

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.

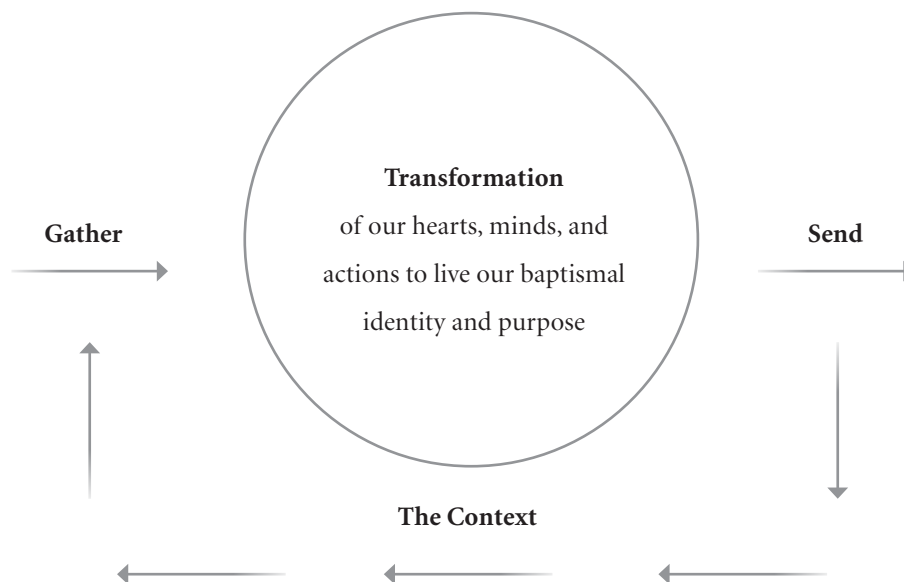


FIGURE A-3: MODEL 1—GATHER-TRANSFORM-SEND

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.



FIGURE A-5: MODEL 1—TRANSFORM

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.

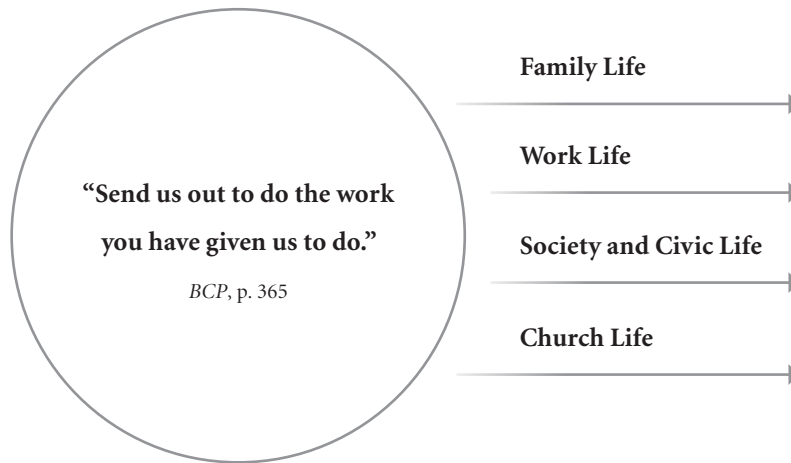


FIGURE A-6: MODEL 1—SEND

Melissa M. Skelton and the Diocese of Olympia, 2007

So....this model is great and all, but how do I use it in my congregation?

- Teach the model to your vestry or other small group and lead a discussion on how your congregation gathers (invites, greets, orients, incorporates) people, where transformation happens, and/or where you are sending people into the world. *See sample questions below.* Where is your congregation strongest? Where might you put some energy and resources?
- Invite folks to a meal and have a discussion about what they remember about why they chose to visit your congregation the first time? What was that visit like? Why did they choose to stay? Where are they fed spiritually in your congregational life? Where do they experience God? How are they trying to live out their faith in the world?
- Do one-on-one interviews with people about their experience of being invited, greeted, oriented, and incorporated into your congregation, where they're fed spiritually, where they're trying to live out their faith in the world.

People like to talk about their experience and you can learn a lot about what your congregation does really well and what you might want to focus on!

Want to learn more? Come to the College for Congregational Development!

Weekend Format: Friday evening at 5:30 pm to Saturday at 6 pm
February 28-29, April 24-25, October 16-17, November 20-21, 2020

Weeklong Format: Sunday afternoon at 3 pm to Saturday at noon
July 19-25, 2020

All at Notre Dame Retreat House, Canandaigua, NY
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