

MODEL 1: GATHER-TRANSFORM-SEND

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 that of an educational institution, which in turn is different from that of an auto manufacturer or 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.

The primary task of a Christian congregation can be described this way: 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 people into the world both 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, courage, compassion, justice, peace, and hope.

This is the primary task of every Christian congregation; however, each congregation is doing this task in its own unique **context**. So what this process looks like in practice may differ greatly from congregation to congregation, depending on how each responds to and works within its own context.

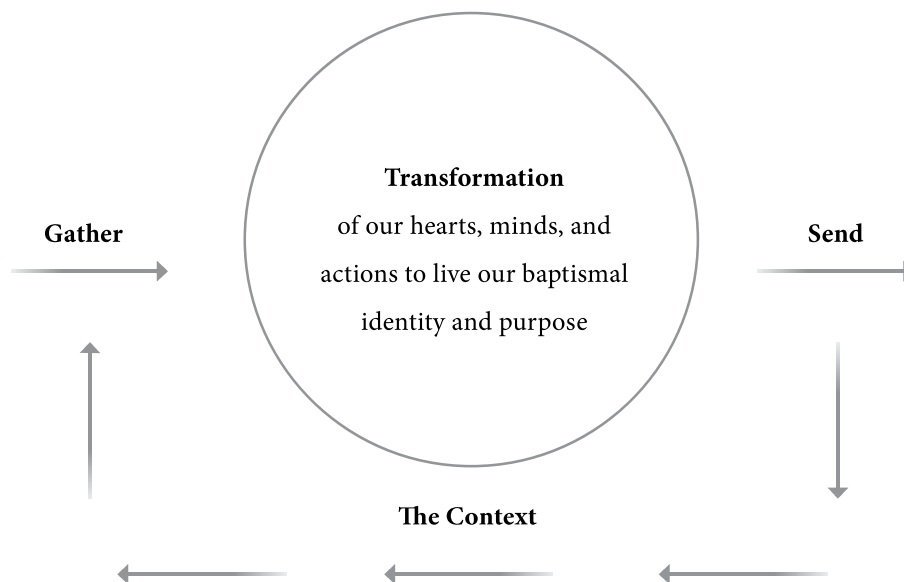


FIGURE A-3: MODEL 1—GATHER-TRANSFORM-SEND

Gather

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*, ca. AD 100

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 *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.



FIGURE A-4: MODEL 1—GATHER

Inviting—that is, drawing attention to Christ and the Church, motivating people to explore Christ and the Church further, and inviting people to this particular congregation. Different elements of inviting include (1) physical presence in the neighborhood, including signage; (2) relationship with the community; (3) invitations made by individual members and word of mouth; (4) electronic outreach, including websites; (5) print brochures, PR, and advertising; (6) invitations in response to enquiries about the sacraments; (7) programs serving those outside the church; (8) special or seasonal liturgies; and (9) re-inviting those who have drifted away.

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 participate and understand who we are, 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, (4) deeper learning about ecclesial and congregational identity, and (5) 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, and/or activity group; (2) completion of an enquirer’s course, a series of foundations courses, and/or a catechumenal process; (3) the invitation (and its acceptance) to be baptized, become confirmed, be received, or transfer membership; and (4) the invitation to make a financial pledge to the congregation.

Transform

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, *The 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

Congregational life—life lived with others in Christ—is the place where we are baptized, fed, and renewed both to become the people whose presence the world needs and to do the work we are sent into the world to do. This process of transformation goes by many names: 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 God calls us to be. This process is an organic one in which our Christian identity and purpose are shaped by the sacraments and other community forms of prayer, learning, and life, as well as the practices and actions we ourselves engage in. (These elements are outlined in Model 2—Sources of Transformation on page 34.)

But these elements are not the only sources of transformation. A congregation's culture and climate, informal relationships, decision-making processes, ways of handling conflict and transition, personal presence of leaders, physical property (including the artwork in the worship space), neighborhood, and attitude toward that 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, and so on that make up the living system—or the living organism—that is a congregation, a specific and local manifestation of the body of Christ.

Send

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. 365

William Temple spoke of the church as 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 in which we already find ourselves. 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.

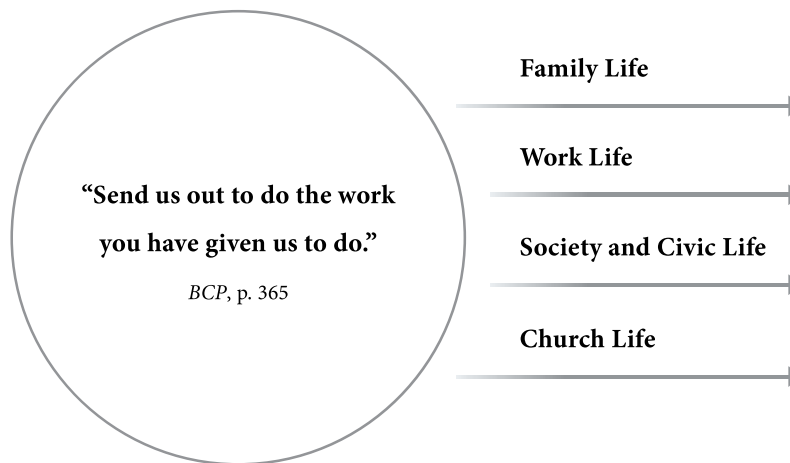


FIGURE A-5: MODEL 1—SEND

Context

By “context” we mean the country, the region, the city, the village, the area, or the neighborhood where the congregation is located as well as the specific time or time period the congregation finds itself in. All these dimensions of context shape the questions, the circumstances, the joys, the longings, the struggles, and the pain of people’s lives who live within the potential reach of the congregation.

Congregations draw people from and send people as witnesses to and agents of transformation into a specific context. Congregations, themselves, are *deeply influenced by* their context in terms of their organizational cultures or the deep assumptions related to the way they see the world. Congregations and their people can potentially *influence* context.

“Context” can also mean the broader ecclesial context of the Episcopal Church as a national or diocesan entity and its influence on the congregation and its people.

Thus, the ongoing listening to, understanding of, and responding to context is an important part of the task of congregational leadership. Some of the questions related to context that leadership might explore are:

- What are the questions or circumstances or joys or longings or struggles or pains that people in the congregation’s immediate, local context are carrying right now?
- What are the issues that people are wrestling with on a national or regional level?
- How might the congregation be a resource for people in the exploration of or responding to these questions or issues?
- What new information or learning from other disciplines is relevant to the lives of those in your context? How is this new information or learning connected to community and spiritual life?
- Where is the congregation located? What neighborhood or area? What are the assets or potential partners in that neighborhood or area as the congregation seeks to be a witness to or agent of transformation there?
- What are the specific faith practices that sustain people for their lives in the specific context in which they are living now? How might the congregation equip people in these faith practices?