



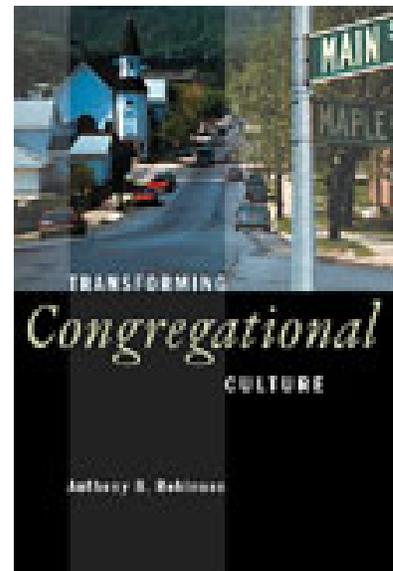
# LEADER'S DISCUSSION GUIDE

FOR CONGREGATIONAL STUDY OF

ANTHONY ROBINSON'S

# Transforming Congregational Culture

A Resource of the Transformation Team of the  
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**Transforming Congregational Culture**  
**By Anthony B. Robinson**

**Chapter Questions—leader’s guide<sup>1</sup>**

**Possible break-down of chapters:**   **Intro through Chapter 2**  
  **Chapter 3 through Chapter 5**  
  **Chapter 6 through Chapter 9**  
  **Chapter 10 through Chapter 13**

**Thanks for encouraging your congregation to wrestle with the important questions of how to be the best church we can be for the 21<sup>st</sup> century! The Transformation Team thought this book would be an easy but thought-provoking way for church members to think about and talk about the life of their church in the context of the life of their community. We hope it’s a helpful starting place for an always essential conversation.**

**NOTES ON THIS GUIDE:**

- ◆ **These questions are leaders’ guide questions, but you can have different leaders each week. You won’t get through all of the questions each time you gather unless you do two chapters each time, so the leader’s main responsibility might be choosing out which questions to use to get helpful discussion started.**
- ◆ **The comments in parentheses are offered in case the activity or question is particularly relevant or interesting to your group—it may not be useful for every group that uses these questions.**
- ◆ **On the LAST page of this guide is a page you can hand out to everyone in the group. It includes some questions for people to think about BEFORE they read the chapter, so they’ll keep their eyes peeled for particularly important themes for discussion, or just to get them thinking a little differently, or more concretely about this book and your church.**
- ◆ **If after reading Transforming Congregational Culture you want to read a reflect more on Christ’s transforming work in the church, go to <http://www.ccncn.org/transbiblio.pdf> for other books on personal and congregational transformation.**

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<sup>1</sup> By Bill Garrett (Sierra Christian Church) and Sandhya Jha (Christian Church of Northern California-Nevada). Please e-mail Sandhya (sandhya@ccncn.org ) with suggestions for improvement—these are meant just to help discussion along!



## Chapter One

- ◆ Does the church Robinson describes on the first two pages sound familiar to you? Has your church faced tensions between traditional members and “born again” members? Are there megachurches in your neighborhood? Have you lost members (or children of members) to churches that “met their needs” better?
- ◆ On page 3, Robinson states, “We were no longer at the center of the religious culture.” What does it mean to “be at the center of religious culture?” How about “not to be at the center?” When you watch television, go to the mall, listen to politicians, do you feel that way? Or do you have the sense that your congregation has historically and continues to be in sync with religious culture and/or the culture of the community? If you feel a little out of sync, what is that experience like for you?
- ◆ Take some time to talk about the five factors changing American culture (from obligation to motivation, the breakdown of social trust and reliable authority, new immigration and religious pluralism, the Protestant mainline's stifling embrace of modernity, and simple complacency). Did they make sense in your congregation's context? Can you think of concrete ways you see them at work in your church? Which one (or ones) stands out as something that gets in the way of your church's relevance to today's society?
- ◆ Which of these five do you think is easiest to address? Hardest?
- ◆ How would you explain the hardest factor to a member of your congregation who thinks “things are fine the way they are?” How would you start the conversation?

(Some of the people in this study group might be from the WWII generation, a generation VERY oriented around obligation rather than “are my needs being met?” They may not know that Generation X is known as a volunteer generation. Does that offer some hope? Might there be some connections across that generational divide that can give life to the church as it becomes more outwardly focused?)



## Chapter Two

- ◆ Robinson talks about membership decline not as a problem, but as the *symptom* of a problem. Does this make sense to you? Thinking back to the five factors, does membership loss fit into any of those?
- ◆ Robinson says that adaptive change requires *learning, authenticity, depth, risk and change*. What does each of those words mean to you? How does it help facilitate adaptive change? How do make sure you're using those things?
- ◆ Of the five roles of leadership (direction, protection, orientation, dealing with conflict, and establishing norms), which of these are you most comfortable and/or skilled in? Least comfortable and/or skilled in? Who do you have in your congregation that is comfortable and/or skilled in each of these areas of leadership that you can call to assist you?
- ◆ Robinson talks about new leadership. Does this leadership only have to do with the pastor (and lay leaders) in the church? How is it relevant to the members of the church helping to lead the wider community?

(If you're technologically inclined, you can go to <http://www.disciples.org/cm/tvradio.htm> to discover some great radio and TV ads by Disciples. For question number 4, play your group the radio ad "God's Advocate." Ask them how they make connections between their faith and regular life, and how they share those connections with others. That's a way of being an adaptive change leader in the world. Ask if someone in your group is feeling creative and would like to bring a radio ad next week about the church you're striving to be.)



### Chapter Three

- ◆ Robinson writes on page 27, “In the civic faith era, many seemed to come to the conclusion that God’s first word was the Ten Commandments...In fact, however, the Ten Commandments were not God’s first word but God’s second word. The first word was God’s act of grace and liberation in the Exodus.” (Subquestion: Robinson is trying to make clear that we sometimes make the mistake of thinking God started with a list of rules, but in fact, God first started with an act of love and liberation. What do *you* think was God’s first word? Some might suggest it was “Let there be light.” Isn’t that a powerful message to remember in the midst of our own times, and our church’s times, of darkness and chaos?) Robinson argues in this section that people join the faith because they experience God, sometimes because of crisis. How does your church respond to people seeking an experience of God’s love in the midst of crisis?
- ◆ Robinson talks about the church’s responsibility being to change lives—to transform. In what ways does your church already understand its function as not needing to provide a civic faith but a transforming experience? What would the church look like—what would it be doing—if it shifted all of its energy to providing support for human transformation? How has being part of your faith community been “transforming” of your life?
- ◆ What would *your* life look like if you fully claimed your role of providing leadership as the church provided support for human transformation?
- ◆ What "ongoing work of God" do you see in your community and/or neighborhood? How is or could your church be better at inviting others to share in the "ongoing work of God"?



## **Chapter Four**

- ◆ Did you have an experience of spiritual formation at any point in your life? What was it like? (If not, how do you think it might have helped?) Have you been involved in someone else's spiritual formation? What was that like? (If not, what do you think that would be like? What might have prevented you from developing that type of relationship?)
- ◆ Is your congregation's worship more "about God" or helping others "access the sacred"? [see the story on page 42] In what ways could your congregation's worship help people to "access the sacred"?
- ◆ In what ways does your congregation's worship enable people to enter "the real world" by seeing ourselves and others as we really are – as God sees us?
- ◆ What spiritual practices are being affirmed in your worship?

(If your group has some members who are very nervous that transformation might result in “throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” ask them if they noticed things about your existing worship service that Robinson affirmed. Point out that his goal isn't to change worship for the sake of changing worship, but to think about *why* we worship the way we do, and maybe to explain to newcomers why it's important.)

## **Chapter Five**

- ◆ The author presents the following statement: "Christian education was for those who were already Christian, those who were Christian by virtue of growing up in North America. Formation recognizes that we are not Christian by virtue of growing up or simply living in this society. We need to be formed in the ways, values, stories, and perceptions of a different worldview." What is your response to this statement?
- ◆ Which of the examples of formation in the chapter is your congregation already doing? Which of the examples of formation in the chapter, as well as any others, are missing from your congregation? Which ones would fit in with the present skills and interests of your congregation that your congregation is not presently offering? What are the obstacles in offering these?

(One of the earlier topics in the chapter is about formation of children. Think about how children are involved in your worship service. If there are children in your congregation, are there ways to incorporate them into worship, while helping them understand why we worship the way we do?)

## **Chapter Six**

- ◆ Robinson talks about Naaman's and Peter's need to receive, even though they thought of themselves as givers. Although it is sometimes hard to shift our mindset, think for a moment: what might you need to receive? Does worship, or do people in your church, meet that need in some way?
- ◆ The author identifies the need for people to move from being "givers" to "receivers who give." In what ways does your congregation need to enhance this model? What are some steps that would help your congregation move to be "receivers who give"? What ways do you need to live into this model also?
- ◆ Who in your church can you go to to remind you and support you in your need to receive?

(If your group is up to wrestling with a hard question, consider discussing how a church moves to meet the needs of "motivation-based" people without falling into the trap Robinson talked about at the beginning of the book: people joining megachurches to meet their needs and then leaving to find whatever the next great new solution to their needs is.)

## **Chapter Seven**

- ◆ Do you have the sense in your congregation that there are two groups: those who attend worship, and then the more in-the-know people who serve on boards? Which group do you fall into? What ways could your church offer a model that allows everyone to lead?
- ◆ Have you ever decided not to involve yourself in one of the church's programs because you didn't have background or experience in it? What did you think of Robinson's reflection at the top of page 80 about God using people who weren't "ready," and giving them "on-the-job training?" Are there ways your congregation could help train you to do certain tasks while doing those tasks, rather than leaving them to the "experts?"
- ◆ How prevalent is your congregation's desire/practice to see their mission as "maintaining the parish"? In what ways does your congregation carry out this mission at the cost of avoiding being focused on "growing the parish"?
- ◆ What means (and desire) does the congregation have to test itself to make sure it is focusing on the three key elements of the cycle of transformation (powerful worship, faith development through teaching and learning ministries, and authentic Christian fellowship)?



## Chapter Eight

- ◆ What "Major Mission Projects" does your congregation have? In what ways does your congregation integrate hands-on mission projects with the education of stewardship and servanthood? Do you ever make sure to talk about *why* you're doing the service projects you do?
- ◆ Without taking financial support away from the outside-of-the-church missions that your congregation supports, what new hands-on mission projects could your congregation become excited about? When taking on a new project, what type of criteria would help you choose the best one for your congregation and the community.

(There's a Disciples church in Arizona that will not let anything show up in their newsletter, will not let an announcement be made, will not let something be pinned on their bulletin board *unless it is attached to a story of transformation*. If an activity will not aid in transformation, it should not be a part of the church, they believe. So the announcement would not just be "The Christian Men's Fellowship is hosting a pancake breakfast this Saturday." Instead it would continue, "Last year, the CMF raised enough money to buy 50 Christmas presents for the children of incarcerated adults. When our own Fred Evans delivered the gifts, one little boy asked him, 'Why are you doing this?' and Fred answered, 'Because God loves you, and FCC Santa Rosa loves you, too.' CMF hopes to touch even more lives for Christ this year with your support at next week's pancake breakfast.'" They do this because people relate to transformation best through stories, and also because it forces them to think about whether their activities are really transforming either them or others. What would it be like to try that in your church?)



## **Chapter Nine**

- ◆ At the bottom of page 93/top of 94, Robinson lays out the difference between democracy and discernment. Which sounds more like the way your church handles business? How can a church (or your church) move from democracy to discernment? What would be required? Why would you even want to make such a move?
- ◆ The statement is made: "A 'majority rules' way of thinking is what happens when we take God out of the congregational process." How much does this describe your congregational process of decision making?
- ◆ What areas or ministries in your congregation would lend themselves most appropriately, at present, to the process of discernment?
- ◆ What support is available to move toward discernment instead of 'majority rules' in your congregation?

## **Chapter Ten**

- ◆ The concept is presented that "The point is not to 'make the budget'; the point is to ask, 'What is our purpose as a church at this time and in this place, and what kinds of financial resources do we need to fulfill that purpose?" Is your congregation more focused on making the budget or fulfilling the purpose of the church?
- ◆ What would it feel like to “surrender control” of the budget to God? What would your budget look like if you were not trying to maintain it, but were really discerning what God wanted?
- ◆ The author identifies the budget process as having the potential of being spiritually alive and formative. What message is your present budgeting process sending to the congregation?
- ◆ The budget itself has the potential to share a story which identifies your congregation's priorities, areas of growth, and willingness to follow God's calling into new ministries. Have you ever thought of the budget as the means of accomplishing ministry? What story is your present budget telling?
- ◆ What would a visitor see in your budget that would attract them to become interested in your church?
- ◆ Is your current budget more focused on survival or growth?



## **Chapter Eleven**

- ◆ Every congregation sees itself as being friendly. Is there a good understanding in your congregation of the difference between friendliness and biblical practice of hospitality? How would they rate themselves in hospitality? To each other? To the stranger? To the outsider who doesn't quite "fit" in?
- ◆ In what practices or programs of hospitality is your congregation presently active?
- ◆ What practices or programs of hospitality could your congregation become active in by matching its current skills and interests with the community's need? Or, another way to ask this question is: what is God already doing in the area of hospitality that your congregation could become active in?

## **Chapter Twelve**

- ◆ The author states that "membership growth is a result and not the goal of a congregation's life and vitality." How much support for this way of thinking about membership growth is currently in your congregation?
- ◆ The statement is made that congregational growth happens where lives are being changed. How is your congregation actively and intentionally offering opportunities for peoples' lives to be changed?
- ◆ Have you ever invited someone to the church? Have you talked with them about it afterward? What did they see and feel while they were there?
- ◆ The goal is presented of the congregation as evangelist. How well is this concept supported or accepted in your congregation? What steps could your congregation take in the next few months to move toward being more faithful to this goal?



## Chapter Thirteen

- ◆ One of the strategies for leaders is "Getting to the Balcony" whereby the leader looks for gaps to help identify the adaptive challenges. What are some of the gaps between your congregation's core values and what is actually going on? Are there norms and strategies that your congregation is accustomed to but that are no longer, in the present time, relevant or productive?
- ◆ Another strategy for leaders is to "Identify the Adaptive Challenge." Numerous adaptive challenges are offered throughout the book. In order to identify the adaptive challenges in your congregation, the author states that the "vital few" question must be answered (What are the vital few things that we as a church must do and do well if we are to accomplish our purpose?). How would you answer this question for your congregation? Could your congregation answer this question? If not, how can you help them to develop the answer?
- ◆ The third strategy is "Regulating Distress." After reading the tools used to keep the stress at a productive level without having too much stress that the top blows off, which of these areas do you feel you and your congregation is effective in? Which areas could be improved?
- ◆ "Maintain Disciplined Attention" is another strategy for leaders. Numerous ways to maintain discipline are given. In what ways have you and the congregation remained disciplined? In what ways have you not?
- ◆ The fifth strategy mentioned is "Give Responsibility Back" wherein leaders involve others in gaining leadership responsibility. In your congregation, how are the current leaders giving responsibility back in order to help others grow in their involvement?
- ◆ The last strategy presented is "Protect Leadership from Below." Are there groups or individuals who are offering new ideas and new directions in ministry in your congregation who fall outside of the current structure? How can they be protected so that they can move forward with their ideas?



READERS' GUIDE TO  
**TRANSFORMING CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE**  
BY ANTHONY ROBINSON.

Get your brain in gear with these questions **before** reading some of the chapters:

**Before reading Chapter One**, ask yourself:

- ◆ What does “mainline church” mean to you?
- ◆ Does the word “Christendom” mean anything to you? Does it (or did it) exist in the United States?
- ◆ When reading the section “from obligation to motivation,” ask yourself why do your current members come to church?
- ◆ In “Erosion of Trust and Reliable Authority,” ask yourself, “Where does authority come from in my church?—‘Because I say so’?”

**Before reading Chapter Two**, ask yourself:

- ◆ What do *learning, authenticity, depth, risk* and *change* mean to me? Are they part of the spiritual life of my church? How can they be?

**Before reading Chapter Three**, ask yourself,

- ◆ “What does it mean to be a Christian?”
- ◆ How is my church’s vision different from a secular (non-religious) non-profit organization?

**Before reading Chapter Four**, if you can do it in a way that doesn’t seem judgmental, ask the high school youth in your church if they know who Paul was, or what happens in the book of Acts, or what the word “grace” means. If they know, ask them how they learned it. Also consider asking some of the other members of the church. (You might discover that people don’t know the stories of our faith that we assume they know, or that they learned it because of someone in the church who was very important in their own journey of formation.)

**Before starting Chapter Seven**, ask yourself: Have I had a job that involved on-the-job training? How did that work out?

**Before reading Chapter Eleven**, read Genesis 18:1-8, and ask yourself what it means to entertain angels/strangers/God, how you do it (and don’t do it), and how the church does it (and doesn’t do it).

**Before reading Chapter Twelve**, ask yourself about a comment in this chapter:

“One of the reasons that many, if not most, mainline congregations have been either stable or declining in the last forty years is that they have been better clubs than churches.” Are there any ways that description rings true for you?

**Before reading Chapter Thirteen**, pray for your pastor and her/his leadership of the church to fulfill its vision. Ask yourself how it felt to lift up a prayer like that—does your congregation support the leadership of the pastor? Do you pray for her/him? And does s/he in return empower the members of the congregation in their own leadership to achieve your congregation’s vision? Keep these questions in mind while reading the chapter, and think about how those dynamics might affect the suggestions Robinson makes.

