

# CREATING A CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE OF VALIDATION

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

Not too many years ago congregational consultant George Bullard wrote a book titled *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict*. He is right, of course. A little conflict can be a sign of vitality. While every congregation might need a little conflict, every congregation also needs an abundance of affirmation.

Your congregation benefits greatly when its good work is validated. The opposite of being one who validates is one who functions as a scoffer. Recall Psalm 1 (NRSV):

*Happy are those  
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers.*

The word scoffer designates someone who denies truth, often in an assertive, often unpleasant manner. Affirmation is an alien landscape to scoffers.

What does it mean to sit in the chair of a validator? In some settings, the word validation means to confirm an experience as truth. It also implies a strengthening of what is already established. Validation corroborates truth.

Validation involves affirming as true and good things that which might be hidden, invisible. Validation affirms the worth of a person and his or her work. It is the feeling of recognition from others that you are right or good enough. "I feel validated."

The word validation is sometimes used to describe a particular kind of therapeutic language. A therapist validates by confirming what is relevant or true about a thought or emotion from a client.

## VALIDATION AND FLOURISHING

All living systems have a better chance of flourishing when validation is plentiful. If you speak about your congregation in a positive manner, then your congregation's leaders and members are more likely to live into a positive future. Consultant Gil Rendle says that



"Conversation is the currency of change." Positive conversation is the currency of positive change.

Dr. John Gottman is known for his work on marriage and relationship studies. He discovered a high accuracy indicator of which marriages will last. In stable, vibrant marriages couples share five affirmations for every one complaint. In contrast, marriages headed to divorce offer less than one positive comment for every single negative remark. The scoffers are detrimental to marriage.

Congregational life is not the same as a marriage relationship. However, the information is relevant. Positive regard builds connection. Connection strengthens the capacity to explore a new challenge, to overcome disappointment and be open to moments of insight. Spoken validations produce positive emotions. Positive emotions indicate that learning and growth have occurred.

An affirming disposition supports your congregation's capacity to learn to do new things. As a congregational leader, consider the reality that your congregation's ability to accomplish something new is con-





nected to your ability to communicate the simple reality that you like the congregation. Despite your congregation's quirks, maladaptations, defenses, failures to live up to its values, consistently communicate your enjoyment of those in the community of faith. These are people you should appreciate and validate.

### THREE WAYS TO VALIDATE

Three ways to validate your congregation include celebrations, blessings and testimony.

#### Celebrations

Abraham Heschel has written that we are losing the power of celebration. He notes, "Instead of celebrating, we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation. To be entertained is a passive state... Celebration is a confrontation, giving attention to the transcendent meaning of one's actions."

Find reasons to celebrate your life together. There are many opportunities for celebration. Think of the language your congregation might already use. Many protestant congregations refer to celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Various rites of passage create opportunities for celebrations. Celebratory opportunities include anniversaries, homecomings, paying off a building mortgage, reaching a capital campaign goal, welcoming a guest preacher or teacher, the occasion of receiving recognition from the community or your denomination or mission partner and much more.

What activities in your congregation are celebratory engagements?

#### Blessings

Rachel Naomi Remen writes that a blessing isn't so much something that someone gives to another. Rather, "blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of rela-

tionship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth."

Former Meet the Press moderator David Gregory recalls a particularly meaningful blessing that took place in his congregation. David Gregory is Jewish. His wife Beth is a Methodist. During Yom Kippur, the Jewish worshippers of Temple Micah moved to the Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church because there wasn't enough room for the throng in their home site.

During the service, Rabbi Zemel invited the non-Jewish participants in the service to come forward to receive a blessing: "You are an embodiment of the grace and beauty of this country where a Jew is actually someone that a person wants to marry and not some 'other' to be shunned... Your presence here honors us. Your presence here makes us stronger and wiser"

Rabbi Zemel then asked the congregation to rise. He offered a short, ancient blessing from the Torah. The Hebrew





words resonated through the Christian cathedral on that Jewish Holy Day.

At that moment, the congregation is infused with validation. Such validation functions as an inoculation against inevitable challenges, disappointments and the daily frustrations that are a normal part of reality. How is the power of blessing used in your congregation?

Celebrations and blessings can strengthen your congregation's sense that its existence is important, worthwhile, noticed beyond and above. Testimony also provides for the way of validation.

### Testimony

In some realms of life, testimony is a truthful statement often associated with a court of law. Testimony can also refer to a public rendition of a religious experience. Our English word comes from the Latin *testimonium*, which refers to being a witness. In the context of congregational validation, testimony is the expression of the truth of one's life with and among others in the congregation.

During worship, Michael stands. He clears his throat, looks out at his friends in the congregation and speaks.

Two weeks ago, I asked for prayers for our son serving in Iraq. He had been wounded. We had very little news. Today I want you to know he will be in a D.C. area hospital in two weeks. He is going to be all right.

This is testimony. The words aren't a blessing. They certainly aren't a celebration. Yet, they are a signal of a deep connection. It is like the neurons in his brain are connecting with the metaphorical neurons that repre-

sent the congregation as a whole. There is a meeting of minds and souls. The currency of human connection is being exchanged.

Such connection creates validation. Where else could Michael share such words in a community? This congregation is a place where ultimate concerns are shared and accepted, beyond the noise of Facebook and Twitter and Snapchat and such.

Testimony within a congregation takes place when people tell the truth about themselves, their struggles and joys, what really matters to them. This is an alchemy that doesn't get captured in committee meeting minutes, but it seals relationships, both immanent and transcendent. It creates the reality that the business of the congregation isn't simply about attendance numbers, financial figures and building maintenance, but about life, learning, meaning and ultimately love.

Years ago, theologian Paul Tillich wrote a sermon. Read the words below as if offered to the congregation of which you are a part:

And in the light of this grace we perceive the power of grace in our relation to ourselves. We experience moments in which we accept ourselves, because we feel that we have been accepted by that which is greater than we. If only more such moments were given to us! For it is such moments that make us love our life, that make us accept ourselves, not in our goodness and self-complacency, but in our certainty of the eternal meaning of our life. We cannot force ourselves to accept ourselves. We cannot compel anyone to accept himself. But sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say "yes" to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole, that self-hate and self-contempt disappear, and that our self is reunited with itself. Then we can say that grace has come upon us.



### CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK

There are so many powers and principalities that encourage negative views about the organizations and institutions that make up our public life. Let's change the way we think about our congregations.

Let's relate to our congregations as living communities seeking validation just as we do as individuals. Validation can be the encounter – through celebration, blessing and testimony – that leads to beautiful and powerful experiences.

Let's help our congregational experience to be one of affirmation. There is not enough time in life to spend it in the community of scoffers. There is good work to be done and good words to be shared.

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**Creating a Congregational Culture of Validation** is part of the Compass for Congregations series. It is intended to provide information and ideas about congregational learning. We hope you find this helpful in your work.

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### REFERENCES

In this article, the following resources are referenced: *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict* by George Bullard, 2008; *How's Your Faith?: An Unlikely Spiritual Journey* by D. Gregory, 2015; *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage: America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship* by John Gottman, 2007; *The Wisdom of Heschel* by A.J. Heschel, 1975; *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging*, by R.N. Remen, 2000; *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, by Martin Seligman, 2011; *The Shaking of the Foundations* by P. Tillich, 2011.

### RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

For resources on this subject, you're encouraged to check out the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG) at <http://thecrg.org/>.



For more resources on this topic

**CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE**

<http://thecrg.org/>

