

# Being the Exception to the Rule

## What It Takes to Transcend Negative Trends

TIM SHAPIRO

There is an exception to every rule. Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is one of the fastest growing and most virulent infections hospitals are battling, but a hospital in Pittsburgh was able to eliminate MRSA infections in a single year. Likewise, far too many children in this world are undernourished, but mothers in small Vietnam villages were able to bring malnutrition down 70 percent over a two-year period in the 1990s. Unexpected results such as these are known in various fields of inquiry as “positive deviance.” In other words, for every widespread problem there exist small-scale, constructive anomalies.

Such anomalies occur in congregations just as they do in other settings. For instance, many congregations in rural Indiana are struggling, but last year one rural congregation had a 25 percent gain in attendance and mission giving.

From these experiences and others like them, the Indianapolis Center for Congregations is learning that negative conditions often common in congregations are not necessarily destiny for any one congregation. Every problem has a solution that defies expectations.

A key recognition of positive deviance theory is that solutions to problems already exist within the community. Physician Atul Gawande, in his book *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance* (Henry Holt, 2007), tells how the Veterans Administration Pittsburgh Healthcare System took on the challenge of MRSA infections. As Gawande relates, “There were no directives, no charts with what the experts thought should be done.” Instead, the whole work community—nurses, doctors, administrators, custodians, patients—went to work on the challenge. A process was designed to leverage the genius of those in the room. Small groups met. “What do you think should be done?” they were asked.

Responses were offered back to the whole system: “What if we made hand washing easier? What if wearing gloves became the norm?” New methods were tested, and results were posted. The conversation continued. Infection rates went down—way down. This Pittsburgh hospital became the positive deviant, the constructive anomaly among other hospitals.

Among congregations facing any particular challenge, there are at least a few congregations whose special capacity enables them to function more effectively than others with similar resources and conditions. What is the trademark of this special capacity? This special competence can be summarized as the ability of clergy and laity to learn together.

This binding of clergy and laity together in learning is essential. The role of the specialized clergy as teachers and learners is crucial, yet it is the ability of the clergy and laity to be lifelong learners, in concert, that is fundamental to congregational vitality.

There is no set curriculum for this kind of congregational learning. The objective of the learning is contextual. Sometimes the learning is about the faith tradition. Sometimes it is about leadership development. Sometimes it is about how to lead a building project. The object of the learning is determined by the questions the congregation seeks to answer. The key points are that the learning addresses the particular challenge the congregation faces, and that clergy and laity are learning together.

Effective learning in congregations almost always involves a pivotal juxtaposition: the blending of an excellent outside resource and the congregation's own inner ingenuity. Important learning takes place when leaders adapt superb resources to their own context. We are learning that the notion of best practices is a misnomer. Because of the particularities of any single congregation, transferring a practice or

program from one setting to another has only limited value. What works is helping congregations think more clearly about their own situations and the options available to them.

Three years ago a pastor called the Center, asking, “How do we fix this leaky roof of ours?” The congregation was a mainline church, one that fit the description of the mainline in decline. They were stuck. Attendance was declining. The neighborhood was changing. And they had an immediate crisis: the rain was pouring in on the organ. They had tried for months to stop the leak. Nothing had worked. Their frustration affected their relationships. At some point, not long after the phone call, the leaders of this congregation agreed not to be done in by such things as a leaky roof. How would they do that? The first step was to learn collectively. The leaders began to study together all kinds of things—the Psalms as well as how to talk to an architect. They asked questions. They slowed decision-making processes down just enough to experiment and to let their thinking catch up with their actions. They brought people together to talk about life dreams. Over time they have become an unusual congregation, even deviant, in a positive way. Long ago they figured out how to fix the roof. Recently the pastor called and said, “You'll never guess what God has dreamed for us now.” And he was right. I couldn't guess. After all, it was an anomaly, a glorious and graceful deviation from the norm. With congregations, as in the rest of life, there is an exception to every rule. ♦



**Tim Shapiro**  
is president of the  
Indianapolis Center  
for Congregations.