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Does Your Congregation Suffer from Anxiety?

The church governing board gathered with a consultant for their much-publicized first meeting. They knew the consultant's reputation and were eager to hear his advice. However, the consultant did not begin with recommendations. Rather he introduced a planning method known as SWOT analysis—acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Several church members were familiar with the approach but could not imagine how it applied to their church problems. No one had given much thought to how the congregation's internal dynamics and their external context related to their current crisis.

He first asked: "What are some of the church's strengths?" The room went silent. Finally, one member offered: "Well, we know we need help." After the nervous laughter subsided, the consultant tried again. "What are some of the church's weaknesses?" Many hands went up and he struggled to capture all their answers in his notes. The same response problem came with the next set of questions. The church leaders offered few insights about the congregation's opportunities but a full set of complaints about the threats they faced as a church. Knowing that the SWOT method only worked if members could give meaningful answers, he knew he was dealing with deeper issues. The consultant suspected a collective anxiety that caused the leaders to focus on preventing bad things from happening instead of a "promotion focus"—the tendency to reach for new opportunities and rewards.[1]

What Does Church Anxiety Look Like?

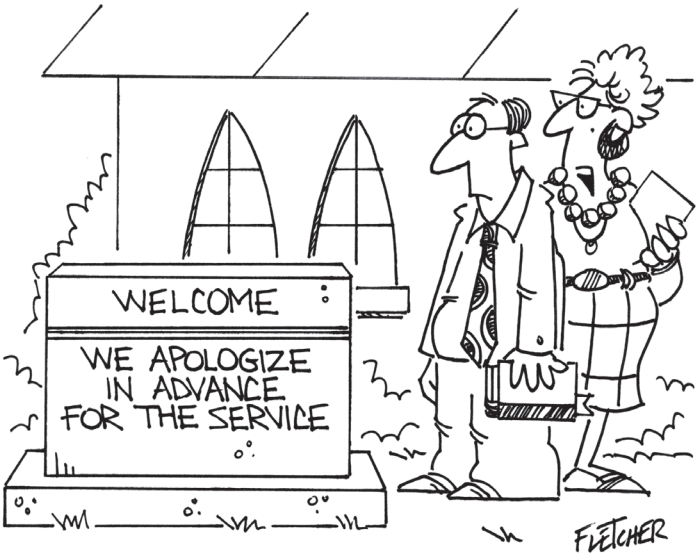
We think of anxiety as an emotional state that individuals experience—like feelings of worry and unease. But non-anxious individuals participating in a church organization can produce a collective nervousness—an unhealthy group emotion entirely different from their own. An anxious church tends to:

- Over think any decision before taking action
- Imagine and expect negative outcomes
- Worry about the very worst that could happen
- Respond poorly to any negative feedback from nonmembers
- Be extremely self-critical

Church Anxiety Risk Factors

Anxiety levels can never be reduced to zero but alarms can fire too frequently, disabling a church with paralysis. High anxiety gets churches stuck in unproductive loops that, over time, actually increase anxiety. For both individuals and organizations, this anxiety manifests itself in a variety of symptoms: it shows up in how we *act* (the behavioral component), how we *feel* (the emotional component), and how we *think* (the cognitive component). And when a church gets caught in an anxiety trap, leaders fail to see the big picture and do not take advantage of opportunities for more effective ministries. When faced with these anxiety bottlenecks, leaders must address all three dimensions where anxiety surfaces.

Behavioral traps. The default mode of operation for anxiety-prone congregations is postponing decisions, conducting more research and gathering more information



"…AND YET…
IT SORT OF MAKES ME WANT TO TAKE A LOOK."

than necessary, and waiting for attitudes or opinions to change. This approach often means that congregations are working harder using outdated or failed strategies. The old proverb, "If all you ever do is all you've ever done, than all you'll get is all you ever got" summarizes this truth. This blend of postponing action mixed with all-or-nothing approaches are warning signs that indicate congregations have persisted too long in certain behaviors.

One of the fastest ways to reduce anxiety is to change behavioral patterns first, without waiting for thoughts and attitudes to shift. To get out of no action mode, set deadlines for action and make those deadlines public. Research shows that deciding when and where actions are to be taken increases the odds of follow through. Hold leaders accountable by delivering decisions and actions on time, no matter how difficult. Consistently review plans and keep moving forward on implementation. Do not let the behavior of a few highjack the congregation's ability to boldly act on core mission goals.

Our church goals are like a mirror that should reflect who we are. If a church fails to act on its mission goals, the church is not who it says it is. Rediscovering our goals and committing to them increases our resilience to anxiety.

Cognitive traps. While behavior in churches reveals *unconscious* intent—we do what we are motivated to do—our *conscious* intent reflects what we *think* we want to do and that intent clearly lines up with our goals. Still, our thinking can be bogged down in cognitive traps. For instance, information and knowledge are essential ingredients for making decisions, but these two alone are insufficient in an imperfect world. To move forward in mission requires faith, the willingness to focus on both the positive and negative, and some ability to tolerate ambiguities.

As noted in the story with the consultant, anxiety-prone congregations, and leaders in particular, are wired to consider any potential negative outcomes. However, with practice, church leaders can routinely put on the table for discussion all the potential positive outcomes and give them an equal hearing. In addition, leaders can recognize the potential harm arising from inaction. Even when the congregation recognizes that a negative outcome is possible, leaders can still believe taking action is worth the risk and that there is value in acting with uncertainty.

Emotional traps. The overall emotional temperature of the congregation determines the likelihood of tsunami-level anxiety. Alice Boyes describes an anxiety-prone individual as someone whose answers start as no and might move to yes. A congregation whose default response is "no" to any proposed action is a church that uses a lot of emotional energy to process change or even the idea of change. When reducing anxiety becomes the goal, rather than the goals themselves, leaders have taken the bait for an emotional trap. Apprehension and pessimism suggest the congregation does not believe it has the capacity to cope with things that do not go according to plan. Similar to navigating the cognitive traps, members and leaders must make a concerted effort to dig out of the emotional traps. Try starting with a "yes" on a mission goal, setting behavior deadlines for decisions, and making sure to consider as many positive implications as negative ones.

Tackling Anxiety with Better Habits

Church anxiety can cost you in terms of missed opportunities. Fortunately, church anxiety is not genetic. When congregations tackle anxiety with self-knowledge and a conscious intent to change habits, they often achieve dramatically different results.

The ways a church thinks, feels, and acts grow into deep-seated habits. In some congregations, these behavioral, emotional, and cognitive patterns solidify into obsessions. Two acres of undeveloped land went on the market next to a suburban church. Leaders began discussing whether the congregation should purchase the additional acreage. Differences of opinion became arguments and arguments led to warring camps—about whether funds could be used more wisely elsewhere, uncertainty about whether the church would grow enough to ever need the extra space, and others who wanted control over the types of development likely to be adjacent to church property. After six months of debate and delay, they realized that their anxiety and uncertainties had generated familiar bad habits. With renewed commitment to their goals, the church sought out several community partners—a preschool and a local Habitat for Humanity chapter. After purchasing the property, the congregation helped these two nonprofits obtain grants to build a school and new family housing. By consciously moving past their negative thinking, they played a critical role in shaping community resources that fostered their neighbors' quality of life.

What opportunities has your congregation missed? When has inaction interfered with meeting the church's mission goals?

1. Material drawn from the analysis of individual anxiety by Alice Boyes, *The Anxiety Toolkit: Strategies for Fine-Tuning Your Mind and Moving Past You Stuck Points* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

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