



Center for Congregations
PODCAST

Tapping into experience

Changes in congregations over the years with Center President Tim Shapiro

Matt Burke:

Welcome to the Center for Congregations Podcast. This is a conversation for anyone invested in sustaining and strengthening their faith communities. The Center for Congregations is an Indiana nonprofit that exists because we believe the work of your congregation is essential. Our mission is to strengthen your congregation, helping you find the right information or expertise for your congregation's needs. We're able to do this work because of the generosity of the Lilly Endowment.

Tim Shapiro:

Right now, I think we're in a time of flux in terms of what is a congregation. I think judicatory or ecclesiastical language is used less, and I think there are many creative and even divergent forms of congregations appearing that didn't exist 20 years ago. So, we're in a time where the word congregation is fluid.

Ben Tapper:

Welcome back, everyone, to another episode of the Center for Congregations Podcast. I'm Ben Tapper, I'm an associate for resource consulting at our central office in Indianapolis.

Matt Burke:

And I'm Matt Burke, I'm the Northeast director and the education director out of the Fort Wayne office of the Center for Congregations.

Ben Tapper:

And today, we are going to be talking with the president of the Center for Congregations, Reverend **Tim Shapiro**, as we discuss the ways that congregational life has shifted over the last 20 years or so.

Matt Burke:

Yeah, and we wanted to have this conversation with Tim early on in the episodes of this podcast, because he has such a wealth of expertise. He was a pastor for 17 years on his own right, but then he's also been the president of the Center for Congregations for about 17 or 18 years, and has just seen a lot happening both as a pastor and then in his work with Indiana congregation. So, we think that you're really going to enjoy this conversation.

Ben Tapper:

And there'll be parts of the conversation that may hit really close to home, and other parts that don't quite feel applicable to you, and just know that that's okay, that's going to be the experience going in. We start out discussing predominantly mainline congregations, and then broaden the dialogue as we go.

Matt Burke:

Some things to watch for in this conversation are just some of the major cultural changes that are taking place right now. And this doesn't mean that your congregation needs to change necessarily, but just being aware of what's happening in broader society will help you think about how your congregation can stay contextual, and really reach those in your community.

Ben Tapper:

And one of the central points that we start with and then later return to in a different way is this idea of defining what a congregation is. Now, we do it as an exercise for ourselves internally to make sure we're centering our work the right way, but I believe it's a helpful question for each congregation to consider as you think about your local context and how you exist within the community structure as well.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. And you're going to hear some difficult things, some difficult trends and problems that are happening in congregational life in the United States, but at the same time, there is a lot of hope that I think you'll take out of this conversation as well.

Ben Tapper:

Yeah. So, without further ado, here's our conversation with Reverend **Tim Shapiro**. Welcome, Tim, it's so good to have you here.

Tim Shapiro:

Hey, Ben, it's good to be here. Thanks for the introduction.

Ben Tapper:

Of course. As we were thinking about this conversation, we wanted to do something that I know our listeners will find just so thrilling, but we wanted to define our terms. So, we're going to be talking a lot about congregations. So, Tim, can you just speak a little bit about how you think we understand the term congregation both internally and externally?

Tim Shapiro:

Sure. I think that's changed over the years just because the culture has changed and congregations have changed. If we went back even two decades, I think it would, if someone said, "Hey, define what the congregation is," they would probably start with ecclesiastical language, the congregation, if it's in the Christian tradition, is a congregation that's a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and then they would add the language that their particular religious framework would want to emphasize. There also were like civil or related to governmental distinctions of what a congregation is, and what a synagogue is, that has changed too in many ways.

So, right now, I think we're in a time of flux in terms of what is a congregation. I think judicatory or ecclesiastical language is used less, and I think there are many creative and even divergent forms of congregations appearing that didn't exist 20 years ago. So, we're in a time where the word congregation is fluid.

Matt Burke:

Tim, you've been the president of the Center for Congregations for 18 years now, and what do you see as the narrative arc of congregational life in those 18 years, where it was when you came on board? And you mentioned or alluded to some of the changes that you're seeing now, what does that arc look like?

Tim Shapiro:

When the center was formed, it was formed around a certain model of learning to help congregations learn, and I like to think of it as a developmental model, where the congregation has the initiative over their own learning. And I think that model that the center uses is still as good as the one that we started with. In other words, this notion of congregations taking the initiative over what they want to do, rather than some other outside group, including the center, telling them what to do, which is one of the key points of adult developmental learning. So, I think the framework in which the center started in terms of its work with congregations, the narrative arc hasn't changed a whole lot.

We've honed it, we've, I think, gotten to be better listeners to congregations, but basically, that narrative arc is fairly consistent. When it comes to congregations themselves, there's a lot of change. When we started, I've been here 18 years, when the center started 22 years ago, I would say, the life of what is by sociologists termed the mainline congregations, they weren't yet at the tipping point between being able to continue or not to continue. I think for the most part, that tipping point, unfortunately, for the mainline congregations, has tipped, where keeping on in survival mode is going to be very, very difficult to reverse. And so, what we have found out is the width and breath of congregations that we serve has expanded in the years that we are been in existence.

And some of the congregations that generation ago, maybe less, were really kind of the main social expression of faith, are in really difficult challenges right now.

Matt Burke:

Yeah, I'm interested in, you mentioned a tipping point, say a little more about that.

Tim Shapiro:

Well, I want to be careful not to be too pessimistic, because there's an exception to every rule, particularly if one's talking broadly, the example I would use in terms of how I want to talk about this is that there's always, in terms of healthcare, I'm using an analogy, there's public health, the way public health officials look at the well being of a community, and then there's a way in which a family physician looks at the health and well being of the particular person that is in front of her or him. And so, I think the same dynamic happens with congregation, so, I want to be careful with my pessimism, or the notion of a tipping point in which many of congregations that come from the main line may not be able to be revitalized. That tipping point has passed.

My disclaimer is that there's an exception to every rule, and there will continue to be vibrant and exciting and innovative "mainline congregations." But for a lot of them, the tipping point of revitalization has passed.

Ben Tapper:

Tim Shapiro here with an optimistic word for congregational leaders.

Tim Shapiro:

Yeah. Remember, I said there is an exception to every rule.

Ben Tapper:

I am someone who appreciates pessimism because I think it can add a dose of realism to certain structures and ideologies in our lives, and so, there's something sobering but also true in naming that we're seeing a radical shift. And if we just pretend the shift isn't there, that's not going to help us, it's not going to help the communities that people are trying to serve. But just because the shift is taking place, that doesn't mean that there can't be adaptation and transformation and new life, or after death even. So, I, for one, appreciate some pessimism from time to time, but maybe that's just me.

Tim Shapiro:

Well, and as you say, Ben, it's may be realistic, and sometimes the pessimism or really becoming aware of what the reality is, does inspire in some situations, innovation. For instance, I know of congregations that have taken their community ministry and made it a community enterprise. So, their congregation may still have at one time, 150 in worship, but now have 15 or 20 in worship, but this congregational enterprise serves some need in our social fabric, plus, they figured out how to make an income stream out of that. So, both the social enterprise and the religious life of the congregation benefits. So, yeah, out of difficulty, there's some really positive, creative, innovative responses.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. And one of the things that I love working for the center, and Tim, as your analogy pointed out, there are plenty of exceptions to the rule. And I tell congregations all the time, that's the best part of my job is, I get to see all the bright spots happening in congregations in Indiana. The congregations have reached out to us, they're choosing to reach out to us because they're grappling with some challenge or opportunity and they want to grow from that, they want to change, they want to adapt. And I think there's a difference between the bare fact of the descriptor of declining congregations, but that doesn't give the rationale or reasoning why they're declining.

And so, it's an alert that then allows us as congregations and as society to pay attention to what's happening, and to say, "Well, what's causing this decline? And then how do we reverse that? How do we change it? How do we grow and adapt in that?" So, I think, while someone might call it pessimism, but according to the latest statistics, it's a reality, and we just have to take that reality seriously, but it doesn't have to be the end result. That because there's decline, does not mean that that's the end of the story, that there's more to it.

Tim Shapiro:

Yeah, I'm following. Again, I'm using a medical analogy, a physician needs to hear symptoms, and then make a diagnosis, and then come up with a treatment plan. And all of that involves interpretation, it involves knowing something about the person in front of them, it means knowing the tools that are available to the physician. One of the things that, again, at the center we get to celebrate is congregations that have made a proper or appropriate or congruent diagnosis based on their context, and created using various tools, creative ways to still be a congregation. For example, this is a congregation that's in Nora, which in the greater Indianapolis area is one of the most diverse zip codes, not only in Indiana, but in the United States. This congregation, they're the Dwelling Place.

And they have like maybe 50 in worship, but throughout any given week, they touch like 500 people in the community, not just offering services, but being in mutual relationship with. And they're also

reaching communities that are stretching them in terms of their life world. One of their key expressions of doing ministry in the community is that they work with the Hindu temple of Indianapolis, which has an excellent medical clinic once a week, and the Dwelling Place partners with this Hindu temple. So, I think that just this notion that they touch 500 people a week, when they have 50 in worship, just that could be interpreted in all sorts of really wonderful ways.

Matt Burke:

Yeah, and I think that illustrates a point that Karl Vaters makes a lot, where he talks about small congregations that if you want to understand success, potentially change your metrics. So, if you talk about a congregation, and your descriptor is, it's a 50-member congregation in a very diverse area in part of Indianapolis, and you leave it at that, probably the assumption is, that's not a very successful church. But if you leave that part aside, and then talk about a congregation that it's in a very diverse part of Indianapolis that serves 500 people outside of their congregation per week, that, on its own face, sounds very successful. And so, it's, what do you focus on? What do you track?

And Karl Vaters often talks to small church pastors and says, "Look, it's not about size, it's about health. And you need to think about what metrics show health in your congregation, as opposed to paying attention specifically only to the numbers of your budget and the numbers of attendance." And I think that's a powerful truth that even large churches can take a lot away from that.

Ben Tapper:

And I wonder, Tim or Matt, I'd love both your thoughts on this, as you were talking, Matt, I started thinking about the distinctions we make between the congregation and then the community outside. And so, we're talking about, when is the congregation healthy? And as I think about what the future of congregational life or even religious or faith-based community life is in the United States, I think it's going to be more and more kind of eroding that hard delineation between the internal congregation and the external community. And so, I wonder how that then will affect the ways in which we talk about congregational health, as opposed to just broader community health. What are your thoughts on that?

Tim Shapiro:

Well, Ben, I think you're tracking something that's really important, and I'm not sure that that would have been brought up without you making that clear. One of the images I would have is that future congregational life will require both leaders... Well, first of all, I think that the distinction between clergy and laity is going to disappear to some extent, but the image of the congregation is going to be standing at the street corner in which they exist. So, I don't mean that as limiting and that they only are going to be thinking about the community that they're in, many congregations have ways to reach far beyond that, especially in this social media age. But if one takes a picture of the congregation, my image is that it's not going to be the elders and the clergy standing near the front pew of the sanctuary, it's going to be people out there on the sidewalk between the congregational building and the life outside.

Ben Tapper:

And I agree, and I'm just wondering how that would shift some of the rigorous division and discussion that we see congregations and denominations having right now. If we begin to understand the health of congregations as intimately tied with the health and vibrancy of communities, then does that shift what we focus on when we're evaluating health, or when we're evaluating some of these ideological or theological differences? Do some of them become minimized if we shift our focus on to what is healthy for our people? If we take the Dwelling Place, for instance, they seem to be doing a good job in looking externally, seeing kind of the landscape of their community, and then trying to shift and adapt in

responsive ways, one of which is creating the... they have a new nonprofit they've created called Patchwork to house some of this programming for immigrant refugee communities.

And I know, in Latinx communities and black communities, I think we see a lot more of that adaptation, where congregation meets community needs as just kind of a natural function, a historical function of the congregation. And so, that may be happening, I guess, in some aspects of religious or congregational life, maybe less so traditionally in mainline congregation, but I think that's going to become an important factor for us to consider as, whether we're lay or clergy leaders, just to continue to reflect on what it means to hold communal health and congregational health is, maybe even one of the same. I don't know.

Tim Shapiro:

There's a researcher in Pennsylvania, and he does really good work, his name's Ram Cnaan. And Dr. Cnaan has studied social engagement of congregations in the community around them, and what he's discovered, as he does evidence-based research, is that 91% of the congregations in the United States have some sort of engagement outside the doors of their congregation. So, that, I think, is really good data. And then, I think we could go deeper with that data, and I'm sure Dr. Cnaan does, but I want to go off something, riff off something Ben said, and that is, in the Latinx community, in the African American community, in various kinds of immigrant religious communities, the way in which they do community engagement is different.

It's much more mutual, it's much more listening to the people in the community, it's much more that we're all in this together, and there isn't a right answer, the right answer is in our relationship, rather than in some program. And I think the reason one is, because I think that's wonderfully, just good human behavior to do that, and I also think, so many times, the mainline congregation has looked at engagement with the community as the congregation helping someone that needs something that they lack. And in some of the people of color congregations, immigrant congregations, so forth, there's far more mutual engagement with the community. And again, there's an exception to every rule, there's, of course, mainline congregations who have learned that and are embodying that too.

Ben Tapper:

So, don't hate us mainline congregations.

Tim Shapiro:

Right, thank you. Yeah, starting with positive examples that include them, because that's what I grew up in and that's the life I'm still in.

Matt Burke:

Well, there seems to be a core distinction there between an us-them, over and against a we mentality. And I'd never heard it articulated before, but an African American pastor up here in the northeast part of the state articulated to me, that he said, "On the whole, white churches, when they think about community, they're thinking about the people who come inside their building. African American churches, by contrast, when they hear community, they tend to think about the geographical surroundings of their congregational facility and the people who live there." And that strikes me as more of a we mentality as opposed to an us-them mentality.

And I came out of a conservative evangelical background, and so, Tim, the things that you were pointing out about the way that mainline congregations may see the way they serve, I think, conservative

evangelical congregations, in a bit of a different way, but still see that same kind of thing, that we have something that is lacking out there, and we have to provide it. So, there's a commonality between those two viewpoints that doesn't get at that mutuality that you were describing, which I think is really, really important and understanding that we have our society, that we have our communities.

Tim Shapiro:

I think it's really good that this conversation has surfaced, the way in which so many congregations are adding to their local community and beyond, in mutual ways and through some very creative programs. There's something else that I'm interested in, and maybe you all can help me understand this because this is a question I have that I've not been able to answer. There's a researcher, professor at Notre Dame, Christian Smith, he's published a lot, he's very trustworthy and does great work. He has a book called Religion, and he defines what religion is. And I don't remember the whole sentence, it's very succinct, the one part of the sentence I remember is that, for something to be considered religious, for there to be a religious community, there has to be an affirmation and an assertion that there is a supernatural relationship going on between people, human beings, and some supernatural deity.

So, he's describing religion from a sociology or anthropology point of view. But I find the fact that he used the word supernatural interesting. And I don't think it would have caught my attention if I was alive in 1950, which I wasn't, which seems like a long time ago. So, I think some of the things that are happening in, at least, I'm seeing in what might be called progressive congregations, of which many of them are mainline congregations, is sort of a reframing of what the word divine, supernatural, other synonyms mean. The very definition of God and revelation, and I don't mean the Book of Revelation, I mean the experience of revelation, there's a shift going on there, I don't quite have a handle around that, and that's not necessarily what the Center for Congregations focuses on. But it's always beneath the surface of conversations we have with congregations, what religious claims and commitments they have.

Ben Tapper:

I've noticed that shift as well, and it's been fascinating for me on a couple of fronts. One, noticing it happening in congregational life, in the lives of leaders that I follow, but I've also have noticed it happen in my own life as I've continued to journey on my own faith journey. And I wonder, Tim, if in some aspects, it is almost a return, and it was, I think about, especially some elements of indigenous religions, or native religions, the distinction between supernatural and natural doesn't seem like it was always as stark as maybe we would make it out to be in our modern era, somehow, everything seemed both supernatural and natural. Trees were holy and part of the divine nature with part of the divine. So, I wonder if part of that re-imagining is both somehow moving forward, but also remembering wisdom that maybe we have excluded from the common zeitgeist. Yeah, I don't know if that's accurate, but that's just something that I've been holding.

Tim Shapiro:

Yeah, it's not necessarily something new, it's something that actually may be more true to humanity's roots. As different civilizations begin to develop, they experience the divine, the experience of God and other synonyms all around them, not some invisible place beyond them. Yeah. So, I'm tracking.

Ben Tapper:

What do you think, Matt?

Matt Burke:

I am biting my tongue hard to not start talking about Greek words and German words. Seminary training is hard to leave behind sometimes. It's interesting that you talk about the separation that we see between some of those ideas, and Ben, you talk about recovering the unity of those ideas. And I wonder if it doesn't come out of the fact that we're getting into a post-enlightenment society. And what I mean by that is that the enlightenment and the scientific process, and from the 1700s on, there was a separation of things in order to understand them, that you divide things down into smaller and smaller pieces and try to understand those different pieces, and hopefully, that will then help you understand the whole.

But that's been rampant in separating things out, and in my own faith tradition, the separation between sacred and secular, and even the division between clergy and laity, that lady, on some level, honestly, were second-class citizens. And so, you just see division, division, division, and you begin to separate all of these things out, but I think that's led to a lack of what it means to live holistically. And I think, in a post-enlightenment culture, where we're realizing that things are greater than the sum of their parts, that there's more to it than that. And we don't necessarily need to divide and separate down, but see life as a holistic thing that has a lot of different pieces, but we may not always understand how all those pieces function together.

And so, to separate out something from... It was interesting, I was reading some book on this idea of post-enlightenment, and they talked about the difference between, Albrecht Durer did a fantastic wood carving of a rabbit, and it's just so lifelike and beautiful, and he said, "Do you understand the rabbit better by seeing this work of wood carving, or do you see it better through the dissection of the rabbit and the pulling out of its organs and setting them on the table and cataloging them?" And I thought that was such an interesting analogy for understanding the whole of something and understanding its parts. And I think younger generations especially, when you look at the work of John Seal and others, they don't see these divides the same way anymore.

It may have been true 20, 50, 100 years ago, but it's just a very different way of seeing the world now. And I love the idea of the integration of all of these things that there isn't a sacred secular divide, and even natural, supernatural. In the old enlightenment mindset, we could maybe make those distinctions, but we talk about the miracle of life, and we understand conception and birth and all of those things, but still, there's a miraculous element to it that we can't create it and reproduce it, right? That it's a holistic process that happens. And can we really label that natural or supernatural, just based on the fact that we happen to understand the biological underpinnings of it?

Tim Shapiro:

We better watch it because this could start sounding like a Krista Tippett interview or a Terry Gross conversation, not a typical Center for Congregations, the dialogue going back and forth. But I'm going to just keep going deeper. So, I want to tell a personal story, which I hope, in form of testimony, is happening in the congregations we serve all the time. I'm getting into the supernatural and the natural thing that both Ben and Matt have brought up. My wife's a veterinarian, and it's one of the few at least in the United States, maybe few, I don't want to say only, because I really don't know, but it's definitely one of the few places where euthanasia is legal. So, she's practicing euthanasia every day on animals. And one of the things she actually takes the risk to say, mostly because she's heard this back from the pet owners, she says to a pet owner who has just been euthanized, she says to the owner, "Now, you need to pay attention to your dreams, because your animal is going to come to you in a dream and tell you that he or she is okay."

And so, this morning, I had that experience, not about animals, though I am an animal, a human being, a very good friend of mine, Bill Steele, who I think I might say this because I can say it, doesn't mean it's literally true, I think he was the best preacher in America, being a friend of his, this morning, he died about three weeks ago, this morning, I had a dream, where I received this box full of tapes of his sermons. I mean, this is a gigantic box and had like 500 tapes of his sermons. So, I took that as Bill telling me he's okay. Traditionally, is that natural revelation? Is that special revelation? What Bible story is congruent with that? I don't know. But to me, it definitely expressed something beyond myself.

And if I feel comfortable telling that story here with you two, I hope that in a congregation, I could tell that story too, and it would be received like, "Whoa, thanks for sharing that," even if they didn't believe my interpretation of it.

Ben Tapper:

Thank you, Tim, for sharing that. I really love that story. And as you were talking it, I was thinking about how you, in your social location, mainline as you are, can think about dreams and attach a meaning to them, a divine spiritual meaning. But I also know people in the black evangelical church that would do the same thing. So, there are these elements of our lived experience, natural or spiritual or supernatural, that seem to just connect with us across the different divides or social locations that we exist in, that we can talk about. And so, indigenous cultures speak about dreams and their own spirituality and their lived rhythms, black evangelical folks do that, white mainline folks do that, and so, something that sounds sort of new age, if you actually stop and pause and think about it, it's not, it's something that most of us do that crops up in any iteration of religious tradition going back as far as we can go back.

And that's the kind of stuff that excites me, because that's like a third of humanity that is always seemingly been there that connects us that we probably wouldn't even think about on a regular day. And that's just really cool to me.

Tim Shapiro:

That's wonderful. And I want to go back, that's an opening to go back to Matt's question about a narrative arc, is the Center for Congregations here, located in Indiana, has a kind of narrative arc? And I think earlier, I said no, we're still using the same methodology and so forth, but I want a chance to revisit that, revisit my answer, because I think now there is a narrative arc. When the center started, the majority of the congregations that we worked with, came to us about very, what I'll call operational tangible things, like, they wanted to re-roof their building, or they wanted to know what was the best asphalt company because their parking lot was starting to break apart, or they wanted to do a strategic planning program. And the kind of planning they wanted to do was pretty much parallel to the kind of planning at least at that time that businesses, corporations did.

So, to me, they were more operational type issues. More recently, I'd say in the last five years or so, more and more congregations, they still call us about what I call operational issues, but they're working with us more and more around resources, around community engagement, which we were talking about 10 minutes ago. They're wanting to come to us about mental health issues, about things related to the creation care or the highly racialized culture that we're living in right now. So, I see that as a difference in the center's work. And then, as we've been talking for the last five minutes, I thought, "Oh, maybe this is too much to expect from the center, but wouldn't it be great if we could get even more inside the lives of the people, so that we're resourcing, not the congregation outside in, but inside out?"

Ben Tapper:

Again, I've only been here a year, so, what do I know? But it doesn't seem that far-fetched from some of our other basic core principles. We value interpersonal relationships, even our customer service will go above and beyond to connect with people. Early on, I got an email from a congregational leader, and they asked me if the PDF for one of our grant applications or financial forms or something, if it was a fillable form. So, I got this email, and I was in kind of a funky mood that day, I read it, and I just replied, "Nope, I don't think so." Period. And then hit Send. And is a case now.

And then, Kara, my supervisor, she was going back to my case now, she's like, "Ben, you didn't actually do anything wrong, but maybe could you have asked a follow-up question, try to get at what their real need was." I'm like, "Yeah, I mean, yeah, sure, fine. I guess I could have, I'll do that in the future." But that small illustration speaks to how interpersonal and relational we try to be in our interactions. And so, to your point, Tim, resourcing your congregation from the inside, even from the individual out, that's being relational. Maybe it's another level than we regularly walk in, but it doesn't seem that far-fetched to me.

Matt Burke:

Yeah, I think it goes to taking seriously the experiences of people who are not you. I don't know, there's something there that I don't think as I was growing up, just for me personally, that I did that, that I saw the world in a given way and I just saw that as prescriptive. And if your experience didn't match my understanding of the world, then you were clearly wrong. And I think it's been a growth journey and a wisdom journey to try to get out of that, and I think that's one of the things that we do here at the center so well, but I think it's also something that congregations can learn to do well, is to just take seriously the experiences of the people who are sitting in the pews on a weekly basis and not shy away from the messiness.

That's one of the things that I was thinking about, just this whole conversation of the last 10 minutes or so, is that life is just messy, and just personally and congregational life is messy, governmental life is messy, all of life is. And as human beings, we try to declutter and simplify to get a handle on it, which is fine, but in the midst of that, we don't want to lose the humaneness of our experience. And so, just being open to hearing someone else's experience and saying, "Well, that's not my experience, but I'm going to take seriously that that is the way that you have walked through life, and I'm going to engage you alongside of that, and not try to change you into something that is different from what you claim to have experienced." I just feel like that's an element to a part of the conversation here.

Tim Shapiro:

I think in our education events, just naturally as the society is gaining its own skill level around diversity, that we see more and more congregations at a particular education event that represent wider theological worldviews, wider distance between their own traditions, and so forth, and I know that one of the goals of the Center for Congregations is to not only walk alongside the way that is developing in natural ways, I hope, in our culture, but also to become a leader as much as we can, that's probably the wrong word, but to affirm it and take it even further. So, this is an anecdote, and I'm going to tell you this, and for our listeners, I'm not asking you to agree with a theological underpinning of the story, but it does represent, I think, the way in which congregations both are messy, but also provide very special safe place and sometimes challenging places for human beings.

So, we're in a small group, there's several pastors, there are also lay-people, they're talking about their congregations and their most recent favorite program or experience. And so, we have a really diverse group, at least for the center in the room, and there's a very progressive pastor, we use that term generally, and who represents a very progressive congregation, and they were talking about the new support group they had with four teenagers that were wrestling with their sexual orientation identity. And most of them were really sensing that they were gay. And so, this group was to help, from these teenagers, be safe and talk about who they are. Sitting next to this person was a gay pastor from one of the most unconservative congregations that the center works with, and the pastor was listening to this, and was a he, he paused and said, "That sounds like a really important thing you are doing." That, for me, was a really powerful moment.

Ben Tapper:

It sounds like it was a touching moment too, one of those moments that just, where everyone is speaking about humanity. We're not getting lost in theological claims or arguments, this congregation is creating a safe space to help teenagers process something that is difficult to process and hold. And that is simply a good thing, period. And as for that to be named is just, it's beautiful. And I think we started out the podcast somewhat pessimistic about-

Tim Shapiro:

Oh, I was pessimistic, I'll claim that.

Ben Tapper:

But when I feel most optimistic about congregational life, it's when moments like that happen, when we're able to cut through the things that normally distract us and get to the heart of it. Because, I mean, what is really just life at its core, but just a way to interpret, understand and move through life? That's the whole point of it, at least, that I see it. So, I appreciate the antidote. That was beautiful.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. And I hope that people listening to this episode understand that there is no judgment on our side of the table on any of the things that we've talked about, that we genuinely believe in you, that, gosh, what you do is so important in our society and we don't stand in judgment about it, but as Tim mentioned, want to walk alongside. And I just want to encourage you that we see so many good things happening in congregations in Indiana, I've been here six years and I can't tell you the number of stories I've seen of positive things and positive change happening in such a wide diversity of congregations. And that is our joy is to see that and to help resource you and be a part of that as you move forward. So, I just want you to understand that we're here for you because we believe in you.

And the whole reason that we're sharing these stories and our thoughts are just hopefully for encouragement's sake, that, as Ben said, Tim started out a little pessimistic on the front end, but that is the reality. But I hope you hear the tenor of the belief that we have and how important your work is, and that we're here for that.

Tim Shapiro:

Matt, thanks. That's really important to say, and it's true that they're center's highest values. And I'm really glad you articulated that.

Matt Burke:

I'm wondering, Tim, I'm thinking about your professional experience and the culture of the center, especially in the piece that we've articulated about maybe moving into a kind of resourcing from the inside out, taking a stance of no judgment, but just wanting to help congregations live into their mission. And you spent what? 17 years or so as a congregational pastor? And I have to believe that that shapes the culture you have tried to help the center live into. And so, I'm wondering if you can speak to how that continues to shape your leadership here at the center, and how you hope the center will continue to be of service to congregations. What are you bringing with you, and what do you hope to continue to bring with you?

Tim Shapiro:

Yeah, thanks for that. And that's a question, after serving in two different congregations for a total of about 17 years and been here at the center for about the same amount of time, that's a question that I do ask, how is this different than being a pastor? How's the Center for Congregations different than being a congregation? Where should there be connections? And where are their definite contrasts? And I think I answered that question differently on different days and during different seasons. So, one observation I would make is that some of the highest values, some of the most powerful religious claims and commitments that exist within a congregation, the language might be used differently in a not for profit or in our work as the Center for Congregations, the language might be different, but the particular claims and commitments have parallels.

For instance, it was important to me as a pastor to be aware of how much of the language that was being used I was getting. I defeated my own value, as we've now observed a couple times in the opening minutes, but a value that I have is that in both the congregation and in workplace at the Center for Congregations, that affirmations outrun critiques to a six to one ratio. And for me, that's theological in terms of good news, gospel, hope, grace, et cetera, and in the work environment, I may not use those same words, but for me, the same dynamic, the six to one ratio is needed for human development and human flourishing.

So, I'm always thinking about this, the question you asked, Ben, I don't always come up with the best answer, but I'm thinking about this ratio between affirmation and critique around grace, you could use the theological terms grace and sin, keeping that ratio up on what I'll call the positive side is important to me, whether I'm a pastor or leading the center.

Matt Burke:

This may not sound related, but it's the question that jumped into my mind as you were speaking. We're very aware of our identity historically as a predominantly white organization, as an organization that has done a lot of work with mainline congregations historically and is hoping to shift that and expand, but I've also observed that even when we take a stance of non-judgment or we think we're being open, there are certain congregations that don't want to mess with us, it's like the other way around. Something we stand for, that I think we stand for is, they're not down with who we are. And so, I'm wondering, as a leader, how do you help us think about what it means to continue to approach those congregations? Or do we continue to approach them? How do we maintain an air of openness, respecting that we're not going to be for everybody, but we want to be? If that makes sense.

Tim Shapiro:

Yeah, it's a live question, and in many ways, the center's behind the curve. Some of corporate life is incredibly aware of how the best work is done in groups of people who are not at all like one another. Some segments of capitalism, some segments of capitalism are farther along than other sectors of life. But I think the Center for Congregations, given our roots, given who we've been for our first so many years, really pretty long time actually for not for profit, 17 or 18 years, has a lot to learn by using one of our key values, which is a listening stance. And also, the other thing I would say, is making sure that when we are in a listening stance, that we don't cross over somehow and make the subject of the conversation about what the center is, and what the center has to value, and how the center is funded, and so forth, and that we try to make the conversation, and are intentional about making the conversation about the congregation, so that we learn something.

And that will help us, I hope, if we know that we're going to learn from the creativity of the congregation that we don't normally work with, will lead us to being seen as a workplace that will serve a wider expanse of types of congregations.

Matt Burke:

To wrap up the conversation, Tim, what are some words of encouragement that you would give to congregational leaders who might be listening?

Tim Shapiro:

One that I heard you give, Matt, and that they're absolutely important, and that the work that a congregation, if I'm speaking directly to a congregational leader, that you are important, you are appreciated. The work you are doing does good that you will sometimes not even be aware of. So, we just want to make a rather clear, and I hope, abundant affirmation of people who, whether as non-clergy or clergy, are contributing not just to their congregation, you are contributing not just to your congregation, but to a better world, to healthier human beings and a more robust social fabric. So, I guess we'd want to move back into the center's mode of affirmation.

And just the story that is told about congregation tends to be like the way I started, and so, this gives me a chance to redeem and say, it'd be great to be able to change the conversation about congregations, that is simply, you're loved, your work is essential, you are highly appreciated, both as a congregation and the individuals and clergy leaders in it.

Ben Tapper:

I just want to say, Tim, as we wrap, that I think, even starting pessimistically, you're still in line with a six to one ratio, you just put the one on the front end and the six on the back end, I mean, so, it all works out.

Tim Shapiro:

Oh, Ben, I feel better actually. So, thank you.

Matt Burke:

Well, Tim, we very much appreciate your time. Thank you so much for being a part of this conversation, and we look forward to more conversations in the future.

Tim Shapiro:

Yeah, Matt and Ben, I love the work you're doing with this podcast. So, thanks so much.

Ben Tapper:

Thanks, Tim.

Now, we're going to dive into the resource section of this episode. And the purpose of this resource section is to identify a couple resources that might be articles, books, or different forms of media that will supplement some of the things that you heard discussed in the conversation earlier. So, Matt, I believe you're going to kick it off, what resources do you have to share with us today?

Matt Burke:

Yeah, I want to kick this off with an article on the idea of technical versus adaptive change. And this is something that the center uses to frame how we think about congregations and the challenges and the opportunities that they're facing. And I think it's really helpful for congregational leaders. And it came out of business leadership, but I'm going to post an article in the show notes, from Scott Cormode of Fuller Seminary, and he gives an introduction to this topic of technical versus adaptive change. And the idea is that a technical challenge is something that you already know what the answer is. You've got a leaky pipe, you call a plumber. You have a blockage in an artery, you maybe need heart surgery. So, those are things that you know what the answer is, and you just need to access that answer.

But then there's the adaptive challenge. And to put it back in the category of heart health, you can fix the blockage, but what if that person has incredibly unhealthy lifestyles? And having them change those lifestyles can be really tricky, because there's not a magic bullet or a five-step method necessarily, it has to do with their behavior, their background, a whole host of factors. And challenges can then be placed into one of those two categories. So, this article is an introduction to those categories, and then if you want some deeper learning on that, you can also follow up with the book that was written on it by Ron Heifetz, and there's all kinds of other resources out there.

Ben Tapper:

Thank you for sharing that, Matt. In that vein, I'm going to bring a book by our president, **Tim Shapiro**, shameless plug, not even sorry about it, but this book is called *How Your Congregation Learns*. It's all about job security y'all. I'm kidding. This book is called *How Your Congregation Learns*. And this book is especially useful for clergy leaders, but lay leaders can also benefit. So, if your congregation is undergoing a time of transition or facing a persistent challenge, this is something that you're going to want to explore. In *How Your Congregation Learns*, Tim unpacks different learning styles and strategies for congregations, but he also helps provide just a broad framework by which a leadership team can help walk a congregation through a challenging time. So, you can find your opportunity that lies within it.

And so, it's designed to help ease the pain of transition, and to help provide a lens through which the leadership team can help the congregation focus, and then move through the challenge into the opportunity. So, that's what I'm bringing. Matt, did you have something else you wanted to add or another resource you wanted to bring?

Matt Burke:

Yeah, just one other thing to add about that book specifically is, Tim has really distilled what he's learned from his last 17 years as the president of the Center for Congregations and also his experience as a pastor, and just really charted a map of how congregations move through projects, move through learning. And it's a high level resource, but it's something that should be on your shelf. Because, even if

you're not encountering anything, well, we're all encountering a lot of deep change right now. Chances are, you're hearing this and we may still be in a stay-at-home, here in the midst of the pandemic, but a lot of changes are happening, but this helps create a roadmap for you through change, and it includes some of the downsides. It includes disappointments, it includes some of the dead ends. And so, it is, of course, ultimately optimistic because we believe in congregations, but at the same time, it's realistic about how congregations journey through their lifecycle.

Ben Tapper:

Thank you for naming that. And I also think it's a tool that is meant to be dealt back into time and again. So, it's not something you just read once through and then you're done, it's something that you can return to as you face different challenges or as you find yourself in different phases of the learning journey, even dealing with the same challenge. And so, it's just one of those you want to keep on your shelf, to Matt's point, because you can dip back into this well time and time again.

Matt Burke:

Absolutely. Yeah. The other one I wanted to bring is another book written by Center for Congregations staff, both **Tim Shapiro** and Kara Faris, who's our resource consulting director, it's called *Divergent Church: The Bright Promise of Alternative Faith Communities*. And what this was, was a deep dive into congregations, not only in Indiana, but also around the country, and taking a look at some alternative ways that congregations are viewing themselves, such as, there's a dinner church in there, and just other ways of gathering that are happening. And the understanding is that the core commitments and values of these congregations haven't changed a bit, but the way that they express those in community, how they gather, how they get together, has changed.

And so, it's a neat model, and not necessarily that your congregation needs to model itself off of what you read in the book, or off of another community, but just give you permission to think about it, get outside of the box and say, "How could we think about doing our community differently that we have our key theological or faith commitments, but revamping how we gather and what we see as our sacred practices or our practices of gathering?"

Ben Tapper:

Yeah. And one of the things that I really appreciate about this book in particular is that it's a reminder that the core functions of congregational life in community can still be done, even if it seems like you're radically changing something else. So, whether you're meeting over dinner, you're meeting in a pub, or you're participating in the cowboy church model, or whatever it is, you can still come together, be community and support each other. And I think, in our shifting world, it's a good reminder that while some things are inevitably going to change, and need to change, some of those core foundations, spiritual life, spiritual growth, person to person connection and relationship are going to remain the same regardless, if you're intentional about it.

Matt Burke:

Yeah. And I think this book is really timely from the standpoint that so much is changing in our culture, I mean, in 2020, a year of dramatic change. And so, I'm sure your congregation is grappling with change, and this may provide some stimulus or impetus to think about ways that you can re-envision who you are, while still holding true to the core values.

Ben Tapper:

So, we hope that you'll really take a look at these resources, both the article and the two books that we mentioned. If you really feel so moved, purchase them off Amazon, shoot them off the bestsellers list, we're all about fame here, the Center for Congregations. That's really the only reason we're doing any of this. But, no, seriously, check those out, hopefully, they're helpful, and if they're not, we can help you find another resource that might be. But we wanted to bring these because we felt that they supplemented the discussion that you heard today pretty well.

Matt Burke:

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Center for Congregations Podcast. For Indiana congregations, check out our other offerings in our work at centerforcongregations.org. And if you're inside of the state of Indiana, or outside of the state of Indiana, or anywhere around the world, please check out thecrg.org, that's the Congregational Resource Guide, which is a searchable database of thousands of resources that we've discovered over the last 22 years of our work.

Ben Tapper:

And if you are listening on Apple Podcasts, please be sure to leave us a five-star rating, and that is the easiest way to ensure that new listeners that might find this information helpful can find this podcast. So, go on there, leave us a five-star rating. If you want to leave a review as well, feel free to, but if you want to save yourself some time, just click that five-star button and keep it moving. And if you're not listening on Apple Podcasts, I'm sorry, you should be. I'm kidding. We'd also encourage you to follow us on social media. You can find us at Center for Congregations on Facebook and on Instagram. We'll post content, resources, and inspiring congregational stories.

Matt Burke:

A big thank you to Jayden Lee for podcast engineering, and thanks to the Lilly Endowment for funding our work.

Ben Tapper:

We will see y'all next week. Thanks for joining us.