

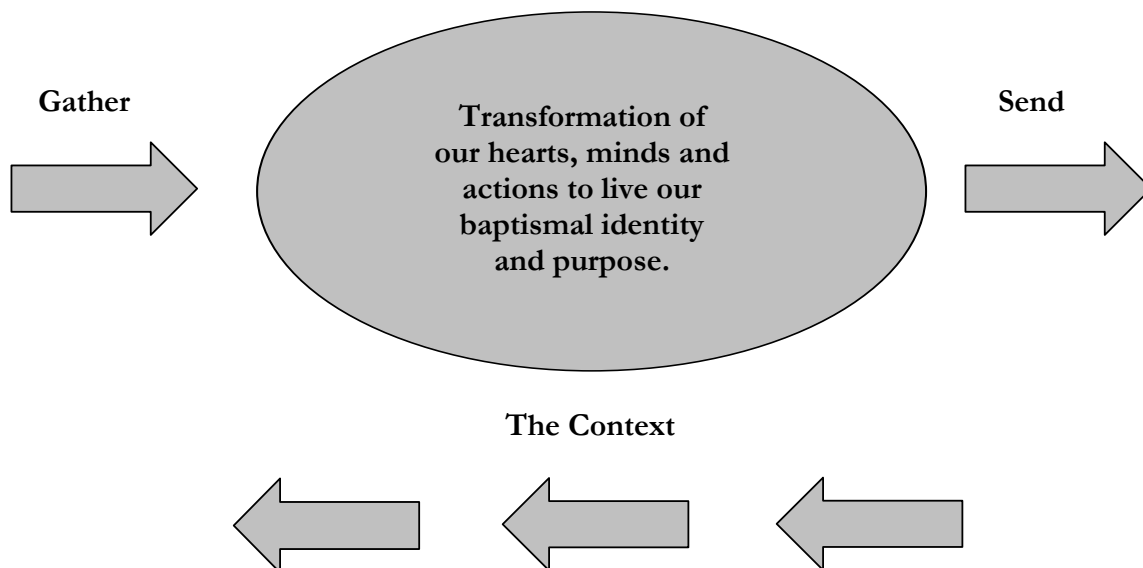
Model 1

Gathering, Transforming and Sending: The Purpose and Work of a Congregation

All organizations have what might be called their “primary task,” that is, their reason for being: the focused activity that they uniquely exist to do. The primary task of a social service agency is different from an auto manufacturer which is different from an educational institution which is different from a Christian congregation. Being aware of and reminding ourselves about our organization’s primary task helps us to focus our efforts and define what our organizational “faithfulness” looks like.

One way of describing the primary task, the unique purpose and work of a congregation is to **gather** those called by God into Christ’s body, the Church, a community of **transformation** of mind, heart and action, and to **send** these same into the world to be and to act as God’s loving and transforming presence.

Another way of saying this is that the purpose of a congregation is to be the body of Christ and, with God’s help, to create and renew the Christian folk who in turn, create and renew a world that we believe both already is and is in the process of becoming God’s own realm—a realm of forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, peace and hope.



Model 1

As this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom.

(Early Eucharistic prayer found in the Didache, c. 100AD)

Gathering

We believe that God is the source of all invitations to life in the faith communities that are Christ's body, whether these invitations come in the form of gentle nudges, tender entreaties or rude awakenings. For us in the Church, the questions are: how we can assist God in inviting and receiving people into the life of Christ's body, the Church? How can we continue to invite and receive them over the various stages of their lives and their lives in Christ?

In Alice Mann's book entitled *Incorporation of New Members in the Episcopal Church* (1983), she outlines stages related to the overall incorporation of people into the Episcopal Church. Even now Alice's work provides an excellent description of the primary elements related to gathering.



Inviting—that is, drawing attention to Christ and the Church, motivating people to explore further and inviting people to this particular parish. Different elements of inviting include: 1) physical presence in the neighborhood to include signage, 2) relationship to the community, 3) invitations to others by individual members and word of mouth, 4) website and other electronic ways of reaching people, 5) printed materials in the form of brochures, PR and advertising, 6) invitations in response to enquiries about the sacraments, and 7) re-inviting the lapsed.

Greeting—that is, recognizing, welcoming and extending appropriate and helpful hospitality to those who are our guests. Different elements of greeting include 1) recognizing and acknowledging visitors, 2) an appropriate and interested welcome, 3) clearly stated boundaries and worship norms and 4) a functional and hospitable Coffee Hour

Orienting—that is, helping people understand and participating in where things are and how we do things in this particular place. Different elements of orienting include: 1) follow up contact and conversations with visitors, 2) newcomers gatherings and classes, 3) orientation to the building and to the activities of the church, and 4) connection to the clergy and others

Incorporating—that is, the process of being knit into the congregation and its people as a local expression of the Body of Christ. Different elements of incorporation include: 1) deeper involvement in a social/formational/activity group, 2) completion of an enquirer's course a series of foundations courses and/or a catechumenal process, 3) The invitation (and acceptance) to be baptized, become confirmed, received or transfer membership, and 4) the invitation to make a financial pledge to the congregation.

Model 1

*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone
and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26)*

*Will you continue in the apostles; teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread,
and in the prayers?*

I will, with God's help.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

I will, with God's help.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

I will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

I will, with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I will with God's help.

(from the Baptismal Covenant, Book of Common Prayer pp. 304-305)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. (Paul, Romans 12:1-2)

Transformation

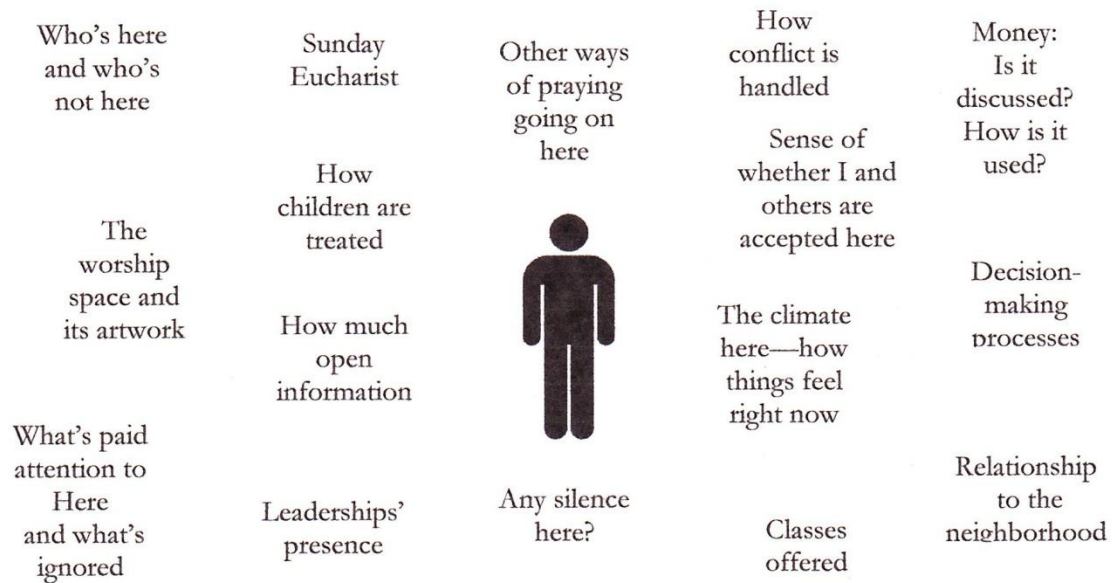
Congregational life, life lived with others in Christ, is the place where we are baptized, fed and renewed to become the people whose presence the world needs, and to do the work we are sent into the world to do. This process is called many different things—continual renewal of baptismal identity and purpose, sanctification, conversion or formation.

By transformation we mean the gradual process begun in baptism by which the Church experienced in the local congregation comes to shape us more and more into the human beings that God calls us to be. This process is an organic one in which our Christian identity and purpose is shaped by the sacraments and other forms of prayer, learning, life in community and the practices and actions we ourselves engage in. (The elements outlined in the “Sources of Transformation model)

But these are not the only sources of transformation. The culture and climate of a parish, informal relationships, decision-making processes, the way the parish handles conflict and transition, the personal presence of leaders, the physical property to include the artwork in the worship space, the neighborhood the parish is located in, the parish's attitude toward its neighborhood—all of these are sources of transformation as well.

Thus, the transformation process in a congregation is never the sum total of programs and liturgies. It is an organic web of actions, dynamics, relationships, etc that make up the living system, the living organism that is a congregation, a specific and local manifestation of the Body of Christ.

Model 1



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Sending

“Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart through Christ our Lord.” (Post-Communion Prayer, The Book of Common Prayer, p.366)

William Temple spoke of the church is the only institution that exists for people who are not its members. God sends us into the world over and over again to be God’s own loving presence in a world in need of transformation. The first place that God sends us is into the relationships, communities, roles and occupations we already find ourselves in. And so God asks us to learn what it means to live reconciling, peaceful, and justice-loving lives as parents, sons and daughters, spouses and partners, lawyers and factory workers, politicians and health care workers, volunteers and voters.

