had always been an important part of her life, and she assumed that at least having someone to listen to her frustrations would be good. As she began her conversations with the pastor, the pastor, Rachel, offered compassionate listening and attending skills, but then asked Jennifer what she would envision being different about her life if miraculously God made everything good tomorrow. Jennifer began to describe how she would have more meaningful conversations with her husband, how the kids would not see her so hurried and frantic all the time, and how she would be able to leave work at work and not dwell on it at home. Pastor Rachel then asked Jennifer to think about any times in the recent past when she was able to do those things in some little way. Although this task was a bit difficult for Jennifer to accomplish, she did think of a conversation with her husband Doug that was meaningful and important, she remembered the great time her family had together cooking pancakes for dinner last weekend, and she realized that she was not always overwhelmed at work.

Within an hour, Pastor Rachel had Jennifer doing something she had not been able to do in six sessions with a counselor who wanted to focus on the root of her problems; Pastor Rachel had guided Jennifer to think hopefully about the possibilities before her. They began to discuss how some of these exceptions could become more common and about some goals and strategies for making that happen. Within an hour, there were still problems in Jennifer's life, but there was a feeling of strength and empowerment as well as hope for the possibilities in the future. This is the power

and potential for solution-focused care. These same results can be seen on a congregational level, as will be described in greater detail.

As we look at the assumptions of solution-focused theory, we must remember that the goal is not to fix the one seeking care, but rather to “move the counselee forward into his [or her] new life”¹⁹ and that “the priority is to help the counselee get unstuck.”²⁰ This is very different from theories of change and care that assume problems must be greatly defined or that the counselor as expert can solve the client’s problems with great skill and resources. In contrast to many of these other theories, Kollar states, “the solution is not always derived from the problem,” and understanding the problem may not even be necessary for a positive outcome.²¹ Focusing on the future and what a desired outcome might be is a third assumption of this theory. We assume that it is possible to seek solutions for the future that are meaningful and important without exploring every detail of the past and of the problem. This assumption takes into consideration an empathetic listener and a caregiver who can establish a relationship of trust that communicates care for the pain and reality of the problem without needing to elicit every detail.

A final assumption to be highlighted about solution-focused care is that the person seeking change and care is the expert in his or her own life, not the caregiver. This will be very important as we translate this theory into the congregation setting because it strongly opposes many models of leadership available today. Jan James

¹⁹ Kollar, 20,

²⁰ Kollar, 44.

²¹ Kollar, 31.

writes, “pastoral caregivers possess knowledge and skills to help people cope with difficulties in their life... but at no time do they usurp the parishioners’ rightful role as experts in their own affairs.”²² The role of caregiver in this model is not the position of expert with knowledge and answers; rather it is the role of helper and facilitator. Howard Stone writes, “from the onset of the first session the minister motivates counselees and makes them cooperative with change.”²³ Cooperation and partnership describe well the relationship that should be formed by anyone offering solution-focused care giving or fostering change in congregations.

A solution-focused caregiver does not coerce or force solutions upon individuals, no matter how much easier that may seem at the time. Instead, the caregiver asserts that no solution formed from outside the person or group will have lasting effect. Kollar invites those who participate in this model to ask “how do we create solutions with the counselee?”²⁴ Creating with, and not creating for, is a subtle distinction at times but a very important component of this theory. One of the problems for pastors and caregivers is the great desire to see progress and growth. There is also the difficulty of finding patience when clients are moving slowly. Nancy Gorsuch writes, “it is very tempting to exercise authority and ‘run the show’ when people seem hopelessly adrift in a sea of troubles, and pastors who offer counseling to their parishioners need to remind themselves constantly (and humbly)

²² James, 28.

²³ Howard W. Stone, *Brief Pastoral Counseling* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 20-21.

²⁴ Kollar, 44.

of their lack of expertise in the lives of others—the not knowing position.”²⁵ Taking a position of not knowing is a part of this assumption that no one is an expert in anyone else’s life. The caregiver or pastor may have great insights to offer and may be very helpful but should not assume the ability to fix or create solutions for someone else. As we translate this theory into an approach to congregational change, it will be vital to remember that pastors and church leaders, who are often given authority by the office held, are not to use this authority to create solutions and answers for the congregation.

There are many critics of solution-focused care giving, and most of the critiques are formed in the assumption that broken humans do not have the resources and abilities to come up with solutions for themselves. Critics argue that an outside expert or counselor needs to insert new thoughts and new ideas into the system and prescribe a new way forward. They will also cite the value of the caregiver’s education and training as tools for offering information and strategies that a non-educated care-seeker should not be expected to have. Admittedly there are limitations to any theory of care, and solution-focused care giving is no exception. There are persons who are so caught up in some problem or past experience that they cannot envision a future story of hope, and there are those with diminished capacities who have difficulty coming to solutions on their own. Nevertheless, focusing on solutions and assuming strength rather than weakness often offers hope and more

²⁵ Nancy Gorsuch, “Collaborative Pastoral Conversation,” in *Strategies for Brief Pastoral Counseling*, 31.

effective possibilities with those who seek care. Part of this comes out of the theology expressed before, as we assert that “God has left his imprint on every human life. We must find this evidence and use it in assisting the counselee toward God’s intention.”²⁶ In addition Kollar reminds us that this understanding is consistent with other areas of faith and life:

In Christian theology the solution to personal sin is not found in understanding the root cause of sin, i.e., understanding the doctrine of original sin. Rather, it is through turning from sin to God’s grace, being thankful for forgiveness, acting upon this forgiveness, and maturing within God’s grace in a constructive and creative way.²⁷

This same understanding can be derived for a theory of change, both individually and collectively. Returning to the most basic component of a broken entity is not always the best way to address the problem. Looking at small pieces may actually inhibit a broader perspective that is more helpful and hopeful. Under a microscope, there are almost always flaws, but those flaws may or may not negatively affect the whole.

In a fairly recent book, *More Than Miracles: The State of the Art of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*, the authors outline these basic assumptions discussed above as well as a few others that form the backbone for this theory.²⁸ The book states that in a Solution-Focused model “if it isn’t broke, don’t fix it” and “if it works, do more of it”.²⁹ The idea is that exploring problems and troubles simply for the sake of finding things to discuss is not valuable to the client seeking a more hopeful future.

²⁶ Kollar, 35.

²⁷ Kollar, 41.

²⁸ De Shazer, Steve and Yvonne Dolan, *More Than Miracles: The State of the Art of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* (New York: The Hawthorn Press, 2007).

²⁹ De Shazer, 1-2.

In addition, they go on to write that “if it is not working, do something different, and that “small steps can lead to big changes”.³⁰ Making giant leaps into a new life is not practical nor sustainable in many cases, but doing something different and applauding small successes is valuable. In *More Than Miracles*, it is also asserted that “the solution is not necessarily directly related to the problem” and that “no problem happens all the time, there are always exceptions that can be utilized”.³¹ In solution-focused change theory there are examples of more desired living already happening, and getting to a goal does not have to relate to solving any particular problem. These ideals help clarify the process and rationale behind this approach to care.

Solution-focused care proposes that based on the assumptions described above, caregivers can work in partnership with those seeking care and can create solutions that include an optimistic outlook on human creativity and God’s hopeful and open future. With this background, we continue with a description of a new possibility in the world of congregational change. Solution-focused congregational change will define leadership in a way that differs from many other understandings of how change occurs and will promote God’s leadership, congregational strengths and forward-thinking solutions.

³⁰ De Shazer, 2.

³¹ De Shazer, 2-3.

THEORY OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED CONGREGATIONAL CHANGE

Imagine for a moment church as it was created to be. What are the tenets of church, and what are the core components of why church exists, originally and today? Does the church itself have value and purpose, and will it exist among us for a time or throughout time? Many different opinions and definitions exist of church, but for the purpose of this work I would suggest that at its core, church is the human institution for God's people to care for those in need and turn people's attention in a faithful direction (including but not limited to the worship of the Divine). It is certainly an assertion of this project that the church was and is created for meaningful purposes in the world and that those purposes of connecting people to God and to one another still exist. In fact, it could be argued that with the increasing individualism prevalent in western post-modern culture, the need of church to connect people beyond themselves is greater than ever. Into this state of the church comes a theory of hope and possibilities.

Solutions will mean very different things for various congregations and or para-church organizations, but all people and organizations can benefit from looking beyond the current reality and into the future of possibilities. This theory can be used when there is great conflict and trouble or simply when there is a realization that in the future things will and must change and adapt to be effective. Effectiveness itself is defined in many different ways, but it can be boiled down to the definition of the

Church and its leaders, as well as the ability to fulfill the basic function of God's church; to guide people towards love of God and love of others.

The assumptions that must be made to engage in this work of solution-focused congregational change are directly tied to the individual change theory described above. However, the process and operation of these assumptions can differ greatly on a congregational scale. The first assumption and tenet of solution-focused congregational change is an orientation towards future and solution rather than past and problems. No congregation exists that does not have problems; neither is there a congregation that has existed for any time that does not have past issues and complications. A leader who practices this theory must not ignore these realities of past pain and current struggle, but they should not be the focus of the process. With great care and support the leader must acknowledge the pain of the past, if it is expressed as a problem, and must be realistic about the limitations and problems of today, but all of that is used to help move a congregation into a new understanding of how tomorrow can be different. The primary job of a pastor, leader, or consultant utilizing solution-focused congregational change is to help provide focus and attention towards the solutions.

The second assumption in the theory of solution-focused congregational change is that of strength and abilities. Even the most broken churches are made up of God's children who have been given a portion of that Creator image and therefore can respond to God faithfully. Churches have competencies and abilities that too often get overlooked in efforts to strive for future meaning and hope. Discovering

and supporting the strengths of a local congregation and the strengths of local church members and leaders is a primary purpose within this theory. Each time past problems are discovered or a lack of abilities is discussed, a solution-focused leader will look for a way to highlight strength and re-focus the conversation on the abilities of the organization. As will be discussed in greater detail later, a main way to elicit these strengths is through the discovery of exceptions. It is often easier for a group to think of reasons why things have not worked or will not work, but what about the things that have worked? In solution-focused congregational change, the leader must become proficient at pointing out abilities and strengths. This process is not only healthy for the congregation, but it also helps produce possibilities and solutions that a frustrated and beaten-down church may not be able to see clearly.

The third assumption relates to the role of pastor or leader. In solution-focused congregational change the pastor or leader takes the role of active listener, focusing agent, and promoter of future possibilities. This cannot however be described as an expert role; neither should it be described as the leader with answers and solutions. Instead, a solution-focused pastor or leader brings to the table an ability to elicit the imagination and possibilities already present within the church or organization. There is a critical place for the leader because the church, or system of people, often fails to see the possibilities and options for a hopeful future. The solution-focused leader must bring into perspective the theology of a creator God who has enabled our creative abilities. In addition, the solution-focused leader must guide and direct conversations that allow for hopeful imagination and dialogue and that

promote solution thinking. Much as in the individual pastoral care relationship, the leader must help look for exceptions to the problem, guide conversation, and recognize ideas as they emerge from the group. This happens best through a process of generating ideas from the congregation and by listening for God's leadership.

Solution-focused leading is an attitude and a focus, but it also can be formalized into a process for change and redevelopment. The process must begin with an understanding that something needs changing. Change is inevitable in the world we live in, but acceptance of that change, and certainly a utilization of that change, is a choice. There are many churches that, from an outside perspective, could use revitalization and new life but that internally have no desire, and perhaps little ability to accept and use change positively. It is understood that these situations do exist, and the truly understanding solution-focused leader or pastor will never try to force a process of positive change if there is no desire. That said, there are very few churches that really want to see the church go away and close its doors after the current generation dies. Most congregations believe in the importance of the Church Universal and their church specifically. The starting place for solution-focused congregational change is always with the congregation. Most congregations are timid when it comes to accepting change and must be lovingly brought into an understanding of what using a change process is and why a church or group would attempt it. Once the theology and groundwork is laid, most congregations will accept the need to enter into a process of solution seeking.

Solution seeking is the time in which there are no bad ideas. Much like

brainstorming, solution seeking elicits all possible responses to the defined problem, situation, or fulfillment of a future goal. This can be effective for an overall vision of the congregation or with individual and isolated problems or issues. This process can only take place after two criteria are met. First, there must be an established and trusted relationship between the solution-focused leader who will guide the process and the congregation or representatives of the congregation. This trust can be achieved because the pastor of the church is leading the solution-focused process or because a trusted outsider has established rapport and spent time listening to stories and opinions. Second, there must be time and attention given to the purpose for this conversation or process. If individuals are brought to the table and asked to offer input about solutions to a problem they do not understand, believe in, or have vested interest in, then the motivation for finding a solution is very low. Motivation in this process must come from a desire to change based on a hope-filled future. In a healthy congregational setting, this can simply be a realization that the church wants to be better and more effective in achieving their goals and mission and ministry for Jesus Christ. In other cases, this understanding will come from crisis or fear of crisis. In either case, there is motivation for looking into possibilities and solutions, and it is from that desire that the solution seeking must begin.

During the time of solution seeking, the solution-focused leader helps point out exceptions she or he hears to the problems and troubles that have caused the need for this process. Often this means listening for those places where the church is doing effective work and offering the love and grace of Jesus Christ. There are very few

churches, if any, that are doing nothing right, and it is the responsibility of the solution-focused leader to become intentional about noticing these things and highlighting them to the congregation. In addition to being a promoter of effectiveness, the guide of solution-focused change will need to help the group dream and imagine. It is often uncomfortable when a group begins to dream about what its church would be like if its members did everything God created them to do. Two of the biggest obstacles for congregations are the lack of experience in dreaming about what a church in general, or their church specifically, can and should be doing, and a defensive nature while talking about something you love. Often when church members dream about what their church can be, they naturally talk about what the church is not currently accomplishing. This can offend pastors, lay-leaders, advocates of previous pastors or leaders, and anyone who has dedicated a portion of his or her life to the church. This is why it becomes essential that during this solution-seeking process the solution-focused leader direct conversations away from the past and onto the future. One of the best ways to understand this process of solution seeking is through the troubles and difficulties of a congregation that has worked through this process and found some possibilities.

A church who for this work will be called, First Church of Anywhere³², once entered into a process of envisioning a better future. The process came about through a change in pastoral leadership. As is common, there were congregants who were

³² This is a composite illustration used to demonstrate elements of a solution focused approach and in no way refers to a real or particular individual or congregation.

deeply saddened by the departure of the previous pastor, and others very excited to see someone new arriving. Between the arrival of the new pastor and the departure of the old, First Church invited a solution-focused pastor to come in and lead a process of vision and focus for the future. The congregation knew that they needed some direction and help but did not know what to look for. The shared reason for this process with the consulting pastor and ten lay-leaders from the church was to get things focused and headed in the right direction for the future. Being a solution-focused leader, the consulting pastor first spent some time talking with each person on the phone about the process and what he or she hoped to gain from their time together. This also allowed the pastor to hear concerns about the past and redirect the conversation into future and solution focuses with each individual before the group gathered. In addition, this phone conversation began the relationship of empathy and trust between this outside pastor/leader and the church members.

When the retreat day began, the first thing on the agenda was a sharing of the goals the pastor had heard the church members express on the phone. The pastor had asked each one what they hoped to get out of the process and asked permission to share that with the whole group when they gathered together. In the few cases where it was difficult to get answers or desires, the pastor simply asked what do you want your church to look like next year? Anytime an answer was offered in a way that described what was not a desired outcome, the solution-focused pastor rephrased the response in the hope-filled way and confirmed with the congregation member whether or not this was what they meant to say. By setting the stage as a day for

hopeful outcomes and future focus, all things began to move in that direction.

After sharing each individual's responses and desires, the pastor asked what the real purpose and meaning of church might be. Many congregants raised the same issues that had been mentioned as introductions to the session and expressed the same hopes. Combining the congregation's desires from this process with the theological discussion about ecclesiology created a goal for the group. Goal stating is one of the initial and most valuable portions of the solution-focused congregational change process. Agreeing upon the reason and purpose of the process must be done in order to achieve a feeling of success in the process and to articulate specific ways to achieve what the congregation needs and wants. The group desired to be more "effective in loving people in this community the way that God loves them." The congregation members had stated portions of this thought in their phone conversations with the solution-focused pastoral leader, and thinking through the scriptures and what they believed about Church caused them to realize that this was what God was calling them to do. The solution-focused consulting pastor phrased the groups quote by adding the word "more" in front of the congregation's statement in order to remind them that in some ways they were already doing this, and they simply desired to do more of it in the future.

From this point, the solution-focused facilitator led the group in a "what if" process of brainstorming and solution seeking. It is not enough simply to ask a group what they want or how they believe they might achieve their goals, rather the leadership required in this portion of the process is to ask questions and frame the

answers in terms of possible solutions. The solution-focused facilitator asked the group at this point to explore what First Church of Anywhere would be doing if they were already living their goal of “more effectively loving people in their community the way God loves them.” The first response was that the church would interact in the community in a more noticeable way. The solution-focused congregational leader quickly asked for some more information because it would be very difficult to measure or define this goal in its current phrasing. The pastor asked, “what specific things would the church be doing when they are more noticeable in the community?” At this point ideas began to flow about community picnics, children’s Easter egg hunts, fall festivals, Christmas plays, and other activities. The solution-focused facilitator could see the passion generated by this conversation and noticed that community involvement was a strength of the congregation, at least in heart if not yet in practice. Because of this passion the solution-focused facilitator enhanced the congregation’s excitement about doing something new by affirming the ideas and inviting more detail about what each might involve.

Finally, the facilitating pastor asked the group to come to agreement about what might be the one best event or activity to begin with in order to more “effectively love the community the way God loves them.” After some discussion about all of the good possibilities, it was decided that because Easter was coming up in a couple of months, a community-wide Easter egg hunt and picnic might be the best option for the congregation to move toward fulfilling its goal. Although many things would help a congregation move forward, selecting something to focus on and

being as specific as possible are two of the most important components of solution-focused congregational leadership. The goal for the congregation and even for this day of visioning was certainly not complete because of a community-wide Easter party, but there was now great momentum and excitement about what the future holds and how a process of solution seeking might work for this congregation.

Part of the goal of solution-focused congregational change is to help the congregation see the strengths and abilities inherent within the congregation for future problem solving and solution finding. Going through the process described above and reflecting on the way the group functions to reach this kind of goal help the next steps of the process and future processes when no solution-focused facilitator is available. After going down this path of solution seeking with several ideas and thoughts from the group, it becomes important to ask the opinions of the group about how things are feeling and progressing. In this case, the solution-focused congregational leader asked the members of First Church of Anywhere “Are these solutions we have discussed and this goal we have stated about showing God’s love going to help you feel that your church has focus and vision for where you are going as this new pastor comes into your church?” This question is important, because as discussed before, in solution-focused theory, the congregation is the expert, and the people must feel that the solutions and goals can be effective, or they will not be.

In this case, First Church felt as though the ability to start doing things in its community would lead it to more outward focus. For years, the leaders of the church believed that if they could get one event going, the congregation would see how great

it was to be in the community and the neighborhood would see how great the church really was. This solution was about much more than one event; it was about a behavioral change that could affect the neighborhood and church for the better.

During a solution-focused congregational change process, the path from goal stating and solution seeking to conclusion depends greatly on the hopes and needs of the congregation or gathered group. If the goal is specific to solving one problem or meeting one need, the fleshing out of one or two solutions might begin the conclusion of the process. However, if there are larger needs or more general hopes and desires, then this goal stating and solution-seeking process should be repeated many times to discover more of the angles and directions to meet the need. There is only so much a group can do at once and only so many things that it can strive for. Therefore, if there are many needs, it is best to tackle them one at a time and seek to give small successes in each area as opposed to overwhelming the congregation or group.

It is always important to conclude a solution-focused leadership process with an achievable goal that the community has created and agreed upon. In addition there should be specific ways the community knows it can help make the goal come to fruition and a way to celebrate when it is achieved. If the time together or process ends with everyone feeling as though there is a goal to solve a problem or find a meaningful vision for the future, that is helpful, but there need to be ways of implementing that vision and behaviors that people can take part in as well.

At Trinity Community Church³³ there were a number of complex issues that needed to be addressed. Three churches were attempting to merge into the Trinity Community Church and the pastoral and lay leadership were very excited about what the future held, but they had no idea how to merge these churches. They were convinced that God was moving them in this direction, but how do you unite three staffs, three facilities, three communities, and three programs? Some of the early work had already been done in discussing facilities and finances, but a solution-focused pastor was brought in to discuss the merging of staffs, personalities, and programs. Understandably, this required not a one-day quick solution-finding experience, but rather a long process of discovery and prayer. Unable to make phone contact before the event due to timing of the session, the solution-focused pastor took time at the beginning of the session to do introductions and listen to the stories of the staff persons that were coming from these three formerly separate but now joining churches. The solution-focused facilitator attempted to offer empathy, encouragement, and excitement about what each member brought to the table.

It became very clear, early in the process, that the group had a lot of anxiety about all of the things not known about the future. Many people were worried about losing jobs or having to redefine what they understood their role to be in the old systems. To enter into overall visioning or to try to tackle all staffing, program, and personality issues would have caused more anxiety and put additional stress into the

³³ This is a composite illustration used to demonstrate elements of a solution focused approach and in no way refers to a real or particular individual or congregation.

group that was neither needed nor warranted. Because of the desire to stay solution and future focused the solution-focused facilitator asked the participants what each dreamed the church might look like three years in the future when the merger would be mostly complete. The solution-oriented facilitator was sensitive to the possibility that the group might have a difficult time dealing with the specifics of staffing questions or programs without remembering the excitement of the overall vision that brought them to this point initially. Beginning with something that people can rally around and be excited about helped the solution-focused facilitator encourage the group, accentuate times when the staff was already doing well, and build rapport.

After some time of getting excited and looking at exceptions to the problems at hand, the solution-focused facilitator asked the group to begin with one area and try to focus on that rather than all of the issues and problems that might be important but not urgent. From the group's responses, the solution-focused facilitator determined that the most pressing matter was that of staff relationships and job transformations because of the merger. The solution-focused facilitator asked what each person would do if he or she were hired to develop a dream staff team for the merged congregation. Each was invited to take some time alone to pray and think about how things would be structured in a perfect situation without regard to names or current personalities involved. This stimulated the imagination and creative ability of each person and gave the group the valuable solution-seeking resource of the members' input. The other benefit of this process was that it prompted the individual staff persons to realize that if they were in charge this would be a difficult task and that no

one would leave things just the way they were. This offers motivation for change and gives the staff empathy for the process as a whole.

With these solutions provided by the staff, the solution-focused facilitator asked the staff members to gather by department (they came in sitting together as the former staffs of each individual church). The children's ministry people gathered in a circle, the youth and young adult's ministers in a circle, the preaching and teaching pastors and staff, the financial staff, administrative assistants, and so on until everyone was paired or grouped by like ministries. At this point the solution-focused facilitator asked each group to share its ideas, and in the spirit of finding solutions, comment only on the portions they agreed with or liked as possible solutions while ignoring comments with which they disagreed. Each sub-group was given a tablet for note taking, and each circle was asked to write down the agreements and possible solutions their group came up with for staffing in their particular area.

After a period of time sharing with one another, each sub-group was asked to share with the entire staff how they believed a dream staff would look for their particular ministry area. The music department shared first and discussed the differing skills and gifts needed for a wonderful music ministry at a great church like Trinity Community. Their main focus was on a shared partnership between their traditional music heritage and the contemporary style that would be important for their future effectiveness. They determined that if they were to create the perfect staff, it would include co-directors of the music ministry. One person would be hired as an expert in traditional music and worship and another in contemporary music and

worship, and these two would coordinate to provide the most meaningful worship to everyone at Trinity Community Church. They then went on to discuss the instrumentalists needed and the administrative assistance that could be shared by the department. Pretty soon the music professionals from three separate churches had agreed upon a dream staff for the new church. Because the first group to share had such success, the solution-focused facilitator praised the efforts and discussed what a God-given blessing it is to see God's future of hope. Then the solution-focused facilitator asked a difficult but important question: "If the board and pastors decide that this model for music ministry is an effective option for your new church, and that each position you have described is needed and valuable, would each of you be willing to apply for one of those new jobs you have created knowing that the job you have now might not exist in its same form?" Although this may not be the final staffing choice that the pastors and board decide upon, if there is an effective model that the music professionals have created themselves and if they are willing to buy in to it to the point of applying for these new jobs, then great strides have been made in finding effective solutions for the future of this church. To the staff's amazement, every music staff person said they would be excited to work on a staff like the one they designed and that to be able to be a part of a staff like that would be worth the risk of change and re-applying for their own position. This is solution-oriented change at its best: created from within and accepted with hope.

The solution-focused facilitator later talked with the pastors who worked with these musicians and they were amazed. They stated that several of these music folks

had never been willing to try anything new and never wanted to hear about changes. One of the pastors specifically said, “I have almost fired that music staff person who was suggesting this new way of ministry because she has said no to everything we have tried at the church.”³⁴ The solution-focused facilitator wanted to use this opportunity to teach the process for future solutions so he asked the pastor, “How many times has that staff person been asked to be a part of the new decisions or changes?” Although the staff member had appeared resistant to change, she may only have been resistant to having change imposed on her. Involving and valuing her in the process of creating change empowered her to embrace it.

It is important for the group to create the solutions that help achieve its stated goals, but the solution-focused facilitator must help frame those goals and solutions so they can be achieved and measured for celebration. If a solution-focused facilitator sees a group or congregation that wishes to set a goal of bringing five thousand new people into the church next year and their solution to that goal is to offer one thousand dollars to everyone in the community to try the church, but the congregation has no money and no access to money, then this is not a reasonable or obtainable goal and solution (and it would create conflict with regard to theological issues). The solution-focused congregational facilitator must always work to frame and specify created thoughts from the congregation in such a way that they are usable and achievable. This does not in any way negate the creation of the goal and solution

³⁴ This is a composite illustration used to demonstrate elements of a solution focused approach and in no way refers to a real or particular individual or congregation.

but simply helps to make achieving them possible in a reasonable time-line and in a way that can be celebrated.

The process of solution seeking can be continued as many times as needed until there is a solution that seems to have consensus among the group as a way forward towards the stated goal or goals. Part of the solution-focused mindset is that positive experience and success foster more success. If small tasks can begin to be accomplished and simple solutions can be implemented, then more difficult tasks will be more manageable. This is one of the reasons why a congregation whose pastor or congregational leader chooses to operate out of this theory will have more success than a congregation who brings in an outsider for one problem or issue. The more positive experiences a congregation or group has with this model, the more change and possibilities there will be for the future.

To conclude this section on the theory of solution-focused congregational change, it is important to state the hope for the end of a solution-focused session or event. It is not the dream or intent to solve every problem with a gathered group of individuals, for that would devolve back to an expert mentality in which the process creates solutions for one specific instance. Instead, the hope is that becoming a solution-focused church with the leadership and guidance of a solution-focused pastor or leader will allow the congregation to repeat this process and implement this theory throughout its ministry and existence. There is little point in this method working once; the goal is that each time this theory is implemented it offers hope to a congregation or organization for the next issue or challenge that they will face.

Solution-focused congregational change offers so much more than solutions; it offers the organization the knowledge that it can produce the best solutions from within itself. This will allow the church or group to function more effectively for years to come. Once a leader is focused on solutions, there is little room for experts who wish to tell him or her what to do and how to do it. This process also limits the amount of frustration the leadership or clergy will feel for the problems and issues the congregation will face.

The solution-focused change theory offers hope to those who lead by reminding them that they are not called to answer all questions. In addition, under this theory, the leaders are in partnership with the members of the church or group and with their creator God, who offers hope and possibilities. Alleviating the pressure and stress of needing to answer all questions and find solutions in a vacuum should begin to curb the clergy/leadership burnout rate so well documented within non-profits and churches. Solution-focused leadership gives an important role to the leader but leaves the burden upon God and the members of a congregation or group.

Theologically and practically, this places the pastor or leader back into the role of shepherd and teacher (in the rabbinic tradition). The pastor asks good questions and leads the flock to water but never claims to have all the answers or to be the source of the water. This is a healthier model for leadership both for the leader and for the congregation.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOLUTION-FOCUSED CONGREGATIONAL CHANGE

The practicality of solution-focused congregational change is at least three-fold. First, solution-focused congregational change can offer effectiveness, hope, and promise to churches that have lost these qualities. This theory is not about doing certain programs or having certain abilities, but about using what God has already given each individual within congregations no matter what their circumstances. This implies that theologically we are not set on one right way of doing the business of church, but rather it is acceptable to vary in our ways of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. This not only brings more applicable solutions to the diversity of congregations that exist across the world, but it also gives buy-in from the congregations so that the solutions are more likely to take hold and be received with enthusiasm. This grass roots understanding of change theory is not particularly new, but many theories of church leadership have moved away from this model into the expert mentality of leadership. Looking for the solutions from within the community not only offers better solutions that are more tailored for the particular context but also offers hope and abilities for the future.

The second implication of solution-focused congregational change is for the more distant future of the church. This theory teaches churches how to listen to God and think for themselves. This skill lasts well beyond any one leader or expert and allows congregations a new way of operating and fulfilling their mission. When a

congregation or group is encouraged to create solutions for itself, and walked through the process of solution seeking, it realizes that it is able to find solutions and create possibilities for the future. This is one of the most important implications of this leadership theory, because it promotes health and hope within the congregational system so that effective ministry, however that is defined, might be experienced for years beyond the initial problem or issue. This is why solution-focused congregational change is a valuable tool for congregations experiencing problems or lack of vision now and also for those congregations who may in the future. Solution-focused congregational change theory is a way of daily operation, not merely a one-time answer for difficult times within a church. Churches that operate out of this understanding have a future of hope, as they know how to move past troubling issues and into possibility visioning and future excitement.

A third implication of solution-focused congregational change addresses the clergy leadership who increasingly burn out and quit for secular work. The church is a proven place of difficulty and stress, but a portion of this issue derives from the self-imposed need to become the savior to congregations. Clergy in this model are given permission to ask questions rather than supply all of the answers. If congregations can be trained and reinforced in this way of thinking, clergy will benefit for years to come with longer and more effective ministries. Too often clergy change professions even if they feel called to church ministry because they and their families cannot handle the stress and pain often experienced in their profession. This is sad and unfortunate for the churches who need experienced leadership and for the

clergy who have often invested years of education and thousands of dollars to become a clergy person. Solution-focused congregational change model gives clergy a new model for effective leadership but does not put all of the pressure onto the clergy alone. The largest benefit to this way of leadership will be seen when the church or congregation accepts and adopts this method of working together with their clergy for the long-term ministries. When a congregation has become solution focused, the stress and pressure on clergy will be significantly less, and the clergy will be able to focus on the more important callings of sharing God's love and being Christ's presence. Churches that realize the possibilities of solutions, and know they can create solutions, benefit themselves and their clergy.

In conclusion, the practical implications of solution-focused congregational change theory goes beyond the here and now and offer hope to congregations, as well as to the clergy called by God to lead those congregations, for years to come. This approach can offer excitement, hope, and revitalization by finding solutions to problems and giving a foundation for vision and future possibilities. It is important that churches find ways of empowering their laity to respond to the needs of local communities while still offering God-ordained leadership to the pastors and staff. Solution-focused congregational change combines these two processes and allows a hope-filled future for churches and clergy willing to participate in this new way of operating and thinking.

First Church of Anywhere³⁵ used to be a church dependent upon originality and answers from its pastor as leader. Its members saw him as a chief operating officer of the church, and one of the main reasons why they felt the need to focus and plan for the future during this time of transition was because the members of the church had no real experience doing this work. In addition, the solution-focused facilitator who came to guide the group through this process contacted the outgoing pastor for background information and found that part of the reason why the pastor left was because he felt alone in his ministry. He described feeling that he “operated in isolation”³⁶ and was leading the church by himself. This led the former pastor to feel frustrated and ultimately leave the church and the ministry. Now that First Church of Anywhere knows and appreciates the solution-focused process, the next pastor, if willing to use this approach, will experience a church ready to make decisions and able to solve problems and issues as they arise. This approach to change and church functioning offered hope to First Church of Anywhere and set it up for a hopeful future with directions to achieve their goals in mission and ministry as God’s church.

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POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS TO THIS THEORY AND PRACTICE

Any theory or model has flaws and limitations. In addition, all theories are rooted in contextual issues and specificities that must be taken into account. There are several possible objections to and concerns with solution-focused congregational change. Solution-focused theory requires great belief in the abilities and competencies of humanity. It asserts that people have the ability to create solutions and find answers to their issues and problems. It can be argued that individuals do not always have the ability to create solutions. It can be further asserted that congregations that are ineffective and/or in crisis are not capable of creating solutions as a collective body. Many times the answer to this problem is an outside expert or a strong leader who can control the congregation into seeing options and solutions. This concept opts for a fixer mentality rather than a partnership mentality between leader and congregation. There are congregations, just as there are individuals, that are so broken that finding an internal solution may feel impossible. There are congregations so conflicted and entrenched in their thoughts and beliefs that they cannot find hope-filled solutions by themselves. Solution-focused change theory can miss true pathologies that exist and need to be medically dealt with on an individual scale, and something similar could happen on the congregational level. There are cases where congregation are experiencing legal, ethical, or institutional problems that might be missed by the hopeful longing of a solution-focused change process.

In addition, some pastors and leaders want to be more directive in their leadership style and will argue that offering opinions and solutions is the God-ordained calling of those set apart to lead the church. There are those leaders who do not feel as though they are functioning in the proper role unless they are fixing problems and offering answers. This role of leader does provide solutions in the short-term and often will provide answers to difficult situations faster than a solution-focused approach; however, it is a short-term fix that will not give a long-term way of operation for a church or organization. Solution-focused facilitators often have difficulty holding back opinions and answers that they know would be helpful, but they do so because they see the bigger picture of education and training that can be gained through solution finding. In individual solution-focused care, many times the lack of opinion or direction in the counselor seat inhibits finding the best possible outcome. There are times when a strong voice or opinion is needed and warranted. The same is true on a congregational scale. There is a time and place for leadership that includes mobilizing the church very quickly and moving in an appropriate direction. Solution-focused theory is not a constant mode of operation for a church structure.

Another objection comes from the realities of context. As stated previously about an expert or author always having a context that influences his or her theories and solutions, so too solution-focused congregational change can have contextual problems. The idea behind this approach is that the leader does not provide the answers but guidance, encouragement, and framing. However, there are traditions

and styles of churches that demand authoritarian leadership from their pastor and staff. They verbalize the desire to be directed and moved in certain directions by a pastor who is ordained by God and has a calling to be in charge. There have been examples of solution-focused congregational change working well even in traditional circumstances where an authoritarian leadership style is expected; however, in other contexts it would not be well received.

The other circumstance that poses a challenge to solution-focused congregational change is the church that does not perceive any problems and/or has no desire to accept changes. Some churches may not wish to enter a change process but because of great need or very apparent problems are willing to look into new solutions. Other churches do not have large problems but have a desire to creatively adapt to changes that are inevitable and be more effective. In either of these settings, solution-focused congregational change can work. In places and times where there is no perceived need or desire to adapt, it becomes very difficult to help people seek solutions. They see no reason to find solutions, and they are not excited about new possibilities. Within this context the leader or pastor needs to have grace and understanding and establish a very slow process of looking to the future. Even a church that makes the decision to decline in number and ministry may be able to find health and vitality for its remaining years through a solution-focused process or pastor. In this case the goal might be to offer pastoral care and community for five more years until the congregation has mostly died or moved on. If this is the goal of the congregation, then a solution-focused congregational facilitator will help that

congregation see solutions to that goal. It must be remembered that the goal must come from within the congregation or church in order to receive buy-in and excitement.

Many times the pastor or leader may not agree with the goal, but he or she must trust that God offers insight to all persons, not just to pastors. Solution-focused congregational change will bog down when the group or church is unwilling to think of goals or sees no reason to do anything differently. Such churches are rare, but they do exist.

In order to work with a solution-focused process toward change, one must adhere to an anthropology that suggests that humanity can find a way forward, and time has proven this to be true. Change is inevitable, and evolution of humanity has been a constant throughout history. A solution-focused oriented pastor acts upon this reality and allows God to guide congregations and individuals into that future of hope. In addition, a faith perspective that states that God's creative abilities can be seen and experienced in and through humanity and through the church must be sought. In addition to these two assumptions, the church or group must desire to make a change or do something differently. If these two assumptions and the desire for change can be found, then the objections to solution-focused congregational change theory can be overcome.

No theory of change will work one hundred percent of the time in all situations. Solution-focused change has its limitations and hazards. Believing that Christ is the leader of the church and trusting that creative wisdom exists among the

people of the church, will not guarantee productive changes and hope filled solutions, but it can strengthen the spirit of a congregation and its leadership for new possibilities.

POTENTIAL OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS TO THIS THEORY

Solution-focused congregational change offers much of what the Church has been searching for in the past several decades of decline. Solution-focused churches are able to interact and respond to the culture and world around them because they have the tools to find solutions to difficult situations without relying on the latest book or expert to tell them how to operate. In addition, solution-focused churches will be more authentic in their operations and ministries because the solutions they find will be their own, created by the church and for the church, not created thousands of miles away by an expert in a different context and copied to the best of the local church's understanding. This sense of authenticity combined with the ability to be flexible in ministry to the current and ever-changing needs of the community and world around the church offers a hope and excitement that congregations are often lacking.

Solution-focused congregational change also allows congregations to feel pride and ownership in their ministry in a way that is rarely accomplished by a leader who dictates answers or by an expert's writings in the latest "how to" book. A church that goes through a solution-seeking process and finds meaning in working through its difficulties and moving into a hopeful future will be excited about what it is doing and will look ahead to what else can and should be done in its ministry setting. Solution-focused congregational leadership also provides a very different and more

authentic role for the pastor or leader. It is not reasonable to expect clergy or even consultants to have every answer to every problematic situation. This expectation is not only unreasonable but also detrimental to the church and its leadership. It is much more reasonable to have leaders be the shepherds of a solution-seeking process whereby they are the exception-finders and solution framers. These leaders who become facilitators help get the congregation moving and help it see that members can find solutions and answers for themselves. This leads to much longer-term health than any solution or answer a pastor or leader might come up with on her or his own.

There are not many examples of churches that have functioned for long periods of time under a model of solution-focused congregational change, however the churches that have gone through this kind of process and have begun to think about what it means to search for solutions instead of focusing on problems or waiting for an expert to offer them a “silver bullet” are experiencing vitality and hope. For example, St. Stephen Church³⁷, which had been frustrated, lacking purpose, and losing members and attendees on a regular basis, now experiences hope and vitality. This change did not happen because a new pastor came in with all of the answers, nor did the board read the latest book on effective ministry solutions. Rather, the congregation members began to believe in themselves and create solutions that worked for them.

A member of St. Stephen Church heard of another congregation that decided

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to work with a solution-focused consultant instead of an answers-based consultant for its annual retreat. The report this church member heard was that this church now felt that it could come up with answers on its own for problems and visioning and no longer needed experts to help it. This intrigued the member of St. Stephen Church because she had become increasingly frustrated with outside experts leaving behind notebooks that were never implemented or referenced again. Therefore, she proposed to her pastor and board that their church try a solution-focused retreat to see what it might do for them. As they entered this process, they did so with some hesitation, because they did not know what to expect, but what they quickly discovered was that there was hope for their congregation, and they became excited about several possibilities. The process started with a solution-focused facilitator telling the participants that they had valuable input and solutions to the problems they were facing and that together they would look into those possibilities and find the best solutions for St. Stephen Church. After many hours of conversations, solution seeking, and discernment, the church board at St. Stephen Church knew they could become effective in sharing the Good News and offering their passion for ministry to the community and world.

Even more impressive was what happened a few months later. The solution-focused facilitator who came into St. Stephen Church to help guide them through this process and get the church moving in a hopeful direction received a phone call from the pastor of St. Stephen Church. The pastor told the solution-focused facilitator that the church had experienced great trouble trying to implement a portion of the vision

and plan that was derived from the solution-seeking process. The solution-focused facilitator was worried that the process might have failed in some way and that the pastor was calling to complain about the whole idea of solution-focused congregational change. However, just the opposite was true; the St. Stephen Church board who had gone through the solution-seeking process gathered together when they recognized that there were new issues with the solutions they had chosen and went back to the solution-seeking process by themselves. Their pastor reported that they were not frustrated, they were not at a loss for what to do next, and although there was discussion about bringing the solution-focused facilitator back in to guide the conversation, they determined that they had learned how to create solutions for themselves and they would be able to handle things. This hopeful mentality among church leadership and dedicated church members is rare but can be nourished by using a solution-focused mentality for church operations.

CONCLUSION

Solution-focused congregational change is a model that focuses attention on the God-given gifts of each church and organization to solve its own issues and dilemmas. The role of leader therefore becomes that of guide and facilitator of the congregation's ability and solution-seeking process. This offers several benefits to the church and the leader. First, the church benefits from making its own solutions and becoming confident in the ability to deal with problems in the future. It also makes the church more flexible in a fast-paced and ever-changing world. Second, the solutions found by the group, from within, are always more authentic and more accepted and therefore more likely to be implemented than an expert's option or leader's suggestion. Third, this model offers a healthier and more reasonable expectation for clergy leadership, because it is not practical to assume all clergy can fix the problems of all churches. Finally, solution-focused congregational change puts the focus of ministry back into the correct place. Churches are called to look at and proclaim the good news of God's world, God's creation, and God's love. Focusing on solutions and possibilities helps the church to emphasize what can be and what should be, rather than focusing on problems and what is not working. This is a vital part of being the body of Christ and offering the Good News to the world.

One of the most important things about this theory of congregational change is the potential it has to create more effective leaders and churches for the ever-

changing world we find ourselves in today. With communication and information so readily available, and with so many options for activities and use of our time, the church has to find solutions to the decreasing role it plays in people's lives. In addition, the Church must find ways of offering the light, hope, and love that it was created to offer. This can happen in the short term by hiring consultants or reading great literature, but lasting change and effectiveness for the Church will only come when it finds a way to focus hope on God's future and seek solutions to be a part of that future. Perhaps a process such as solution-focused congregational change can help leaders and churches achieve this goal.

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