Consistory Center Case Studies
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Author’s Introduction

These case studies are developed to support a transformation in how consistories interact. As I’ve worked with churches in conflict and struggling with change, I’ve observed dedicated and well-meaning people becoming very frustrated. My background in communication studies leads me to see this as a problem of process. The way people interact either helps or hurts their ability to solve problems. This is not a particularly Christian or theological approach (at least on the surface). It might also be true for civic groups, synagogues, mosques, school boards…anywhere there are people seeking to collaborate on shared projects. There are many excellent biblical and theological studies about the consistory, church offices, mission, vision, and conflict. These studies are meant to complement them by offering a communication process perspective.

So there is a bias in the way the cases are presented and the questions are asked. Other people might offer other ways of approaching the situations. I would ask you, however, not to abandon the communication process approach too quickly. Explore it, try it—you may discover that it offers a great deal of possibility for improving life in your church.

The motivation for these studies comes from the consistory members I have met through the years, both in my own congregations and the consistories that have opened their meetings to me as a classis representative and facilitator. In particular, I have in mind those good-hearted, faithful church members who accepted a call to serve on consistory in spite of their doubts about their preparedness. They came to the offices because they love the church and want their church life and mission to go well. If they are asked to serve, they are willing to try. What they encounter is often discouraging. Meetings don’t go well, problems don’t seem to get solved, and there are hard feelings between people who worship together and pray together. Most endure this for the sake of the church. It doesn’t need to be that way. The practices noted throughout these case studies emerge from research and practice into how groups of people can work together well. We are well advised to give them careful attention and serious effort and develop new habits of interaction.

If we think of the church as having a particular culture, we recognize that it takes two to five years of continual practice for a culture to shift to stability in new patterns. Things may get worse before they get better. In fact, according to the late church consultant Edwin Friedman, this is almost certain. Any attempt to change an existing stability that is not functioning well will be met with sabotage and resistance, both overt and passive. It is only in the hope of a better future that a consistory and congregational leaders can persevere in creating a new culture. My experience tells me it is worth whatever the cost. When a church settles into a new, healthier culture in which there are clear norms about how conflict is addressed, and there are good process skills in place, distributed throughout the congregation in members who have learned to practice them as habits of interaction, then there is new energy along with new possibilities for outreach and mission. And somewhere along the line, we remember that this is why we are still here, and not in heaven.

At the root of the analysis of these case studies is also an attention to emotional processes. Moving to a healthy culture and process means that individuals become aware of their own emotional processes, the emotional processes of others, and how those processes interact in the new “family” that is formed by the gathered and meeting consistory.

As members of consistory become aware of these, they can develop new skills at working together. They can establish new patterns of interaction, new habits of how they will “do consistory” together, that bring out the best that each person has to offer.
It is important to recognize that this is different from the idea of “managing” others. In the emotional process approach, we do not try to manage someone else in order to create the results we want or to keep the peace. If anything is managed, it is a person managing his or her own emotional process and responses to others. Any change in the other takes place because the first person is present in a new way and interacts in new ways that have integrity and clarity for him or her. This way of approaching group life may in fact increase a sense of conflict at the beginning. It is not about keeping peace, it is about creating healthy processes. These try to avoid manipulation, management of others, and scapegoating. It may mean making differences sharper but learning to deal with those differences in healthier ways.

This approach leads to certain kinds of questions that are intended to highlight these aspects of the cases. Typical questions are:

1. What are the parts of this topic that push emotional buttons for me?
2. What stories and experiences have shaped my feelings about this?
3. What am I afraid of here?
4. What is this or that person afraid of here?
5. What are my hopes in this situation?
6. What are the hopes of this or that person in this situation?
7. What are the faith dimensions of this situation?
8. What is important to me?
9. What are the hopes of this or that person in this situation?
10. What would be a “quick fix” that we might later regret? What problems would a quick fix lead to in the future?
11. What new patterns of interaction do we need to practice to create the life we want together?
12. What are the larger contexts we are dealing with that influence our feelings and decisions? How are we being affected by a, b, c, d?
13. What are the patterns in our interaction as a group?
14. Are there subgroups that are polarized?
15. Who are our mediators, or people who can talk with both groups?
16. Who are our scapegoats, or people we blame for the problems we have?
17. How can we draw out the best each person has to offer for the sake of our calling and mission?
18. What would have to change for that to happen? (For instance, we might decide that we need to talk directly to others instead of about them to third parties; we might choose to listen more carefully to each other instead of interrupting…)

A typical set of questions for a case might be:

1. How do you feel when you read this case?
2. What things in the case prompt those feelings?
3. What would an ideal situation look like? Describe it in as much detail as you can.
4. Practice offering alternative explanations for this current state of affairs: why are things this way? Try to come up with explanations that are based on different causes: circumstances, lack of commitment, lack of leadership, interpersonal conflicts and tensions, poor communication, lack of vision, turf struggles, etc. See if you can describe the case based solely on each of these. What is happening? How? Why? When? Who is involved, and in what way?
5. Could there be a history to this situation? Is it the result of long-standing conditions, or is it a recent result of some particular recent situation(s)?
6. People tend to find someone to blame when there is a problem. Who are the likely scapegoats for this situation?
7. People tend to attribute motives to other people. The “Fundamental Attribution Error” claims that we tend to excuse ourselves (“Circumstances were to blame”) and that we tend to blame others (“They are lazy”). How might this tendency be operating in this situation?

8. What would have to happen for this case to move over time to the ideal discussed earlier?

From a theory perspective, new process skills and new learnings may be developed:

1. Meta-conversations about process: how are we talking about this?
2. Tolerance of discomfort--discomfort now for growth into maturity
3. Feelings: expressing, respecting, awareness of (emotional component)
4. Anxiety monitoring and management
5. Critical advisor/flag: reflection on process quality
6. Safe and unsafe groups
7. Lencioni team dysfunction pyramid
8. Gibb climate awareness
9. Symlog interaction analysis
10. Roles: task, maintenance
11. Myers-Briggs awareness
12. I messages practice
13. Asking good questions
14. Keyton group roles framework
15. Bowen triangles, self-differentiation
16. Cloud and Townsend boundaries

Before the case studies are undertaken, the group should develop a list of “emotion words” to work from while discussing the cases. This is a helpful reference for each case in which the opening questions ask how a person feels when thinking about the case. The list should make available at least a dozen words. With some work, the group should be able to list dozens of emotion words, which could be typed and copied for each person. Examples are happy, sad, angry, annoyed, frustrated, confused, relieved, and afraid. People should be encouraged to use a number of emotion words rather than just choose one. We often have multiple and contradictory feelings about the issues considered in these cases.

I have tried to avoid simply duplicating the questions for discussion from case to case. However, almost any of the questions from this introduction or any case could be useful in other cases as well. If the group seems to move too quickly through the given questions without any real engagement, consider borrowing questions from other places. What is most important is not getting correct answers. What is most important is getting healthy interaction and respectful dialogue going. Once healthy processes are in place, the Spirit will guide the group to the shared wisdom that is needed.
Case 1: The Blahs Set In

Over the past four months, consistory attendance at First Church has been irregular. People don’t seem to make getting to the meetings a priority. Those who do attend often seem to be thinking about other things. A few of the consistory seem to do all of the work. They are getting angrier and angrier at the others, who don’t seem interested. When the pastor talks with members of consistory about the situation, they turn the conversation to personal issues they are facing at work and at home. One member is going to put a motion on the agenda for the next meeting setting a policy about how many meetings a consistory member can miss before he or she must resign.

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel when you read this case?
2. What things in the case prompt those feelings? (“I feel ____ because _____.”)  
3. What would an ideal situation look like? Describe it in as much detail as you can. (“People would arrive early and spend time talking with each other; meetings would open with a joyful time of prayer; there would be well-prepared reports distributed in advance…”)
4. Practice offering alternative explanations for this current state of affairs: why are things this way at First Church? Try to come up with explanations that are based on different causes: circumstances, lack of commitment, lack of leadership, interpersonal conflicts and tensions, poor communication, lack of vision, turf struggles, etc. See if you can describe the case based solely on each of these. What is happening? How? Why? When? Who is involved, and in what way?  
5. Could there be a history to this situation? Is it the result of long-standing conditions, or is it a recent result of some particular recent situation(s)?  
6. People tend to find someone to blame when there is a problem. Who are the likely scapegoats for this situation?  
7. People tend to attribute motives to other people. The “Fundamental Attribution Error” claims that we tend to excuse ourselves (“Circumstances were to blame”) and that we tend to blame others (“They are lazy”). How might this tendency be operating in this situation?  
8. How might the small group of workers be contributing to the way things are?  
9. How are the people who are losing interest contributing to the way things are?  
10. What might the worker group do differently in the short term and in the long term?  
11. What might the group that is losing interest do in the short term and in the long term?  
12. What would have to happen for this case to move over time to the ideal discussed earlier?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?  
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?  
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?  
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?  
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 2: The Church Is Dirty

This conversation took place during a recent consistory meeting:

“I don’t know what we are going to do about our cleaning problem. John has really been letting things slide lately. People are complaining about dust and dirt. Last week the children’s ministry director told me that the garbage hasn’t been taken from the nursery for three weeks. I know John is going through a hard time with his health and family lately, and he really needs the money, but this isn’t working.”

“John and his family have been members of the church for generations. We owe it to them to let him have this job.”

“I agree. I’ve been spending time counseling with John, and you’re right, he’s going through a lot right now. We pray together each week, but it doesn’t seem to be getting better.”

“Nobody can make everyone in this congregation happy anyway—people pick on the smallest things to complain about. Being a custodian is like having everyone in the church as your boss.”

“We’re not a social service welfare agency. He’s not doing his job. Fire him.”

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How are staff positions set up in our congregation?
2. Are there plans for regular performance review? Are there people assigned to work on this?
3. We think we are doing people a favor by letting them get by with low performance. How might it be the case that we are creating more problems for them?
4. Why are performance review situations so difficult? What are we afraid of? What past experiences in our congregation or in our families shape how we feel about this?
5. Metaphors guide the lives of congregations. If we think of ourselves as a “family” church, how is that different from thinking of ourselves as a “business” church or a “community” church? How does each image change the way we deal with performance issues?
6. Explore “what if” questions: “What would happen if…?”
7. Explore creative alternatives: “The real issue is getting things clean. Can we hire another person to help John?” (Are we willing to continue to have John on as benevolence to him that looks like pay?)

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 3: Bill Is Angry Again

A regular consistory meeting is scheduled in two weeks’ time. At coffee hours, and even before and after worship services, it has become apparent that one of the members of consistory is highly focused on and angry about a church issue. Three other consistory members are standing together at coffee hour.

“Uh oh, Bill is angry again.”

“Oh, no, that means our whole next meeting is shot. I hope the pastor can manage to get something done.”

“It’s so frustrating. Bill is like a bulldog when he gets something in his mind. Do you remember last year when it was about the outreach team?”

“I think I’ll bring a book to read while he rants.”

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel about this consistory?
2. What do you see as the major issues involved?
3. What about Bill’s behavior is a problem?
4. What are possible causes of Bill’s behavior? Is there a function Bill is fulfilling for the system? Try to offer different explanations. Don’t settle on one perspective.
5. Whose responsibility is it to change this pattern? Do the other members of consistory have a part in this pattern?
6. What are the consequences of allowing this pattern to continue?
7. What are the fears that are operating to keep this situation the way it is?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 4: People Aren’t Happy

At First Church it seems like the entire consistory meeting is spent fielding complaints from members of the congregation. The consistory is well respected in the congregation and open to hearing concerns. Each member has spent time listening to people in the past month and has brought a list of concerns to the meeting. Part of their meeting sounds like this:

“The children’s ministry team isn’t happy about the new music director’s music schedule. The children aren’t getting as much time in worship to sing. They’d like to be put on the schedule once a month.”

“OK, we can do that. We’ll tell the music director to set that up.”

“Lots of people are asking for more of the old hymns and the organ to be played more often in worship.”

“We can have hymns half the time and the newer music the other half.”

“The missions committee feels that mission isn’t being emphasized enough in the sermons.”

“OK, we can make sure that the pastor includes a mission reference during each message. You can do that, right, Pastor? Mission is important, isn’t it?”

“Last week there were communion cups left over from the first service when the people arrived for second service. Some people couldn’t take communion, they were so upset that the sanctuary looked like a mess.”

“OK, we can make sure that the cups are cleaned up. We’ll ask the youth leaders if they can have the youth group make sure this gets done.”

“What other concerns have we heard? Have we taken care of everyone’s complaints?”

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel about what is happening in this consistory?
2. What is the working vision and mission that is evident in this way of responding?
3. Is there another way of dealing with these complaints?
4. How has the consistory cooperated in establishing this way of functioning?
5. What are the effects of doing what they are now doing?
6. What would be the effects of their changing this?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 5: These Young People Today…

The consistory seems to have gotten into a habit of spending time talking about the youth of the church. There is a great deal of frustration surrounding youth and youth ministry. When the church holds special services (Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, etc.) there don’t seem to be any young people there. A significant amount of time is spent focusing on what has been heard about the young people. Typical comments are:

“I heard that Suzy Jones got called to the principal’s office last week and was expelled for three days. I’m not sure what it was for, but Mary told me that it had something to do with drinking…”

“The Smith boy got a driving ticket last week…I don’t know what’s wrong with our youth leaders; it seems like the young people are not doing the right things, all of a sudden.”

“Well, what do you expect from that family? I heard they are going to marriage counseling…”

“These young people today just don’t have the commitment to the church we had…”

“When I was their age…”

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel about this consistory conversation?
2. What are the possible consequences of this behavior?
3. Who is responsible for making changes in this pattern?
4. What fears are present that keep this pattern in place? (“If I say something, then ____ will happen.”)
5. Where are the forums or places of conversation in your church life for people to discuss frustrations about news, current events, and cultural changes?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 6: I Can’t Stand Those Praise Ditties

First Church has been struggling to deal with questions relating to the worship service. When members travel and visit other churches, they bring back bulletins and stories about many different practices. Like many churches, they are concerned about declining membership and how they are relating to the youth of the congregation. Last week, the music director and the pastor included two contemporary praise choruses in the worship service. Consistory has been content to allow the pastor and music director to set the pace on this. Later that week, the monthly consistory meeting was held, and the following comments were part of the discussion:

“My children enjoyed the praise songs and have been singing them all week in the car.”

“Some of the visitors said they felt the Spirit’s presence.”

“I heard some visitors say they’d never be back if that’s the kind of music we use here.”

“Why can’t we just use the hymns we’ve always used? They were fine for us, and we turned out OK--best to stick with what works.”

“That new River church down the highway is growing really fast, and they don’t even have an organ.”

“I bought some CDs so I could listen at home and learn the songs.”

“Why can’t we have the music too, instead of just the words? People are going to become musically illiterate if we don’t see the music.”

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel about this case?
2. If you could wave a magic wand and make things perfect, what would that look like?
3. What is the role of the consistory in this case?
4. What is the role of the board of elders?
5. What is the role of the pastor and music director?
6. If you had to identify the main “streams” of argument, how many would there be? What would you name them?
7. Try to speak on behalf of an argument that you don’t personally agree with. What are the valid points of those who disagree with you?
8. What past experiences in your life shape your current feelings and views about this case?
9. Can you imagine a church where all of these concerns are addressed?
10. What have you seen happen to churches where there was conflict over this? Try to be specific about particular cases.
11. What would you like for our church?
12. What would you be willing to do to make that happen?
Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 7: The Bible Says…

First Church takes pride in being a “people of the book.” Each consistory meeting opens with a devotional time offered by a member of consistory. The Bible is celebrated and central in worship. From time to time the consistory conversation turns to what the Bible says about the issue at hand. Comments like the following may be heard:

“My friend from the big church says her minister is preaching a ten-week series on tithing. I never heard before that God promises to multiply our giving if we do this.”

“That’s the Old Testament. In the New Testament, giving is less structured…”

“Jesus told us not to let our right hand know what our left hand is doing.”

“Micah says to ‘bring the tithes into the storehouse…”’

“My friend’s church makes every member promise to tithe.”

On any issue, you might hear the following opening statements:

• “This passage says…”
• “But that was meant for that time; it doesn’t mean…”
• “You can’t change Scripture--you’ll end up…”
• “My Bible has study notes that say…”
• “You can’t get too complicated with the Bible; it says what it says.”
• “The General Synod study paper from 1983 said…”

Particularly in these kinds of conversations, a few people tend to speak, and many others remain silent.

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. Many things are happening in this case. What do you notice?
2. How would you feel if you were part of the conversation in this case? Would you be one of the active participants or one of the spectators? Why?
3. How do people come to hold the beliefs and views that are important to them? Is there a history to your own set of beliefs and views?
4. What have been the sources of our own understanding of the Bible?
5. What is the likely outcome of this conversation?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 8: Pastor, Why Aren’t You…?

The scene was fairly typical. Not long after the consistory meeting got underway, the questions began:

“Pastor, Mrs. Jones was in the hospital last week, and she told me you never visited.”

“We wanted you at our committee meeting to answer some questions, and you weren’t there, so now we can’t…”

“How long does it take you to write a sermon?”

“One of my friends from Smithville called and said he saw you playing golf last Wednesday afternoon.”

“Our last pastor visited every home once a year.”

“Pastor, why aren’t you…?”

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel about this case?
2. Giving each speaker the benefit of the doubt, and ascribing to them the best of intentions, what are the issues that they are concerned about?
3. What are alternative ways for these concerns to be addressed?
4. What are the benefits or drawbacks of each of these?
5. Where in our church is pastoral performance reviewed?
6. What different ideas about the pastoral role exist in our own congregation?
7. What different ideas about the roles of elders, deacons, and members exist in our own congregation?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 9: You Want to Spend What?!

The proposal for spending $10,000 on training and equipment for the children’s ministry was not a surprise, but it still created a stir in the consistory. People had been talking about it for weeks. Typical statements heard during the hours-long discussion were:

“If we are going to keep growing, we’ve got to invest in our young people.”

“We can’t even pay our bills now; where are we going to get the money?”

“We don’t give enough to missions anyway; I think we should do more for mission.”

“Have faith--God will provide!”

“If the pastor preached more on tithing, this wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Kids expect too much today anyway. When I was a kid growing up…”

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel about this case?
2. What are the hopes and fears of the people who made each statement?
3. What have been your own experiences with money?
4. How do the life experiences of people affect their attitudes toward spending?
5. What has been the history of our congregation with finances?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 10: Parking Lot Meetings

The consistory meeting broke up about an hour ago, but there are still groups of people talking in different parts of the church. This is not unusual. Following a typical congregational meeting, groups of people will go out to eat together, or stay around the parking lot debating the issues. There are times when one person will walk by a group, and suddenly the conversation will stop till that person is out of earshot. This creates suspicion that “people are talking about me” or about some sensitive issue. There are distinct feelings of being “in” or “out” of the inner circle, and people use the telephone and email to continue these conversations. Messages are often forwarded, and many people become involved in sensitive or tense matters.

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. What are the consequences (good and bad) of these kinds of conversations?
2. What kinds of feelings do they generate in you?
3. How do these conversations relate to the deliberative conversations that take place during consistory or congregational meetings?
4. People sometimes say things in other groups that they don’t say during deliberative discussions. How do you feel about this? Why does this happen? What are the consequences of this practice?
5. If you wanted to create a climate where people spoke their concerns respectfully and clearly during deliberative gatherings, what would have to happen to create that climate?
6. How do you feel when someone says something you don’t agree with?
7. How do you typically respond?
8. What would encourage you to speak up with more of your ideas and comments during consistory or congregational meetings?
9. What are people afraid of when they don’t speak up?
10. Some boards have a “one voice” policy in place that asks for board members to speak with a single voice on issues that have been decided by the board as a whole. Why do you think such policies exist?
11. What would you be afraid of if you were part of a board with a “one voice” policy?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 11: It’s All Your Fault

The consistory was relieved that the whole problem was beginning to make sense. Trying to figure out who was to blame for the events that led to the youth group being stranded overnight at the concert had been difficult. In the end it all pointed to the volunteer youth coordinator who had not made the phone call she had been asked to make. Everyone agreed that this fit in with an overall pattern of irresponsibility in her life and that once she was removed from the picture everything would be fine.

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel about this case?
2. How did the consistory come to the decision that the volunteer coordinator was to blame?
3. If the consistory was looking for another way to deal with this event, what else might they explore?
4. Make a list of all of the possible factors or alternative scenarios you can imagine that might have led to this event.
5. There is a concept known as “assigning a scapegoat.” The idea behind this is that if we can find one person to blame for our group problems, we can feel a sense of closure when we have assigned the blame, and we don’t have to look any further or acknowledge any other dimensions of the problem. What problems does the “scapegoat” practice create?
6. Use the “learner” questions in Appendix 4--what kinds of conversation might take place around this event?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Case 12: So What Do We Do Now?

It is late. The consistory has been discussing a particular problem for hours, but nothing has been decided. People have to go to work tomorrow and want to finish this. Finally, one of the members says, “Why don’t we just do this…” A motion is made, everyone agrees, prayer is offered, and people go home grateful that someone finally made a decision.

Questions for consistory discussion are provided below. As you work through the questions, take time for each person to speak and for others to listen and ask clarifying questions. Avoid making value judgments about the statements of others (“That’s dumb,” “How can you think that?”). Try asking a question instead (“I’d never have thought of it that way; can you explain that more for me?”). The goal will not be to “solve” the case but to learn new ways of thinking and talking together that will transfer to real cases in your own church life.

Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. How do you feel about this case?
2. What do you see as possible problems with the way this decision was made?
3. What is your experience with the decision-making process? How do you make decisions about important matters?
4. Some theorists warn about the problem of the “quick fix.” Have you experienced decisions that solved one problem but created more problems later?
5. Can you imagine another way this decision might have been made? What would be your ideal decision-making process?
6. What fears keep us from using other decision-making processes?
7. How could we create habits of doing our work together that would lead to meetings in which we feel better about our decisions?

Assessment of process:
1. How did we feel our discussion of this case went?
2. What were we happy about with our discussion?
3. What were we not happy about with our discussion?
4. Did we gain any new insights into this case from our discussion?
5. Could we have this kind of discussion about something in our own church life?
Facilitator’s Guide to Case 1: The Blahs Set In
(morale, overfunctioning, and unintended consequences)

Dear Facilitator,

Thank you for being willing to help a group discuss this case study. The goal of this study is more about helping a group exercise new group process skills than it is about getting a “right answer” to the problem.

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Theologically, these assumptions are based on the following truths:

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Case 1 demonstrates the ease with which we tend to blame others and turn to regulatory solutions. Some members of the consistory will immediately conclude that the problem is a lack of commitment on the part of the “losing interest” members, and that the best solution is to create a policy that will regulate their behavior.

From a management perspective, this is based on Theory X, the idea that people are basically lazy and must be intimidated and controlled if they are to do their assigned work. Theory X was eventually replaced by Theory Y, which approaches people differently. Theory Y assumes that people want to make a significant contribution to work and will do so when they are treated with respect and given a positive environment that supports their work. There are other management theories that work from other assumptions.

Your goal as facilitator will be to help the group explore other possible explanations for the current situation at First Church. These would include:

• That most members of the consistory have a lack of commitment
• That most members of the consistory are facing overwhelming life pressures
• That some members of the consistory have taken over the work and not allowed others any meaningful role in the work
• That the pastor has not provided missional or visionary leadership
• That there are long-standing conflicts that are draining energy from people and stalling any development in church life
• That most members of the consistory have taken a passive stance toward a small group of people who own “turf” in the church life
• That conflict has been poorly handled in the church and people have retreated from involvement
• That most members of the consistory have allowed the church to drift into a condition such that people are losing interest and find no meaningful involvement in the church

These alternative explanations aim at broadening the analysis of the case. The move from a simple blaming of people to an ownership of each person’s part in creating the situation is a difficult move to make. It involves an awareness of the systemic nature of group process. Whatever is happening is a result of everyone’s contribution to the process. Those who talk a great deal and those who contribute nothing all have a part in shaping what has come into existence.

The best solutions often emerge when everyone accepts responsibility for his or her part and begins to practice new ways of “being” in the situation. For some people, that means speaking less and listening more. For others, it means speaking more and risking their safe “hiding place.” If you as a facilitator can help create a safe group setting for discussion of this case, you will have made a major contribution to the future of your church. Safety happens when people are not afraid that they will “lose face.”

For suggestions about creating a supportive communication environment, read the “Communication Climate” pages (available in Appendix 1 or at http://www.bsu.edu/classes/flint/climate.html).

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 2: The Church Is Dirty
(staff performance and missional focus)

Dear Facilitator,

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Case 2 is similar to the youth case (number 5) because of the problem of focus of attention. It is different in that it involves church staffing, and in this case we pay more attention to the issue of the role of mission and vision for decision-making.

John is a major point of attention in the congregation right now, and in the consistory. His poor performance becomes something to talk about, complain about, and focus on. One way to look at this is to ask what function this focus of attention performs for the group. It is possible that it functions to redirect attention from other matters that should be the focus of attention, such as mission and vision, which may be more difficult and which people may want to avoid (sometimes without realizing it). When we find urgent, immediate concerns that appear to be legitimate, we can devote time to them that might better be spent on other issues that may be less urgent and more difficult to talk about. The focus on John serves to help us feel busy about urgent things while missing the larger, truly important things. If we were thinking strategically, this would be called a diversion or distraction.

This leads to the question of whether there are other matters of concern that we are avoiding--things we need to talk about but don’t want to talk about, issues that are pressing on us but that we don’t feel we have any good answers to. Explore with the group what these other matters of concern might be.

Putting up with John’s low performance has become a sign of the Christian ministry of the congregation, a form of benevolence or mission shown by supporting John. There are multiple dimensions to John’s relationship with the church: he is a member, a long-term key church family member, a friend to some, and a hired staff person. This makes for complicated interactions. It may be that the church sees their
patience as a form of benevolence. The problem with that is how others are affected. Why is it important that the church be clean? When the consistory starts from the missional premise that visitors will judge the church partly on its appearance, the issue becomes clarified. We need the church to be clean so that we can carry out our mission of outreach.

When the issue of benevolent ministry to John and the missional value of having a clean church are separated, it becomes possible to work on two problems instead of one. On the one hand, the congregation may choose to continue benevolent ministry to John, either by gifts or loans through the deacons or by continuing his employment and reducing their expectations. Solving the cleaning problem may involve hiring additional people or organizing volunteer support for specific parts of the cleaning. Clarifying expectations would reduce frustration and stress for all involved.

A further dimension of the case involves John’s own personal growth. John may be at a point in life where he needs to understand his own limitations. If there are physical problems, he may need to learn to live within new limits. If there are emotional or family problems, he may need to direct more attention to them. Allowing him to continue in an ambiguous status with the church work, so that part of him may be aware of his failure to meet expectations but another part wants to deny this, allows him to continue to live in an immature state. He is not in touch with reality. He is living in denial of the effects of his problems. A compassionate staff or parish committee member might be able to have a productive conversation with John about how he is feeling about his work and where the expectations of the church are not being met. It is always better to know the truth and live in the light. John may need to change jobs to something that meets his needs better. This may be better for him and for the church.

Still another dimension concerns the interaction between consistory and any staffing committees. Some consistories choose to hold the staffing review function in their own portfolio. Other consistories delegate this function to a staff, parish, or similar committee. There are arguments for and against each approach. Has your consistory had this discussion, or just fallen into a pattern by default?

A root goal of this case, however, is to have the consistory discuss the role of vision and mission in decision-making. Do we spend our time discussing matters that are relevant to our vision and mission? Do we relate our discussions and our decisions to our vision and mission? Are we spending most of our time focusing energy and attention on matters that are not central to our vision and mission? Encourage the consistory to think about how getting the focus off a person and onto vision/mission will change the way decisions are made. It can help free us from feeling trapped.

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 3: Bill Is Angry Again
(blockers, informal group roles, scapegoats, and system function)

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There are a couple of issues to consider here.

People are not accepting their own responsibility to approach Bill about his behavior and how they feel about it. They are taking a passive role and waiting to see if the pastor will deal with this. If we think of the board as a system of interacting parts, their silence becomes part of how this behavior continues. Part of the goal of the case discussion will be for people to explore how their own behaviors contribute to the way things are, and to consider what new behaviors might create a different consistory experience.

Bill may be responding to a system or habit wherein people never make decisions and things are never settled. He may be taking on the role of being the one to bring closure to open issues. What valid concerns may be represented by Bill’s behaviors?

Joann Keyton, in her text on group communication (see the bibliography at http://comsight.info), discusses formal and informal group roles. An angry person who blocks all other issues, always bringing the group back to issue A, is playing the “blocker” role. There are many reasons a person might behave this way. Our purpose here is not to do psychoanalysis or to label a person. Our purpose is to identify a pattern of group behavior and consider ways that the patterns of interaction could be changed to be more productive. Whatever Bill’s reasons for behaving this way, there are other ways in which people can begin to talk together.

Here is one way for the pastor or a member of consistory to address the matter:
“Bill, I understand that this issue is important to you. I would like to spend time on it, and I would also like to take care of the other items we have on our agenda for tonight. Could we take ten minutes now to hear your concerns, and then schedule another time when we can devote some time and preparation to that issue? I think that would honor your concern and the concerns that others have brought here tonight.”

Note the use of both/and language, rather than either/or. I try as much as possible to avoid using the word but in a sentence: “I would like this, and I would like that. Here is how I see we can deal with both.” This is better than “I would like this, but we can’t do that now because…” This opens the issue up to argument about your reasons. The both/and approach honors the multiple concerns that are present in any group gathering.

That being said, there is also value in reflecting on whether Bill is serving a system function by forcing attention and decision-making on matters. One possibility is that this consistory has a history of interminable debate without making clear decisions. Bill may be acting out a necessary system role by demanding clarity. It would be better if the group conducted more healthy discussion and used a good decision process. The way to change Bill’s behavior may not be to address Bill at all. The leverage point may be to engage in better group process. Bill’s behaviors may then simply fade away, because they are no longer relevant.

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This consistory is headed for a nervous breakdown! Over a period of months, so many demands will be placed on worship leaders, the pastor, and the staff that they will feel paralyzed: “We can’t do this, and we can’t do that, and we have to make sure that this happens, and we have to include this…”

It is likely that the people who are being asked to structure their work around the complaints of others will be frustrated and, rather than directing their frustration at the cause, will act it out in other ways. The worship and public life of the church will be structured to keep everyone happy, but anger and frustration will lead staff and leaders to become demoralized and discouraged and seek escape. The result is that the focus of church life is on keeping this or that person, or this or that group, happy. This means that the focus is not on mission or vision, which may place demands on everyone in order to reach a shared goal. The whole dynamic of this congregation needs to be changed to a mission-driven expectation. Leaders will need to begin speaking about vision and how mission priorities shape decision-making. There will be a new sense of freedom for leaders when the criteria for a good decision are related to missional goals rather than to pleasing people’s preferences.

Edwin Friedman, in his video *Reinventing Leadership*, discusses how in an unhealthy system it is the most immature and recalcitrant members who are allowed to guide decision-making. The system is organized around responding to the unhealthy behaviors of these members in an accommodating way. People who are immature often behave in ways that violate the boundaries and invade the internal processes of others. Whenever a consistory finds itself focused on one person, or a staff person finds that a complaining congregational member has taken up residence in his or her mind, there is an indication that new patterns of leadership and community need to be explored.
It is useful in this case to discuss how people feel about disappointing or disagreeing with others. What are the risks involved in being a person who has his or her own views and goals?

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This case brings up issues of focus of attention and boundaries.

The questions we ask and the events we focus on are very important in shaping our behaviors. “Judger” questions like What’s wrong? Who is to blame? How can I be in control? and What is wrong with them? tend to lead to frustration and paralysis. “Learner” questions can lead us to think about what is in our power and what choices we have. (See Appendix 4, or the book Change Your Questions, Change Your Life, by Marilee Adams)

There are also dimensions of displacement here; people may be expressing their anger or frustration about their own lives or childhoods or their concerns about the world by targeting a young person in the church. The promotion of healthy boundaries is a valuable safeguard against this damaging behavior. There is much literature out these days about healthy boundaries. (See the writings of Henry Cloud and John Townsend or most literature about adult children of alcoholics and codependency.)

It is difficult to keep clear where our responsibilities begin and end when it comes to other people. It is especially difficult for consistory members because we feel a sense of responsibility for the members of the church. This case brings up good discussion about privacy and gossip. When are we intruding into people’s personal business? When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he warned them about not being busybodies (2 Thessalonians 3:11). A busybody is someone who has an unhealthy interest in details of the lives of others. A busybody usually spends his or her time thinking about what others are doing, and does not reflect on his or her own behavior.
Helpful questions to ask, growing out of the judger/learner model mentioned above, include:

- What is working with young people today, here and in other places and churches?
- What are we responsible for?
- What is really happening with our youth? Can we work with our youth leaders to understand better what they are facing, how they are feeling, what they need to do their work?
- What is going on nationally and internationally with youth today? Are there things about youth culture we do not understand? Who can help us learn about this?
- What are the choices we have? What is within our power and what is outside our control? Are there choices we might make that would challenge us more than the youth?
- What are the youth feeling, needing, wanting from their involvement with the church?
- What is possible?

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 6: I Can’t Stand Those Praise Ditties
(personal preferences and the group good)

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One dimension of this case relates to being vision- and mission-driven rather than allowing personal preferences to drive the practices of the local church. At some point there will need to be a discussion about what people see as the vision of Christ for the church in general, and for this church in particular. If past experience holds true, there will be a diversity of views on the core mission of the church. For some, the church is meant to be the moral anchor of society. Others use a missional image of the church becoming all things to all people to win some. H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic work *Christ and Culture* describes a variety of ways Christians have understood the church’s relationship to the world.

What is probably most important, from the perspective of a particular local church, is that there be a shared vision of the church’s role around which people can work together. It may be that different visions will work for churches in different places. If a consistory cannot come to a shared sense of the vision and mission for its church, there will be ongoing loss of energy to internal conflict. It may not be as important which vision they agree on as that there is agreement on some vision. This cannot be done in a coercive way but must emerge through a process of dialogue, respect, and listening.

Multiple fears and concerns are driving the conversation of the consistory in Case 6. It is likely that people are not listening to each other or taking each other’s concerns seriously. Anxiety reduces our ability to think beyond our own concerns. There are expressions of
- personal preference
- misional concern
- concern for children in the church family
- discomfort with changes taking place in the world
All people have a history when it comes to worship styles and music. The music style that people grow up with becomes for them a kind of “heart language” that connects with their spirit in a special way. Some current brain research seems to indicate that the part of the brain that processes music is next to the part of the brain involved in religious practice. Whatever science shows, experience tells us that music is an integral part of people’s experience of worship. It is highly worthwhile for members of the consistory to tell stories of their own musical and worship experiences--what music they grew up with, what memories are associated with those styles, what styles they enjoy today, and what styles they see being enjoyed by their children and friends (perhaps at work or in other settings).

One perspective on the diversity of music today draws a distinction between people’s personal preferences (which they may celebrate through various forms of recorded music) and the music used in the church’s worship. The music will be chosen according to the view that the church takes of worship--whether it is primarily for existing believers or for seekers or, still further, for outreach to the unchurched. Some churches have been able to establish multiple services (sometimes even happening at the same time, in different parts of the facility) in which the Scripture and sermon are the same but the musical style is different.

People will often make value statements or major social judgments around the issue of music. There is a strong fear, shared by people of many different religious perspectives and even non-religious perspectives, that American culture is experiencing a time of breakdown in various ways. It may be in the interests of this case to have a separate conversation about what people feel is happening in our country and with American culture. That may actually be part of what is driving feelings toward worship music.

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 7: The Bible Says…
(theological controversy, dialogue, and intimidation)

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- People have the capacity to solve their problems together.

Theologically, these assumptions are based on the following truths:
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- The Holy Spirit is present in the gathered consistory.
- As James 1:5 assures us, we will be given the wisdom we need for following Christ through life’s challenges.
- God is at work for mission in and through the church.
- The body of Christ works best when its parts respect each other and work well together.

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This case brings up issues of biblical literacy and theology. People who serve on consistories have an incredible variety of backgrounds when it comes to these matters. Some may have formal theological training. Others may have taken some college courses on religion. Still others may have only their childhood Sunday school training to draw on. Others may draw on what they hear on the local Christian radio station. Still others may have come to faith recently and have no biblical literacy at all.

The issue of lifelong learning is one that has been taken up by the Reformed Church in America and its staff associated with Christian education. Various Web resources and regional events encourage people to continue to grow in their biblical and theological understanding throughout their adult lives. Developing an adult approach to Christian faith rather than a childhood approach remains a challenge.

It is important to realize that even highly educated and theologically trained persons have significant disagreements about many issues related to interpretation and application of the Bible. Part of the Reformed Church’s approach is to practice theological reflection together, through conversation and discussion as a group, when we are seeking to understand God’s will about a matter. The doctrinal standards provide a base from which we can operate as a particular community of faith among all the denominations that exist.

Educators have become sensitive to the issue of bullying in schools. We may want to become sensitive to the issue of biblical or theological bullying in our conversations as consistories. Because people have significantly varied backgrounds when it comes to biblical literacy and theological reflection, those who have the most well-formed views can be perceived as (or may well be) bullying others in the
conversation. There is a need for all participants to take time to reflect on the process of the discussion as well as the discussion’s content. Are we listening well to each other? Are we seeking out the views and thoughts of those who are reluctant to participate? Are we demonstrating respect for each other? Do we approach this conversation with a learning attitude, willing to have our reasons and evidence examined as we offer our point of view?

Practically speaking, this may be the best outcome of engaging this case study with a consistory. If people leave with an awareness of how to engage more productively in conversation around sensitive and difficult issues, this will have been time well spent. If they are able to reflect on how they have come to hold the views they do, and how others have come to hold the views they do, learning will have taken place.

Those who would like to explore issues of process more fully may want to investigate the Lombard Peace Center’s “Here I Stand” course or read the books *Getting to Yes* and *Getting Past No*, by William Ury and Roger Fisher. The field of rhetorical studies also offers many concepts and studies about how difference may be productively addressed. (You can access some of this through http://comsight.info.)

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 8: Pastor, Why Aren’t You…?
(pastoral performance and scapegoating)

Dear Facilitator,

Thank you for being willing to help a group discuss this case study. The goal of this study is more about helping a group exercise new group process skills than it is about getting a “right answer” to the problem.

This goal is guided by the following assumptions:
- Good group process will allow positive results to emerge.
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This case brings up issues of anger about pastoral performance. Of interest are the following questions:
- Why is the consistory meeting chosen as the time to address these issues?
- Is there a performance review process in place for elders, deacons, and the pastor(s)?
- The elders are key advisors to the pastor. Do they meet with the pastor, and have they already discussed the consistory’s concerns?
- Why is there an over-focus on the pastor? Do others participate in ministry? Is the pastor seen as someone who trains and equips people for their ministry, or as the paid doer of ministry?
- Is there a history of similar complaints against previous pastors?

The question of clergy well-being and burnout comes to mind in this case. A number of the Reformed Church in America’s classes are paying attention to issues of clergy well-being by forming peer supervision groups that enable ministers to check in with each other about their professional functioning and vitality. The goal of these groups is to support clergy in being energized, creative, enthusiastic pastors to their congregations. This often does not happen without the support of an external group. Stresses and pressures within congregations can lead to clergy burnout or “acting out.” There are far too many cases of clergy leaving ministry because of feelings of isolation, failure, and frustration.

An interesting dimension to probe here is whether the people who voice the concerns in the consistory meeting have coordinated their complaints. There are probably appropriate means of addressing these concerns, particularly through the board of elders or a staff/parish team. If there is an informal “pastor supervision committee” that is not appointed or accountable, this can lead to a persistent drain on pastoral energy.
Another dimension to probe is whether there have been discussions between the pastor and consistory about areas of giftedness and passion for ministry. One consistory begins each new year by sharing ministry areas of interest, giftedness, and passion. The members speak about what kinds of ministry are energizing for them and what kinds of ministry are energy-draining for them. The pastor also participates in this sharing. At the end of the time, a picture has emerged of what gifts God has placed in the leadership, and what areas of ministry are likely to need special attention. Such a consistory has a sense that ministry is shared and is provided through the gifts of the Spirit present in a group. It may be in the best interest of a congregation to capitalize on the particular “shape” of a pastor’s gift set, and fill in the gaps with ministry shared by other gifted persons.

There may be an aspect of this case wherein the pastor gravitates toward the role of being criticized. People who are accustomed to being defensive and justifying themselves may inadvertently set themselves up for a system in which other people are more than willing to accommodate that pattern. Edwin Friedman points out that when we find ourselves defending our actions and justifying ourselves to others we have lost the footing of being “self-differentiated.” This results in a loss of self, a giving up of having one’s own feelings, concerns, vision, and choices. In Friedman’s view, healthy pastors know who they are and what they will do and won’t do, and can stay engaged with people who disagree with them without defending and justifying their own views. To be a non-anxious, engaged presence is the goal.

You may want to lead the consistory into a time of thinking about how ministry would look ideally. What would the pastor do? What would the elders do? What would the deacons do? What would others do? Given our particular personalities, gifts, experiences, and backgrounds, how would this work together with everyone in the right place for his or her makeup? People function best when they are working in their area of giftedness. Burnout is not a function of busyness; it is a function of mismatch. What is the pastor’s ideal vision of ministry, and of his or her personal contribution to a church’s ministry? What is the vision of each person for this? What kind of a church would they like to be part of? What are they willing to give to help form that church?

If this highly critical practice has been part of your particular consistory, it may be important to be sensitive to your pastor’s feelings about this case study. Before the case study takes place, there may be value in the facilitator meeting with the pastor and a denominational staff person or counselor to reflect on the pastor’s feelings.

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 9: You Want to Spend What?!
(finances, emotions, personal history, and faith)

Dear Facilitator,

Thank you for being willing to help a group discuss this case study. The goal of this study is more about helping a group exercise new group process skills than it is about getting a “right answer” to the problem.

This goal is guided by the following assumptions:

• Good group process will allow positive results to emerge.
• Good outcomes are blocked by poor communication.
• Progress in mission is frozen by bad process, which absorbs energy, enthusiasm, and creativity.
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This case brings up issues of attitudes toward money. Jesus identified this as a major spiritual issue when he said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Different generations of people tend to have different views about spending, especially spending connected to the church. One generation grew up “making do” with whatever could be found on hand. Parsonages in such settings became an odd collection of doors and windows from church members’ garages and basements. Painting was done with whatever Elder Jack had in his toolshed. Other generations became accustomed to spending and borrowing in order to provide quality furnishings. This is an extremely sensitive issue that strikes near the hearts of people.

A valuable exercise in this case is for people to share their experiences with money. Each member of the consistory brings a personal history and background about money and spending. They apply this history and background to the church. There are strong emotional components to these habits. If people can reflect on their own formation as spenders and stewards, there is more possibility of productive discussion about new spending within the church.

It is helpful for each person to share what his or her hopes and fears are around this issue. Hopes and fears are interests that stand behind and give rise to people’s positions. Getting to Yes, by William Ury and Roger Fisher, along with their other books on negotiation, stresses that productive collaboration is best accomplished when people understand the interests of others, not just their pronounced positions. There may be other ways for people’s interests to be met; this cannot be determined until those interests are verbalized. It may be that, once those opposed to a particular suggestion understand the interests of others...
and see that they share those interests, they will consider changing their position. Or a new collaborative position may become apparent.

Beyond personal hopes, fears, and other interests stands the ever-present question of the church’s vision and mission. We may want to explore what God’s interests are, and whether we are willing to allow those to direct our decision processes.

This is another opportunity for creative thinking. Are there other ways to meet these interests? Is this the right time? Are these expenditures the best ones? How else might we accomplish our goals? Case 12, “So What Do We Do Now?” addresses questions of good decision process, and may be useful in connection with this case.

One RCA staff person was fond of repeating the statement “You never have a money problem; it’s always a vision problem.” What do you think he meant by this? Is it possible that more time and attention are needed to build a shared vision around the matter of concern in this case? While the immediate circle of people concerned about children’s ministry, or any other ministry, may understand the need, others may not. Consider how communication and information might transform this situation.

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 10: Parking Lot Meetings
(triangles, indirect communication, and dialogue)

Dear Facilitator,

Thank you for being willing to help a group discuss this case study. The goal of this study is more about helping a group exercise new group process skills than it is about getting a “right answer” to the problem.

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This case brings up issues of direct communication. In general, healthy communication involves speaking directly to the people who are involved in a situation. This requires some personal communication competency in knowing how to engage in dialogue or respectful disagreement. Murray Bowen observes that when people are having conflict with some other person or group, they will “triangle in” a third party who is recruited to take their side and support them in their problem with the other party. If you imagine a gathering of people as a collection of interlocking triangles, you will see how communication can be frozen in a group. People have spoken with this one about that one and with another one about someone else, and those people have brought others in to deal with their concerns. Everyone has heard things about some others, and often those things have not been addressed by the two people who had the original disagreement.

One practice that can prevent this is for people to refuse to become entangled in triangles. When someone tries to bring in a third party by telling him or her about a problem with someone, that person might response with:
• “I’m sad to hear that. How can I help you work with that person to resolve this?”
• “That must have hurt you. Would you like me to go with you to talk with him/her and resolve this?”
• “That sounds hard. I’m wondering if I could role-play a conversation with you that you might then go and have with that person. Maybe we can work out a way you could talk with him/her about it.”
By refusing to accept responsibility for people’s problems with others, you save yourself frustration and lead them to struggle through the temptation of using immature behaviors. They will grow and mature as they learn to take responsibility for their relationships and to deal directly and respectfully with others with whom they have differences.

An associated problem in this case is that we get into triangles because we like to feel needed and important. “Everyone comes to me with their problems” is a warning sign: it indicates that people find you willing to take responsibility for things that they should be dealing with. It also indicates that you may be supporting ongoing immature behavior in the community.

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 11: It’s All Your Fault
(scapegoating, systems approaches, and leadership)

Dear Facilitator,

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This case brings up issues of scapegoating. If a group can pass off onto one person or another group the responsibility for their problems, it is possible to imagine that the problem has been solved and that there is no need to look further, or examine other factors. While it may be the case that one person has played a major immediate role in a failure or problem in the church life, there are often other factors that influenced these events that are less obvious and more invisible because they are “distant” from the event. For example, in the situation of the youth being left at the concert, there may be unresolved differences about youth leaders or youth activities that shape how people interact around the youth program.

This does not excuse the failure to make a needed phone call, but it uncovers long-term and systemic matters that need attention if there is to be a healthy, functioning team in place. A key part of thinking systemically is to realize that the cause of an event may be removed in time and location from the event. Another aspect of thinking in terms of systems is to look for the ways in which every part of the system contributed to an event. What happens is exactly what the system made happen. Together, we are responsible for the outcomes.

Another aspect has to do with the kinds of questions we ask. Marilee Adams has developed a method of learning called “QuestionThinking” that makes us sensitive to the kinds of questions we ask and the consequences of asking those questions. She suggests that while “judging” questions are natural, there is benefit in asking “learning” questions instead. (See Appendix 4.) Some people have called this “fixing the problem instead of fixing the blame.”
To use a moment of failure as a learning opportunity makes ongoing improvement possible for a group or organization, as well as for individuals. I will often begin a problem review session in my own consistory with a statement of what I have learned, about myself and the situation, through what has happened. I then invite others to reflect on what they have learned about themselves, their responses, their choices, and their actions. Not only do we learn that often we have all contributed to a situation, but we also learn how to interact in more productive ways.

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Facilitator’s Guide to Case 12: So What Do We Do Now?
(creative problem-solving and good decision-making processes)

Dear Facilitator,

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This case brings up issues of meeting preparation, decision-making processes, and group facilitation. There are a number of possible ways for this practice to be improved. Most textbooks on group communication offer chapters on decision making (I recommend Joann Keyton’s book Communicating in Groups: Building Relationships for Effective Decision Making; see my bibliography on http://comsight.info for this and other books that may be useful). The following notes are samples of the tremendous amount of research knowledge on how to help groups make good decisions.

One aspect to consider is pre-meeting preparation. When a group is going to face a challenging decision, it is valuable for people to have the factual information ahead of time. Some of this can be done by letter, email, Internet, fax, or phone. Providing people with cost numbers, initial perspectives, possible choices, and alternative approaches ahead of time gives everyone an opportunity to reflect on and process the information before the group comes together. Some consistories use websites where monthly information is maintained and information is posted ahead of the meeting. In this way, the time together can be devoted to quick review, clarification of any confusing points, and the opportunity to hear each other share thoughts, reasons, and initial conclusions.

During the meeting, the person who is facilitating it (helping it move along) can work at providing summary statements of what appear to be emerging group perspectives and offer ways for the group to move forward. The group’s time together is best used for discussion rather than information-sharing.

Significant decisions require good processes. Learning to define the problem, brainstorm possible actions, rank choices, and identify criteria for an acceptable solution are important initial steps. From this point on,
Brainstorming is a practice that some groups have found useful. It involves a time of offering many different ideas and possible solutions—as many as possible, as diverse as possible—all without taking time for criticism or evaluation. This is difficult for groups that are accustomed to criticizing ideas as soon as they are offered. The benefit of withholding criticism and evaluation is that creative ideas are allowed to surface. When people are fearful and anxious about criticism, they are not able to think creatively. Setting a noncritical atmosphere allows new ideas to emerge. After a significant number of diverse ideas have been gathered (usually on newsprint or a chalkboard), it is good to take a time to sit quietly with the ideas. It is even better if this can be done at a separate meeting. This allows people to take the ideas home, think about them, sleep on them, and then return with their responses to the ideas.

The evaluation of the ideas is another time when it is important to offer reasons and avoid emotional reactions. Statements that judge the person who proposed the idea (“Whose stupid idea was that?”) create a climate in which healthy communication cannot take place. Some groups that have a history of trouble with this have used the Nominal Group Technique for the gathering of ideas. In this technique, each member of the group is provided with three-by-five-inch cards on which to write ideas during a brainstorming time. In this way, nobody knows where the idea has come from. This avoids complicating the decision process with personal relationship issues that may exist.

There are various ways to go about choosing between proposed ideas. While a simple majority vote is often used, there are other options. Some groups have used a five-finger voting technique. People indicate their support for an idea by using a raised hand. A raised hand with five fingers showing indicates full support for the idea, four fingers somewhat lower, three fingers less yet, and two fingers still less. One finger indicates weak support, and a closed hand indicates strong opposition to the idea. This has the advantage of allowing the facilitator to judge the relative strength or weakness of support for a given idea, and the whole group is able to ask for reasons from those with the strongest support and strongest opposition.

A final word here about the difference between strategic planning and continuous learning. For years, decision-makers in organizations were trained to do strategic planning, which usually involved gathering experts to create years-long plans to help an organization reach its goals. In the best cases, these plans included feedback and evaluation in order to make adjustments. In the worst cases, these plans became fixed no matter what was actually happening because of them. This has led to another approach, based on continuous learning and evaluation, under the title of the “learning organization.” Books like Peter Senge’s The Fifth Discipline are a valuable introduction to this approach to organizational planning and process. Much free information can also be found on the Web at http://pegasuscom.com.

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Appendix 1: **Communication Climate**

These notes are from the website www.bsu.edu/flint/climate.html. Many sites reference Jack Gibb’s work; google “Gibb” or “communication climate” to find more. Most texts on small-group communication, such as Joann Keyton’s book *Communicating in Groups: Building Relationships for Effective Decision Making*, contain a section about this topic. See my bibliography at http://comsight.info for other useful texts.)

Sometimes when we communicate we feel very good about the conversation. We have an impression that our statements are welcomed and valued. At other times, there is a negative feeling about conversations we have. We might feel nervous and defensive. We are not happy with the conversation and we are reluctant to say what is on our mind. The different feelings we have in different conversations are due to different communication climates.

According to communication researcher Jack Gibb, as soon as two people start communicating, a climate begins to develop. One way to view communication climate is to view it as a people process rather than as a language process. When viewed this way, improving the communication process can be achieved by improving interpersonal relationships. This can be accomplished by reducing defensive messages and replacing them with supportive messages. This guide overviews communication climate by first examining Gibb's six pairs of defensive-versus-supportive message types. Following that, a list of suggested behaviors for developing a positive communication climate is provided.

**Defensive - Supportive Message Types**

Gibb describes six pairs of defensive and supportive types of messages. Because more effective communication will occur in a supportive communication climate, effective communicators should practice creating and using supportive messages. It is also important to note that defensive behaviors build on each other with a snowballing-type effect generally resulting in a very negative climate in a very short period of time.

**Evaluative - Descriptive:** An *evaluative statement* is based on making a judgement, usually of the other person or his or her work. People don't like being evaluated and generally respond to evaluative messages in a defensive way. By contrast, *descriptive messages* are clear and specific statements that do not contain evaluation. A speaker constructing a descriptive message will avoid using "loaded" words and is aware of his or her nonverbal cues. In addition, descriptive messages do not contain evaluative terms such as, "too late," but rely, rather, on concrete description such as "two days past the deadline." Consider the following example of a supervisor who needs to confront an employee who is turning in unacceptable paperwork and notice how the evaluative message is more likely to result in defensiveness than is the descriptive message.

*Evaluative:* The work you turned in yesterday was sloppy.

*Descriptive:* The work you turned in yesterday contained seven typos and had uneven spacing.

**Control - Problem Orientation:** A *controlling message* is one in which the speaker attempts to manipulate or coerce the listener. Frequently controlling messages contain elements that attack the adequacy or intelligence of the listener. This type of message often results in the listener becoming offended and resistant. On the other hand, a *problem orientation* focuses on identifying a problem as a mutual problem which requires cooperation to solve. The following two examples demonstrate the
contrast of controlling versus problem orientation messages.

Controlling: *If you continue to arrive late to work your pay will be docked.*

Problem Orientation: *Let's try to figure out why you have difficulty arriving to work on time and see what we can do about it.*

**Strategy - - Spontaneity:** Strategic messages convey a message of deceit, or misleading. They attempt to trick the listener by hiding facts or agendas relying instead on “gimmicks” or head games. On the other hand, spontaneous messages are characterized by openness and honesty. This direct message indicates the speakers' meaning is unplanned and free of hidden motives. Consider the following example of an individual who wishes to end a meeting.

Strategy: *(looking at watch)* Wow--it's getting late and I have another appointment.

Spontaneity: I *don't see this meeting as accomplishing much and I have a lot of other work to do.*

**Neutrality - - Empathy:** A neutral message creates defensiveness by demonstrating a lack of understanding, interest, or concern. This type of message makes the listener feel like he or she is being treated as an object rather than as a real person with feelings. By contrast, the empathetic message contains elements of concern and interest and ensures the listener that he or she is valued. This type of message is sensitive to the feelings and thoughts of the listener. Consider the following example of a supervisor who wishes to have a job completed by the end of the day.

Neutrality: *I don't care what your problems are, get this job done by the end of the day.*

Empathy: What difficulties would you encounter if you were to try to complete this job by the end of the day?

**Superiority - - Equality:** A superiority message tells the listener that the speaker feels he or she has greater power, wealth, intelligence, or social status. Such a message encourages the listener to become defensive by ignoring or forgetting the message, or by establishing a competitive environment. A message of equality, on the other hand, encourages a positive communication climate that consists of cooperation, encourages feedback (two-way communication), and demonstrates respect.

Superiority: *Do it this way because I'm the boss and I say so.*

Equality: *How do you think we should handle this problem?*

**Certainty - - Provisionalism:** Certainty messages are absolute--they imply that the speaker knows all there is to know on a particular topic with no degree of flexibility (this is also known as dogmatism or an allness attitude). The speaker is perceived as a "know-it-all" who probably has a poor self-image and is more interested in winning an argument than in being correct. By contrast, a provisional message poses a point of view, but with an open attitude. This invites other parties to explore alternatives rather than limiting the alternative to one or two ideas. Consider the following example of a manager discussing a proposal to relocate a factory.

Certainty: *Moving the plant would be a stupid idea.*

Provisionalism: *I feel there is evidence to suggest that we carefully consider moving the plant before we
The above six pairs of defensive versus supportive message types contribute significantly to communication climate. A positive (supportive) communication climate results in easier and more effective communication. Therefore, effective communicators are careful to create and maintain positive communication climates.

**Behaviors That Create Positive Climate**

The following is a list of specific behaviors that will aid you in establishing a positive communication climate. Because a positive communication climate results in more effective interaction, you should attempt to use these behaviors whenever possible and appropriate.

- Initiate a positive climate when starting the conversation. This is the best time to introduce a positive climate because at this time you can most easily create messages that allow people to believe you value them.

- Acknowledge the other person whenever possible--send the message that you care that he or she is present.

- Demonstrate an open-minded attitude. A closed mind can imply to the other person that you don't care about the topic and that your mind is made up. Open-mindedness allows for a more positive interaction between you and the other communicator.

- Agree with the other person whenever possible. This can be accomplished verbally or nonverbally. Discussion is usually more productive when the other cares about what is said. It also shows you are listening and are interested in what is being said.

- Describe, don't evaluate. Statements that judge another person are likely to provoke a defensive action. An example of describing and evaluating is as follows:

  Evaluating--*You didn't show up last night and you ruined it for the rest of us.*

  Describing--*I felt upset because my plans were ruined by your actions.*

  In other words, describe how you felt or how you were affected as opposed to judging the other person's character.

- Show concern for the other person's interests. Showing that you care about what the other person is talking about tends to lead to a positive climate.

- Communicate honestly. Honesty is the best policy. It builds credibility as well as trust between the communicators. This can only establish good rapport and promote effective communication.

**Conclusion**

A defensive communication climate is very disruptive to the communication process. At times, a negative climate may actually appear to make it impossible to communicate. By employing those behaviors that foster a positive communication climate, we can be more effective communicators and establish more productive and pleasant relationships.

Please direct all questions and comments regarding this document to: LFlint@bsu.edu.
Appendix 2: **Problem-Based Index to the Case Studies**

Which statement resonates now for you? What kinds of behaviors are bothering your consistory?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements that might fit how you feel:</th>
<th>See this case:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Why bother going to consistory?</td>
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<td>Our meetings go on forever, and we get nothing done.</td>
<td>Case 12</td>
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<td>I can’t stand Bill; he’s such a problem for us.</td>
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<td>We’re divided about…</td>
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<td>People are not happy.</td>
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<td>I wish we could do a better job with…</td>
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<td>This pastor has got to go!</td>
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<td>You want to spend what?!</td>
<td>Case 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We talk forever about things and never decide.</td>
<td>Case 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobody wants to do anything.</td>
<td>Case 1</td>
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<td>I heard that there was a problem at consistory last week.</td>
<td>Case 10</td>
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<td>This country is in real trouble.</td>
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<td>Whose fault is this anyway?</td>
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<td>We’ve got to put shoes on our own feet first.</td>
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<td>The Bible is clear about this.</td>
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<td>I wish it was like it used to be around here.</td>
<td>Cases 1, 6, 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>People today just have no commitment to the church.</td>
<td>Case 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the pastor should…</td>
<td>Case 8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: “What if” Supplements to the Studies

The following questions are illustrative of additional materials that may be developed for the cases in the future. They are intended to provide a way for consistories to explore alternative ways of managing their conversations. The alternatives are based on theories that may not be familiar to consistory members. Using them, however, does not require a knowledge of the theories. It is enough that people begin to consider how different ways of talking together create different futures. All feedback on their value is appreciated as we think about developing these further in later editions of the case studies. (Contact Phil Bakelaar, bakelaar@comcast.net, with your comments and suggestions.)

Case 1: The Blahs Set In

Take some time to imagine if someone said this to those who are complaining:

I hear a great deal of frustration in your talk about this. It is clear that you love this church and want it to do well. I think that it may be time to try something different to get people involved. This might be scary for us, because we want to see everything continue and grow as we have it going now. I think we need to stop doing some of the things we are doing and let them not happen for a while. The downside of that is that it will feel like failure. The upside is that we will see if what we’ve been doing is still fulfilling an important purpose for others, and whether there are gifts and talents that will become activated when people see the need and the opportunity. Do you think we could do this?

1. What do you think the short-term consequences of this would be?
2. What do you think the long-term consequences would be?
3. Why is it so hard to stop doing things the way we’ve been doing them?
4. Why is it so hard to allow new people and new ways to emerge in our life as a church? Were we once the new people with new ways? Who stepped aside to make room for us to emerge as leaders?

Case 2: The Church Is Dirty

Take some time to imagine if someone said this to John:

John, there are things that are not being done as well as we’d like them to be done in the work you are doing. We appreciate what you do, and realize that this is not a full-time job and that we aren’t paying you as much as you could earn somewhere else. We’d like to see if there is a way you could do the work at the level we want. Is there any way we could work together to see that happen?

1. How would you feel if someone spoke to you this way?
2. Why do you think it is so difficult to make this kind of direct evaluation?
3. Who in your consistory would be the most likely to be assigned to say this to John?
4. What do you think the short-term consequences would be?
5. What do you think the long-term consequences would be?

Take some time to imagine if John responded in this way:

Well, it’s about time someone talked with me about my work. Everyone is always pleasant and nice, but I can feel that there are things they don’t like. It’s really frustrating not knowing who you have to make happy around here; everyone has an opinion about how I do my work. Mostly, I just end up doing whatever the last person to complain to me asks for. I used to like doing this work, it made me feel good to be working in a place of worship, but I don’t like it much anymore.
1. Is there anything surprising to you in what John says here?
2. How does this make you feel toward John?
3. Since everyone has good intentions in this situation, how did this unhappy condition develop?
4. What might be some short-term solutions to the situation as we imagine it here?
5. What might be some long-term solutions to the situation as we imagine it here?
6. Can you imagine other responses that John might make?

Case 3: Bill Is Angry Again

Take some time to imagine if someone said this to Bill:

Bill, I know that you are upset about this. There are important parts to what you are saying. When you yell and push so hard on this, it makes me want to avoid talking about it, and avoid talking with you. I would like to discuss the issues involved, and I would like to discuss them in a way that feels more peaceful. Can we change the way we talk about this?

1. What do you think the short-term consequences of this would be?
2. What do you think the long-term consequences would be?
3. Why is it so hard to name the things that we are bothered about?
4. Why is it so hard to talk with people who upset us and ask for new ways of being in relationship?

Take some time to imagine if Bill said this to the consistory:

I have no respect for this consistory at all. If we don’t do this, the church will never make it through this time. If you don’t do what I am saying, I’m done here.

1. What would likely be said to Bill? By whom? Why?
2. What do you think the short-term consequences of this would be?
3. What would the long-term consequences be?
4. What other possible responses might be made to Bill’s threat? Can you imagine a statement like the one made to Bill above being spoken in your consistory?

Case 4: People Aren’t Happy

Take some time to imagine if, when people approached consistory members with complaints and concerns, the members replied:

That is good to know. We’re really trying to figure out how to follow the vision and mission that we believe God has given us here at First Church. We are trying to make all of our decisions and set up our church life around our calling to be “the very presence of Jesus Christ, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.” I promise you I’ll bring this up and get back to you with what our thoughts as a consistory are. In the meantime, it would be great if you would pray for our consistory and our mission as a church. Can I count on you to do that, and to remind me if I don’t get back to you?

1. How is this different from what might be a typical response?
2. Is it easy for you to talk with others about your consistory’s sense of vision and mission? The denomination’s sense of vision and mission?
3. How visible are the vision and mission statements of your congregation, classis, regional synod, and denomination?
4. What can you imagine people saying to this? Saying to others about it?
5. What would be the short-term consequences of speaking in this way?
6. What would be the long-term consequences?

Case 5: These Young People Today…
Case 6: I Can’t Stand Those Praise Ditties
Case 7: The Bible Says…

Take time to imagine if a member of consistory were thinking this while the discussion was going on:

Those are really good points. I never knew that. I hadn’t thought of it that way before. I can’t believe that I might need to change my view on this. It is really going to be a problem if I do. I’ve spoken out about my views, and people will think I don’t know what I’m talking about. And what would my family say? They expect me to represent their views on this. If I were to change my mind, it would rearrange all kinds of relationships and friendships for me. I don’t think it is worth all of the trouble. I’ll have to be stronger about arguing my current view.

1. How realistic do you think this internal dialogue is?
2. Are our beliefs about theological topics held for cognitive reasons alone, or would you agree that there are relational, historical, social, political, cultural, and personal reasons for holding particular views?
3. One Christian has said, “The older I get, the less I believe; but the things I do believe, I believe more deeply.” How would you respond to that statement?
4. How have your beliefs changed over the years?
5. What things do you believe more deeply than ever?
6. What might you say to the person having the internal dialogue above?
7. People place different values on personal integrity and relationship maintenance. Can you think of contexts other than theological views in which people allow for difference in order to maintain relationships?
8. St. Augustine lived in a time of theological controversy. He made the famous statement “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials (adiaphora), liberty; in all things, charity.” Why do you think different people end up with different lists of what is essential and what is nonessential?
9. Have you ever been wrong in your life? How did you handle it when you realized you were wrong? Who was affected by your being wrong? Who was affected by the way you handled being wrong? How were they affected?

Case 8: Pastor, Why Aren’t You…?
Case 9: You Want to Spend What?!
Case 10: Parking Lot Meetings
Case 11: It’s All Your Fault
Case 12: So What Do We Do Now?

Take some time to imagine if one of the members of the consistory said this:

I think it is important for us to wait on making a decision about this. In the short term we can do this or that, but if we are going to make decisions that help us reach our mission goals, we’re really going to have to think about the long-term consequences of this choice and how it fits with our vision and mission statements. It may be that we will discover that our mission and vision need adjustment or that we can go with this decision for a limited time, or some other creative solution may emerge. I’d like to avoid making a decision that may be a quick fix but that leaves us with more problems in the future.

1. How do you feel about this statement?
2. What in it is most exciting? Most annoying? Most discouraging?
3. Who in your consistory is most likely to stay focused on mission and vision?
4. Who in your consistory is most likely to be focused on how the group is feeling?
5. Who in your consistory is most likely to call attention to procedures and bylaws?
6. How might these differences in focus create tension or polarizations?
7. Can you imagine a way that these could be productively blended in a decision meeting?
The questions we ask can lead us down paths of discovery and delight, or down corridors of doom and gloom. Which road are you taking?

On the path to happiness and success, most of us think we get the greatest mileage from having all the right answers. According to Marilee Adams, PhD, cofounder and partner of the Institute for Inquiring Leadership, we’ll actually go further, faster, when we focus on asking the right questions.

And what might those be? According to Dr. Adams, a psychotherapist-turned-organizational consultant and executive coach, we get the most bang for our buck from “Learner Questions” --the kind that lead to discovery, intimacy, understanding and accountability--as opposed to “Judger Questions,” which more often lead to frustration, narrow-mindedness, blame and regret.

Adams, whose corporate consulting clients include Lockheed Martin, Siemens Building Technologies, Aventis Pharmaceuticals and Aetna U.S. Healthcare, as well as the National Defense University and NASA Goddard, is the originator of a problem-solving methodology called QuestionThinking™. She is also the author of two books: a psychology text titled The Art of the Question: A Guide to Short-Term Question-Centered Therapy (Wiley & Sons, 1998), and just published, Change Your Questions, Change Your Life: 7 Powerful Tools for Life and Work (Berrett-Koehler, 2004). This more recent work is an easy-to-read fable aimed at laypeople, specifically executives and others who are seeking a higher level of personal satisfaction and effectiveness in their professional and personal lives.

Empowering Your Observer

As Adams explains it, becoming more aware of and selective about the types of questions we tend to ask is one of the very best and most empowering tools we have for creating constructive change. “Questions are at the very core of how we listen, behave, think and relate, both as individuals and as organizations,” she says. “Virtually everything we think and do is determined by the questions we ask.”

But, she notes, if we are unaware of the questions that underlie our daily assumptions, reactions and behaviors, we can very easily wind up with flawed decisions and choose a less than optimal, or even tragic, course of action. To illustrate this fact, Adams employs something she calls the Choice Map, a graphic that looks something like one of those old Uncle Wiggily board games, except that starting from the very beginning (an experience of thought, feeling or circumstance), players get to choose from two distinct routes: the Learner Path or the Judger Path.

One starts down the Learner Path with neutral questions such as: “What just happened? What’s useful here? What do I want?” One starts down the Judger Path with judgmental questions like: “Who’s to blame? What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with them?”

Learner Questions generally lead you toward thoughtful solution-focused choices, says Adams. Moreover, they tend to produce win-win relating styles, which help build and solidify relationships. Accordingly, on the Choice Map, the Learner line of questioning leads toward the sun-dappled mountains of discovery, and even more expansive and productive questions, such as, “What’s possible? What are my choices? What’s best to do now?”

Judger Questions, by contrast, tend to be automatic, even unconscious, reactions; they are often blame
focused; they typically produce win-lose relating styles. So while Learners are busy getting ahead, Judgers are often obsessed with how to get even. On the Choice Map, the Judge line of questioning leads to a “Judge Pit,” a trap filled with gruesome ooze. Once entrenched in the Judge Pit, one can be tormented with questions like, “Why am I such a failure? Why are they so stupid?”

There’s no question which path is most appealing. Yet we rarely end up in the Judge Pit by conscious choice. Often, notes Adams, we go barreling down the Judge Path out of habit, in reaction to fear or as the result of our own unconscious insecurities. Over time, if we wear a deep enough groove to the Judge Pit, and hang out there long enough, it may become the path of least resistance. We may even come to feel it’s “normal,” hardwired—just our lot in life. In reality, fortunately, it’s rarely our best available option.

The key to navigating your way onto the Learner Path, explains Adams, lies in identifying your own judging triggers, noticing when you’ve inadvertently embarked on a judging journey and then grabbing the first off-ramp you can find. On the Choice Map, this opportunity is represented by a convenient “Switching Lane,” which one can access at any time just by asking “Switching Questions.”

Switching Questions, it turns out, are really just a special type of Learner Question capable of diverting what might otherwise become a full-throttle Judge voyage. Switching Questions (see sidebar below) might include everything from the simple, “Am I in Judge mode right now?” to more probing questions, such as, “How else can I think about this? What assumptions am I making? How can I be more objective and honest? What am I missing or avoiding? What do I really want?”

According to Adams, these switching skills can be enormously helpful in navigating conflicts, rescuing failing teams and projects, transforming negative self-talk, even getting a lapsed diet or exercise program back on track.

**Steering Clear**

The whole idea behind QuestionThinking is using your best available line of self-questioning (and the best questions you can employ in relating to others) in order to minimize the time you spend thrashing around in the Judge Pit and maximize the time you spend in Learner mode. But that doesn’t mean you can avoid your internal Judge altogether.

Change happens through awareness and observation, notes Adams, so it’s important not to shut down your observations with an overly critical negative reaction every time you identify a judging question going through your brain (or coming out of your mouth). “We all wind up on the Judge Path from time to time,” she explains, “sometimes several times a day, or even every hour.”

When people first learn the Learner/Judge concepts, she points out, “they may have an initial tendency to ‘go Judge on their Judge,’” meaning they blame themselves every time they notice their Judge self coming into play. “Even though it’s understandable, it’s also a waste of time,” she insists. “I tell my clients to forget trying to banish their Judge, and instead focus on building their Learner skills.”

The mantra, says Adams, is “Accept Judge, practice Learner.” It’s not about eliminating every last judging instinct you might have, she concludes. “It’s about strengthening the observer self, becoming more discerning and disciplined about the questions you ask, both of yourself and others, so you can enjoy being in Learner more often. And then you get to see the great places that takes you.”

Ready to get started down the Learner Path? Start by considering the Learner, Judge and Switching
Questions below and on the previous page. Add a few of your own. Then pick up *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* (it’s a fun, easy read that follows the highs and lows of a fictitious character named Ben, who receives Question-Thinking coaching at the urging of his concerned boss).

To find out more about QuestionThinking and inquiry-based coaching, visit www.marileeadams.com. Dr. Adams also conducts one-day “Change Your Questions, Change Your Life” workshops nationwide and offers inquiry-based phone-coaching for individuals.

Clara Beacon is a freelance writer with an inquiring mind.

**SIDEBARS**

**Judger-Learner Questions**

**Judger**
What’s wrong?
Who’s to blame?
How can I prove I’m right?
How can I protect my turf?
How can I be in control?
How could I lose?
How could I get hurt?
Why is that other person so clueless and frustrating?
Why bother?

**Learner**
What works?
What am I responsible for?
What are the facts?
What’s the big picture?
What are my choices?
What’s useful about this?
What can I learn?
What is the other person feeling, needing, wanting?
What’s possible?

**Switching Questions**

These are examples of some useful questions for when you find yourself veering into Judger mode and want to “merge” back into Learner.

- Am I in Judger mode right now?
- Where would I rather be?
- How can I get there?
- What are the facts?
- How else can I think about this?
- What assumptions am I making?
- Is this what I want to feel?