## Build a Robust Network

Whatever else it did, the COVID-19 health crisis forced congregations to consider web-based platforms like Facebook and YouTube as a legitimate place for worship. It served as a wake-up call to church leaders accustomed to thinking in terms of their congregations as "stand alone" entities. Congregations began to understand that we live in a networked society. Worship leaders adapted to the restrictions on in-person gatherings by uploading video images of readings and songs to the internet. Beyond using the tools of the internet to create a community, congregations can learn from the organizational structure of the internet as well.

As we use the knowledge of today to review our organizations, we see that hierarchical structures predominated in the 20th century. Decision making took place at the top and was implemented by committees. Leaders held knowledge closely and honored "tradition" (the way we have always done things) above all else. Unfortunately, hierarchies have tended to favor procedures over relationships, discourage trial and error, resist diversity, and assume the world is controllable. Due to their rigidity, hierarchical organizations found themselves unable to adapt to the rapid technological changes underway in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.[1]
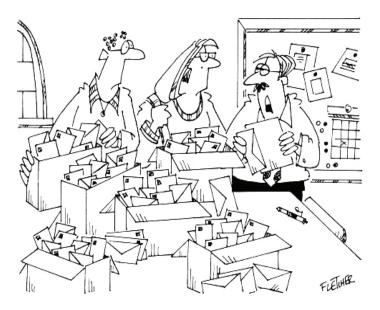
At the same time, emerging tech companies like Google and Amazon sought to imitate the internet with its open structure and intersection points (or nodes) that are loosely woven together. Organizational networks tend to be fluid, non-hierarchical, self-organizing, and lacking clear lines of authority as leaders cede authority to ordinary workers to foster creativity. While social media tools make it possible to create and share content and to collaborate with others no matter how distant, the very structure of digital networks have reshaped our life and can reshape organizations if they learn how to use them.

Mature organizations, such as older congregations, often behave more like hierarchies, while new church starts tend to adopt the looser structure of a network. People have come to expect churches and other organizations to be open and amorphous structures where every individual has equal access to plug in and where everyone may be heard. The good news is that any congregation can become more like a network by following three steps.

### Analyze the Social Network

Congregations' boundaries are porous and include weak social connections. Social network analysis (SNA), a tool used by social science and health researchers, can identify those connections. Imagine a church whose building gets extensive traffic during the week. First, identify the network to be studied, which may be difficult in this case with people flowing in and out on a regular basis, some of them one-time visitors. Next, learn about people in the network through a simple survey with a clipboard as they enter the building. How



"WE'RE USING CROWDSOURCING TO DIRECT OUR DECISION MAKING...SO FAR, ALL THOSE RESPONDING TO OUR MASS MAILING THINK WE SHOULD HAVE DECIDED TO SAVE MONEY BY TEXTING."

often do they relate to others in the network in person, by phone, or email? Who has the most authority and power? Are any of them related by family? Finally, analyze the information visually by drawing a diagram with nodes connected by lines.

The lines (or ties) can be color coded, each color symbolizing a different bit of information, such as how often people communicate or work with each other. In other words, is the tie strong or weak? Note characteristics such as 1) betweenness, or the degree to which a person controls information or resources in the network; 2) centrality, or a person's power in the network; and 3) reachability, or the number of intermediary contacts between two people. Now larger patterns begin to become evident, such as Hubs (persons with an unusual number of connections to other people) and Clusters (groups with a denser pattern of connections between them). Analyzing such data might help church leaders to plan better ways to utilize and connect to this network of building users in the future.[2]

## Seek Collective Intelligence

Too often church leaders seek to control information. Hayim Herring and Terry Martinson Elton ask in their book, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World,* "What if congregations . . . flipped their understanding of themselves from being dispensers of information to platforms of collective learning?" Wikipedia, an open-source encyclopedia, offers a model for seeking collective intelligence. This web-based platform brings together people seeking information with people who want to share and edit information, relying on participants to post, revise, and correct what's been offered. Free and available to anyone, it provides an example of "crowdsourcing," drawing information from a large group of people. To experiment with this for one month, identify one thing each week requiring a decision, then look for information outside the congregation and track these ideas by writing them down. For example, ask for ideas from a friend, watch the news for ideas, talk to a relative in the family, ask a group of lunch companions, or email friends for ideas. Ask a team of leaders to do this and report its impact on decision-making.[3]

## Offer a Variety of Ways to Connect

Many churches are too tightly bound together, with long-term members enjoying strong ties and every-one else wondering where they fit. The goal must be to expand the number of weak ties.

Beth Estock and Paul Nixon envision a two-track system with "a more traditional Christian community existing alongside and in spiritual partnership with a more expansive community of folks." B3M, a new church in Manhattan, offers nine worship communities in four locations. One such community, Tutti (Italian for "all together"), was created by and for college students to overcome the disconnection of big city life. Members seek "community for the sake of community" by planning events such as socials, barbeques, sleepovers, fashion shows, hiking, skiing, game nights, bead days, yard sales, and doing community development together. Tutti Circles offer groups for likeminded people to learn cooking, film, writing, and singing together. The church offers a variety of ways for persons to connect and make it easy for them to enter and leave. Getting involved feels less like a burden than a choice.[4]

## Networks Are Everywhere

On her way to a meeting of the ecumenical council, Pastor Ruth finishes brushing her teeth and turns off the faucet connected to a municipal water system; flips off the house lights connected to a state and regional electrical grid; checks Instagram, a platform supported by a global system of interconnected computer networks; and then drives past a supermarket connected to 357 other stores as part of a regional chain. The ecumenical council, though limited in budget and officers, has served a cluster of city neighborhoods for over thirty years.[5] Networks are everywhere.

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1. Hayim Herring and Terry Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 24.

2. Adam C. Springer and J. E. de Steiguer, "Social Network Analysis: A Tool to Improve Understanding of Collaborative Management Groups," *Journal of Extension*, (Vol. 49, No. 6), December 2011, https://www.joe.org/joe/2011december/rb7.php

3. Herring and Elton, 91, 105.

4. Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon, *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2016), 164.

5. "Network Literacy: Essential Concepts and Core Ideas," NetSciEd, twelve pages. Accessed at https://sites.google.com/a/binghamton.edu/netscied/teaching-learning/network-concepts.

Endnotes