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CONGREGATIONAL
RESOURCE GUIDE

The Illusion of Congregational "Happiness"

by
Gil Rendle

About the Article

This article argues that focusing on complaints in the hope of increasing congregational happiness leads only to additional and competing complaints rather than to increased happiness for a congregation and its leaders. The search for congregational "happiness" forces leaders to focus on problem questions rather than purpose and identity questions.

Many complaints—and the ineffectiveness of trying to "fix" them—stem from the increasing diversity of expectations in our congregations.

The key to successful leadership is to "unhook" the system of evaluation, turning instead to a culture of understanding and communication. Originally published in two parts ("On Not Fixing the Church" and "Unhooking the System") by *Congregations* magazine in May/June 1997.

About the Author

Gilbert Rendle is a senior consultant with the [Texas Methodist Foundation](#) and a former senior consultant with the [Alban Institute](#), which offers these comments on Gil's background and expertise:

"Gil has an extensive background in organizational development, group and systems theory, and leadership development. He frequently consults with congregations on planning, staff and leadership development, and issues of change. He is well-known for his work with middle judicatory offices and staff as they wrestle with the issues of both denominational and congregational change. In training workshops and leadership retreats, Gil has led numerous large and small groups in practical learning that directly affects the decisions and behaviors that participants practice in their congregations."

His publications include *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences*; *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*; *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders*; *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge*; and *When Moses Meets Aaron: Staffing and Supervision in Large Congregations*.

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Part 1: On Not Fixing the Church

How and when did American congregations become so sensitive about complaints? One very large congregation with more than adequate financial resources asked for help with a problem: a few influential members who contributed significantly to the financial support of the church were unhappy. They were not unhappy with what the Senior Minister was doing, but with the way in which he was doing it. Since most of the leaders were pleased with the Senior Minister, they were asking me how they could address the concerns of the complainers and make them happy.

Another congregation, happy and healthy, asked me to work with its governing board to make some obviously needed changes in worship. But they were overwhelmed—and therefore felt powerless: every alternative they considered was matched with persons or groups who might be unhappy with the change. What to do?

Often, congregational leaders want to "fix" their congregations, meaning correcting complaints and making it "perfect" for everyone. Instead, I suggest a healthier response: to work toward faithfulness rather than happiness. I advise them to go back to their mission statement or their understanding of their congregation's call to ministry and develop decisions that support such a position.

The Happiness Trap

There are several built-in traps to using happiness as a criterion for decision making. The same is true for using complaints or their absence as a measuring stick of effectiveness. Perhaps the most damning trap is the constraining of the Spirit of God. This is the risk we run personally when we practice only the parts of a faith that we enjoy or appreciate.

This risk was highlighted when an interviewer asked Houston Smith, widely known for his understanding and teaching of world religions, about his own spiritual practices. These included daily Christian prayer and Muslim prayer rituals, as well as Buddhist and Hindu disciplines. Noting the eclectic pulling-together of so many faith traditions, the interviewer asked if Dr. Smith recommended such a potpourri of practices for others. The answer was a resounding "no" because people might then choose only parts of disciplines that seemed safe and comfortable. "If you only practice and attend to those things that you already appreciate and understand," said Dr. Smith, "you are assuming that you are already where you are supposed to be spiritually. You have left no room for growth and development that only comes from submitting yourself to a spiritual discipline that might in fact be meant to change you."

Such is the risk of congregational happiness as a criterion for decision making. If we assume that the only appropriate decisions for our faith community are those that will affirm what we already do and already appreciate, we have constrained the movement of the Spirit of God. That Spirit may want to call us to, and discipline us for, some greater maturity or purpose.

A second trap is that the happiness principle controls change by minimizing or eliminating it. Over attention to complaints is a predisposition to stability and status quo.

This is often demonstrated by a congregation's personnel committee or any group given the task of evaluation. Many such groups are very unsure of how to proceed with an "evaluation" of such a nebulous process as "ministry" or "leadership." And so they ask what seems to be the obvious question: "Do we have any complaints?" If the answer is "yes," then they move quickly to problem solving in order to eliminate the practices drawing complaints (i.e., return the congregation to a stable status quo where happiness overrides complaints). If the answer is no, they often conclude quickly that their task is completed, and they report a favorable evaluation (i.e., again supporting the status quo stability where nothing has changed sufficiently to create any discomfort that may have prompted a complaint.)

The third trap of trying to "fix" and continually perfect the congregation focuses the attention and energy of leadership internally and avoids or ignores any call to external ministry. Yet mounting research that defines vital congregations consistently stresses that they are clear about balancing their internal and external attention. They minister to current members and to potential members—as well as to those who will never be members.

In this moment when church leaders are attempting to understand which congregations will successfully navigate the waters of change from one paradigm to another, there is increasing awareness that ships that list out of balance in the rapid waters of change will be the first ones to sink.

A Systems Paradox

In a seeming paradox, efforts to "fix" congregations actually bring an end to complaints less often than they create opportunities for additional and competing complaints. A reference to general-systems theory can be helpful in understanding this phenomenon. According to the theory, complex systems (such as a person, a corporation, or a congregation) have interconnected and interrelated parts. In the sciences, general-systems theory continues to evidence the global interconnectedness of all living systems. This is true to such a high degree that, as the saying goes, "When a butterfly flaps its wings in the rain forest of South America, there will be tornadoes in Texas." In other words, any change in one part of an interdependent system will cause responding and rebalancing changes in other parts of the system.

In a highly interrelated and interconnected system, to "fix" one part is to throw the rest of the system into disequilibrium. Perhaps a helpful image is a mobile: a hanging work of art in which component pieces seem to be free-floating in space though the wires and braces keep them interconnected and interrelated. Changing or removing just one part of the mobile causes the rest of the system to swing through massive changes of position trying to accommodate the initial change ("fix"). So it is that an attempt to fix a complaint in the congregation often creates more complaints as the rest of the congregational system swings and shifts to accommodate the "fix."

Systemically it is normal that if a worship committee makes changes to quell complaints about the music, their response will spawn a scattering of additional complaints. The congregational system shifts to accommodate the newest change—meant to fix the problem. Similarly, when organizational rules about decision making are enforced to fix complaints that people are not following "proper procedure," new

complaints will arise from others about red tape and the suppression of initiative. And when the pastor agrees with the governing board to focus her attention and time on the development of small groups because there are complaints about lack of fellowship, there will be a new outcropping of complaints about lack of pastoral visitation and availability.

Congregational Reality

Rather than trying to solve problems and fix the causes of complaints, leaders in many congregations today are more appropriately trying to manage differences and make decisions based on the congregation's defined purpose or goals. The search for congregational "happiness" is not only difficult for leaders, but also damaging to ministry. This reality is based in a fundamental cultural change characterizing congregations today.

We have changed from a culture of sameness to a culture of difference. There was a time not long ago when conformity and sameness were strong values to be followed. I often joke with people in continuing education events that when I was growing up as a United Methodist, if I left Philadelphia and traveled to Boston or Chicago, I could go to worship late on a Sunday morning and know exactly how late I was without looking at my watch. All I needed was to see where the congregation was in the worship liturgy and I would know the time. Worship services were fundamentally the same, as were the expectations of the people who worshipped in all of those churches.

This culture of sameness described not only the church. If you wanted to buy a refrigerator in the l940s or l950s, there may have been more than one manufacturer, but there were very few models of refrigerators to pick from. The assumption was that everyone who needed a refrigerator needed the same kind. If you wanted a phone, you got one just like everyone else—big, black, and bulky, attached to the wall with a pretty substantial cord. Today if you want a refrigerator, salespeople are trained to "educate" you, not just about the tremendous array of models and features, but about yourself and your "refrigerator needs." Presumably, such knowledge will help you to pick just the right one in a culture of tremendous differences and choices. And what about phones? Recently in Atlanta I noticed that Radio Shack was having a sale on telephones and advertised "one hundred different models" to choose from. I had trouble thinking of more than about a dozen kinds.

Ours is now a culture that honors diversity and differences. It is not a question of whether we should, or if it is good to do so. Sameness and difference form a polarity in which health and community are to be found somewhere in the tension between the two. Our present focus on differences and diversity is not the problem of ministry; it is simply the reality that our congregations are living. Consider:

- More and more congregations report that between 40 and 60 percent of their new members do not come from the same denominational background as the congregation they are joining. They may not understand why the congregation works as it does because of its history or its practice. But they do come with some expectations of how they would like to see it work. These are real differences.

- Increasingly, congregations are receiving new members who not only have no denominational experience to match the history of their new church; they have no congregational experience at all. Not only don't they know how this congregation behaves and what it believes, they are not sure what to expect from any congregation. This group may not be sure what its new church home is prepared to offer, but they are sure they are seeking something and are willing to articulate it—for themselves, their children, or the kind of world they hope to live in.

- Trends continue to show that more and more people are joining large churches (worship attendance of 250 or more on Sunday morning). Yet, ours has been a national history of small congregations (worship attendance of 150 or less on Sunday morning). Experience continues to say that the size of a congregation is the most critical variable in determining how it behaves, and that congregations of very different sizes behave in very different ways. This is especially true regarding communication, decision making, programs, leadership, and worship. Our congregations are increasingly a mixture of small-church expectations, large-church expectations, and non-church expectations, depending on the congregational experience that church members bring to their present congregation.

These are simply a few measures of the differences that are coming to characterize our congregations. There is an additional multitude of differences based on the variety of lifestyles and preferences of congregational members. Continually drawing the pictures of these differences and tracking their sources is critically helpful to our leaders as they seek to understand differences without taking them personally. However, pastors and church leaders are forever faced with the issue of how to satisfy multiple and often competing concerns or complaints.

To approach this situation from the perspective of "fixing the church" or "trying to make everyone happy" is like stepping into a shower too quickly on a chilly morning. We instinctively reach for the hot water and turn it up hoping to fix the problem, but end up unbalancing the system. The shower then becomes too hot because we have over-attended to the hot water. We then have to reach for the cold, often in the process further unbalancing the system and requiring that we play with the faucets a third or fourth time. The more you play with the faucets, trying to "fix" the water temperature, the longer the system stays in disequilibrium.

So, too, trying to satisfy each and every demand in the congregation (or the judicatory) does not lead to improvement, or even satisfaction of the complaints. It simply keeps the system out of balance and in a reactive mode as various expectations compete.

We were exploring this systems paradox in a training event with clergy and laity who were preparing to try to help congregations go through transformational change. One of the group members later sent me a computer graphic of a bathroom shower with a heading that said, "Keep your hands off the faucets." That may not be a bad maxim for congregational leaders who are experiencing complaints. We need to encourage leaders to stop trying to adjust the water to make it comfortable for everyone, and to stop trying to fix every complaint.

Instead, congregational leaders need to begin learning more about their congregations rather than trying to fix them. Obviously, ignoring complaints may be

even more dangerous than trying to fix them. Differences and dissatisfactions that go without any response lead to divisions and mistrust. Congregational leaders—clergy and lay—need to let their members know that their concerns and complaints have been heard. But then, congregational ministry, especially in a changing environment, is better served if leaders would expend their energy in trying to understand why their congregational systems react or respond as they do rather than trying to fix them.

We clearly need to "unhook the system" from our earlier congregational expectations of sameness, and from the need to think that harmony and community depend upon everyone being "happy."

Part 2: Unhooking the System

I remember a particularly frustrating "game" from my childhood. My sister would decide that I was in a bad mood and needed to smile, or simply that I needed to be irritated. She would begin to mimic everything I said and did as a way of getting me either to laugh or to scream. If I whistled, she whistled. If I looked out the window, she looked out the window. If I said "Stop it," she said "Stop it." If I yelled, "Mom!" she yelled "Mom!" What was truly frustrating about this "game" was that there was no way to end it. Whatever I did to bring the game to an end was mimicked and became the next step in the game itself.

In the first part of this article, "On Not Fixing the Church," I explored how, from a systems perspective, complaints and the search for "happiness" (satisfying complaints and making things right for everyone) have a similar effect on the congregation. A congregation today is a social institution of increasing differences and complexity. Each time leadership tries to satisfy a complaint in this complex reality, it does not return the congregation to happiness or satisfaction (the end of the game). Instead, "fixing" a complaint, in interrelated and interconnected systems such as congregations, becomes the next step in the game of differences, and spawns the next complaint from some other part of the system.

Congregational leaders, clergy and laity alike, are seeking ways to end the complaint game. They are learning to make decisions based on their understanding of the congregation's call to ministry or its core purpose, rather than according to an individual's or group's preferences. This often means managing differences in the congregation rather than harmonizing them, or managing differences in order to preserve them rather than negotiating differences into common agreement. It means "unhooking" the congregational system from the "we need to fix it" complaint game.

One of the fundamental ways of unhooking the system from the "fix it" syndrome is to be intentional about the questions that leaders are asked to address.

I worked recently with an expanded personnel committee in a congregation that was experimenting with a new and potentially exciting form of ministry involving multiple staff. After several years they had concluded that the idea was still good but that it just wasn't working. They had recently experienced their second round of substantial complaints from congregation members.

When I asked the committee to explain the mission or purpose of their new experiment in ministry, I received multiple and contradictory interpretations from people around the room. When I asked them to explain their purpose as a personnel committee, again they offered multiple explanations. When I asked what they did as a committee to help implement the new experiment, the chairperson responded by saying that they really didn't have a clear role. Rather, they just reacted to problems that staff encountered. This group of leaders was constantly facing problem questions:

- Who wants what?
- How do we satisfy (a person or a group)?
- What should we do about (a problem or a complaint)?

Leaders and committees benefit greatly in escaping the "fix it" game by reframing questions they seek to answer. The goal is to minimize the problem questions and refocus on purpose and identity questions:

- Who are we and who are we called to be?
- What are we called to do in this chapter of our history as a congregation?
- What are the goals and/or objectives that we set out to accomplish in our ministry?
- What are the appropriate strategies for our ministry, and how will we measure its attainment?

Staying focused on purposeful questions instead of problem questions helps remind leaders that change is expected in their congregation and their ministry. They are then more easily reminded that changes in a congregational system are often accompanied by complaints. They can begin to explore those complaints or discomforts as possible evidence of their goals in ministry rather than as barriers. It is quite a different perspective for leaders to discuss if they have been receiving complaints "appropriate to" defined goals of ministry, than to discuss trying to keep everyone satisfied as they try to initiate changes.

Making the shift from a fix-it posture to purposeful leadership is often a change in the congregational system itself and will provoke reactions in the congregation as the system tries to rebalance and find equilibrium. As in withdrawal from caffeine, there will be headaches. The congregational system will initially become more reactive and complaining, not less so.

According to family systems theory, when a family system seeks to change for the better through therapy or some other intervention, the family initially gets worse (becomes more reactive) before it gets better. It is easy to see this in the frustrating game of mimic from my childhood. When I finally figured out that the only way to stop my sister from irritatingly copying everything that I said and did was to stop saying and doing things, it initially intensified the game. My sister would then begin to exaggerate her mimic of any movement, gesture, or even breathing of mine as a way of prompting some kind of reaction reintroducing the game.

Similarly, when the pastor and other leaders stop responding to complaints by trying to fix them and begin trying to understand and interpret them, the congregation (especially those with the complaints) will intensify energy and excitement around the complaints. Withdrawal from the complaint game can be uncomfortable.

At such a time, it is more helpful if leaders take a non-reactive and "self-differentiating" position. This is a family systems theory response Edwin Friedman introduced for congregational leadership. Leaders need to maintain three significant postures in their effort to be non-reactive and self-differentiated:

- Stay connected
- Take a clear and reasoned position
- Resist sabotage

Staying connected depends on communication. Leaders must listen to individuals and groups to understand how the congregation is reacting. And they need to talk with individuals and groups about what is taking place and its purpose. To become

disconnected—to ignore or dismiss complaints or discomfort in the congregation—is both foolish and inappropriate. People need to be heard and responded to.

Staying connected begins with listening. People need to be taken seriously as they respond to changes within their congregation. Author Steven Covey identifies listening as the most important and powerful communication tool in his principle, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." [*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989, p. 235.] When we try to help someone understand the need for a change in the worship service, or in the use of the pastor's time, or in the allocation of money, we too often begin by talking instead of listening. Our cultural training is such that even when we do listen, it tends to be limited to searching for the information needed to shape our next response.

A major part of staying connected is listening to understand the congregation's issues (not to fix its complaints). Leaders can sit down in conversation with individuals who seem to voice concerns on behalf of others. They can invite concerned subgroups to meet with a few congregational leaders or with the governing board. They can convene systematic listening groups at times of significant change or challenge.

In any case, listening is most successful when people are assured that they are heard. Whether as a conclusion to an informal conversation or as a written report to the whole congregation listing responses from congregation-wide listening groups, the report needs to say to people, "This is what we heard you say about your hopes and concerns." People will correct any inaccuracies.

The second part of staying connected is talking. Leaders need to continue to talk and inform members of what they are doing and why. If there is a vision of ministry driving leaders' actions, people need to be told repeatedly about it and how the present actions, decisions, programs, or priorities are connected to that vision.

It is a matter of "extroverting." In the familiar preferences of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, persons (and congregations) who "introvert" do all of the necessary thinking and planning internally and then announce conclusions. Congregations "introvert" when they do all of their thinking and planning in committee meetings and announce only the decisions to the congregation. Decisions and conclusions offered only in an introverted fashion may be absolutely appropriate and correct, but they are disconnected from the vision and the process that led the congregation to a particular change or priority. An essential tool for leaders in staying connected is to extrovert. If there is a rule of thumb here it might be that leaders need always to extrovert their process and the content of their process as often as they can.

Listening to people or groups as they share their concerns or complaints is **not** a contract to agree with them. People have a right to be heard, but they do not hold a mandate to be accommodated. Yet many congregational leaders are often hard-pressed to point to reasons or criteria that guide their decision making. Without this reference, leaders appear to others as if they are simply following their own preferences and choosing against the preferences of the complainers.

This is the basis of many congregational arguments ending with the conclusion that if "we don't like the way that our pastor/board decides this issue, then we'll call/elect new people next time." Leaders must address the purpose questions in advance: Who are we? To what have we been called? What are our goals, objectives,

strategies? When leaders have clarity and consensus around these purpose questions, it is much easier to take a clear and reasoned position in response to congregational complaints and concerns.

Leaders' clarity about purpose questions provides the necessary "whys" to explain decisions to the congregation: "Yes, the pastor is visiting the shut-ins less frequently this year and the reason is…" "Yes, there is a significant increase in the budget for music this year instead of redecorating the adult fellowship room because we are intentional about our goal of …"

Sabotage is a rather strong word. It does, however, recognize the resistance and the continued reactivity that occur when people or groups in the congregation do not get the answer they wanted to their complaints. People in the community need the safety of time and space to work through internal personal and spiritual transitions that will come with any significant changes. After leaders take a clear and reasoned position, time and space are necessary for people to react and respond. Leaders should not participate in the reactivity; they need to hold their course during this period. Resisting "sabotage" does not mean "fighting back" in order that leaders "win" and members "lose." It has more to do with leaders:

- working to understand, rather than evaluating and defeating the responses of disequilibrium they are receiving;
- completing communication with all interested and involved people to make sure everyone has the same information at the same time;
- depersonalizing reactions so they are seen as expressions of discomfort or change rather than as expressions of hostility or evaluations of poor leadership directed at decision makers;
- being willing to be vulnerable without giving in to coercion to change a decision;
- drawing upon the humor and play that are healthy and health-giving in any relationship, and that allow us to smile and joke with each other even at difficult times;
- honoring the chaos that accompanies any time of great change.

"Unhooking" congregational systems from our learned behavior of trying to please everyone is a shift that will create reactions and complaints of its own. It requires congregational leaders to acquire new skills and commitments. It requires from leaders an understanding of the congregational system and a committed willingness to focus on the ministry's vision and purpose. Such a leadership shift may be an essential key to a viable future in congregations trying to stay connected and relevant to a changing world.