

Attributes of a Flourishing Conference

What is the true health of a Conference—is it flourishing or failing? Over the years, the Society has provided checklists and evaluations such as Standards of Excellence, Questions About Required Practices, and the annual Operational and Financial Review, prompting Conferences to assess their health. With boxes marked, these checklists and evaluations likely indicate a relatively healthy Conference. But beneath the surface, a troubling feeling remains that the Conference is in decline, drifting further away from the "Vincentian" charism. The Conference is no longer growing or even holding its own. There are never enough Vincentians to meet neighbors' needs or perform key administrative tasks. Once active members have disappeared. The Society's works stagnate or are slowly collapsing. The Society has become a job, not a vocation, and certainly not a place to grow in holiness.

A Reflective Approach: Attributes of Flourishing Conferences

What if we truly and honestly identified the underlying values, beliefs, and practices of our Conference and assess their contributions to success or lack of it? The following segments offer attributes of a flourishing conference from servant leadership to operational efficiency and effectiveness. Ask: are there signs that an attribute has or is failing? What needs to change to flip a failing attribute to a flourishing attribute? Where there are positive attributes, what must the Conference do to sustain them?

Servant Leadership Attributes and Dynamics

Attribute 1: Conference leadership from the President to the Board do not center attention almost exclusively on daily activities and emergencies. Longer-term issues—how the Conference will succeed in coming years, accompanied by self-reflection--are seen as urgent or requiring reflective time the Conference should invest.

Attribute 2: Succession planning means there is more than one candidate for President. The President is not voted into office because he/she is the only person willing to stand for the office. Fitness and a calling for the role are overriding considerations.

Attribute 3: The Conference does have a full slate of officers. Only under extreme circumstances does one officer fill more than one position for a short period. There is infrequent turnover of Conference officers during the President's term.

Attribute 4: The Conference leadership, other than the limited-term President, do not recycle from term to term with leadership positions retained for years. The Conference has a strong commitment to recruiting new leadership with different perspectives, avoiding the perpetuation of "this is the way we have always done it."

Attribute 5: Conference members fully believe the Conference leadership desires and practices open communication in discussing and reaching consensus on decisions. Leadership never prefers the decision-making to be

held at the Board level. There is ongoing open, honest engagement with and within the Conference membership.

Attribute 6: Conference leadership either at the Board level or within the Conference use a true consensus approach and do not wait for total agreement before acting. The process for Conference membership agreement seldom involves a motion and a vote.

Attribute 7: The President, the sole elected official, looks to his or her Board for advice, not for decision-making authority.

Attribute 8: Different services such as financial aid, food pantry, and other special works are seen as equal parts of a holistic team. These services do not engage in independent actions or territorial disputes. Teamwork across and within services is highly valued.

Attribute 9: Conference leadership does not perform almost all work for the Conference, from direct services to neighbors to data entry and reporting. Leadership does not take on available work with only a cursory call-out to members. Leadership never takes on a “martyrdom” attitude of saving the Conference by their work.

Conference Meetings

Attribute 10: The Conference faithfully meets twice a month. The meetings emphasize a good portion of the time on spirituality. The Conference meeting agenda does not heavily focus on business reports, business discussion, and/or training on providing services, such as filling in case records or reporting on pantry distribution. Considerable time is spent on discussion of neighbor encounters and reflections on those encounters.

Attribute 11: The President crafts an agenda that respects the time members devote to a meeting. He or she controls the meeting, so it is rarely overlong.

Attribute 12: The Conference cultivates Conference members to understand and comply with The Rule. The Conference is fully committed to living the Rule and does not allow exceptions to The Rule.

Spirituality and Friendship

Attribute 13: The Conference has a Spiritual Advisor who regularly attends meetings and fully engages in their spiritual direction. His or her spiritual reflection avoids the form of a homily. The Advisor fully promotes the spiritual life of the Conference, including leading discernment and formation of members or promoting member spirituality and friendship during the meeting’s business portions.

Attribute 14: The Conference alerts members about attending a monthly mass before one Conference meeting and follows up if individual attendance is

consistently sparse.

Attribute 15: The Conference celebrates one or more Society feast days and festival meetings. It also holds retreats or partners with a neighboring conference to conduct retreats. These are seen as vital for building a shared experience of the Society's rituals and traditions.

Attribute 16: The Conference has gatherings such as potlucks to promote friendship outside of the Conference meetings.

Conference Help to Neighbors

Attribute 17: The Conference crafts stewardship of funds to only hold sufficient funds for immediate operational needs or capital expenses. It does not hoard substantial funds for future needs or a "rainy" day. The Conference believes in Divine Providence, trusting that God will provide what is needed.

Attribute 18: The Conference's directives for helping neighbors are stable to avoid disruption and confusion for both neighbors and Vincentians providing the assistance.

Attribute 19: The Conference only collects neighbor information that is of direct support in determining need, exhibiting trust and respect for those in need who request financial or other assistance.

Attribute 20: The Conference understands the importance of safeguarding policies and practices and the danger if they are not followed. The Conference knows that all neighbor person-to-person contact must be made by two Vincentians and does not allow only one Vincentian to perform this contact. Fingerprinting and background checks are tightly monitored.

Attribute 21: The Conference uses home visits as the primary method of service in the Society and ensures there is sharing within the Conference of the impact on the member as the home visitor.

Attribute 22: The insights of new members who come from other Conferences are welcomed. They are not discounted as "will not work here" or "we don't do it that way."

Attribute 23: The Conference meets neighbors' immediate needs (rent, utilities, food, clothing) as a traditional focus. However, the Conference is building major efforts to move individuals out of poverty.

Visibility to the Pastor and Parishioners

Attribute 24: The Conference sees communication and relationship with its Pastor and parishioners on its service and activities as central tools for the success of the Conference. The Pastor takes an active interest in the Conference.

One Society

Attribute 25: Conference members and leadership are active participants in District/Council programs and events, including attending events and serving on committees.

Attribute 26: The Conference President ensures that communications from the Diocesan Council and District to be shared with Conference members is actually shared.

Attribute 27: The Conference is an active user of the tools on the Society's website, striving continuously to strengthen its ministry and operations.

Attribute 28: Annual reporting and operational and financial reviews are seen as important in accountability and in identifying the status of the Conference's ongoing operations and financial stewardship.

Membership Recruitment, Utilization, and Retention

Attribute 29: The Conference believes that recruitment of new members is vital to the continuation of the Conference. Society recruitment programs and tools are effectively used. Barriers such as the age of the potential recruitment pool, other activities being more attractive than the Society's service to those in need, and/or lack of Vincentians to develop and continue an active recruitment program are never used as excuses.

Attribute 30: The Conference's main recruitment goal is not "live bodies" to fill slots serving those in need. Searching for volunteers with a possible vocation is seen as central to the mission of the Conference. Recruitment vehicles such as a pulpit talk or parish bulletin language emphasize the full scope of being a Vincentian and the growth in holiness mission.

Attribute 31: The Conference sees the active member admission process from discernment to commissioning as fundamental to being a member in the Society. The Conference closely follows the Society's discernment process before a member is accepted as an active member. Members who choose to be associates are always invited to Conference activities.

Attribute 32: New or returning members serve where the need is greatest, avoiding the members automatically selecting where they want to work. This avoids the perception of the Conference as a volunteer organization, not a Vincentian organization.

Attribute 33: The Conference robustly forms its members in the Vincentian way, starting with the Ozanam Orientation. The Ozanam Orientation is scheduled for new members every year. Serving in Hope and the Vincentian Pathway are used as ongoing formation and training tools.

Attribute 34: The Conference pays considerable attention to the revitalization and retention of current members. The coming and goings of members are reviewed and addressed on a consistent basis. There is attention to manifestations of slackening interest and to reaching out to absent Vincentians.



Operational Efficiency

Attribute 35: Conference policies, procedures, and processes are reviewed on an ongoing basis. The review targets how they impact the Conference's services to both neighbors and Vincentians or how they meet the spirit of Vincentian spirituality, friendship, and service.



Attribute 36: The Conference is anxious to embrace newer technology and targeted database software such as ServWare. There is heavy emphasis on moving away paper-based data collection and reducing substantial data entry tasks. Conference members are seen competent to embrace technology directly.



Moving Forward: Identification and Inventing

So, the next step is to honestly identify what attributes might be deemed as failing, not flourishing. Whether the number of failing attributes is large or small, failing is not an option for Vincentians and for those we serve. One failing area can lead to others in a cascading effect. Many failing areas can lead to a terminal situation.

St. Vincent reminds us that charity requires organization, but that charity also is inventive unto infinity. He called us to not only do good but do it well. Doing good well means we need flourishing conferences. Let's get to inventing.