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Holy conversations: strategic planning as a spiritual practice for congregations

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a greater sense of belonging and a deeper knowing of each other. The pastor became more aware of the kinds of spiritual and theological questions that people carried, and this awareness impacted worship and preaching. Stronger connections were made between people's daily lives and their faith, and they began to see themselves as ministers and theologians. "Theological questions were becoming part of people's vocabulary and consequently part of church structures." (109) In committees, people began to ask, "Where is God in this?"

Through my experience as an adult group facilitator, I know that people want to know how God is with them and at work in their lives. This book will be an important resource for equipping adults to discern God's presence and their calls to ministry in their daily lives. With Abigail Johnson, I encourage you to "jump right in and begin the experience."

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Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations

Gil Rendle and Alice Mann
Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2003
288 pages, \$30.57 Softcover

This is a handbook on leadership and strategic planning – a handbook in which the authors, veteran consultants with the Alban Institute, present and explore approaches, tools, resources that they have used in congregational consultations. They are candid in asserting that:

Leaders need to help people find worthy goals. They need to have a plan to structure work and maximize the resources of the congregation. They need to build agreement in the congregation about the plan, so that people are willing to move together toward the goal... We do not believe that planning centers on problem solving. The leader is not responsible for discovering the perfect solution or for creating a perfect planning process to get people to arrive at a perfect plan. Instead, the task of the leader *is to help the people have a purposeful and meaningful conversation about who they are and what they believe is important to do.* (xi-xii, authors' emphasis)

The authors see planning as “conversation”:

People explore their differences and their perceptions. People risk saying what they believe to be important. The talk is full of stories, memories, and hopes – the kind of conversation that strengthens and transforms people. (xiii)

Conversation is *holy* because, at its best, it is about a people’s understanding of their identity as a faith community, their sense of purpose, and their relationship with God. Though the holy conversation may take a multitude of shapes and directions, at its heart that conversation centers around three critical formation identity questions: *Who are we? What has God called us to do or be?* and *Who is our neighbor?* Say the authors:

[w]e hope to offer ideas, pathways, processes, and tools to equip leaders to work with a congregation in shaping their needed holy conversation...The first task of leaders is to be aware of the many opportunities and tools available to help the congregation to have its holy conversation. The second task is to choose judiciously the methods, tools, and paths to enable this conversation to happen. (xiv)

Although the language of “strategic planning” has become very popular, Rendle and Mann are insistent that they use the term in a particularly way. They note that there are three types of planning. There is problem planning: “essentially the problem-solving method applied to a clear need.” There is developmental planning: “often referred to as long-range planning.” There is what the authors call *frame-bending planning*: “Frame-bending planning ... is a process designed to highlight and disturb expectations in order to make space for the possibility of an unseen or unconsidered future.” (9) This is at the heart of “strategic planning.” The handbook identifies the steps to be undertaken to engage in “holy conversation strategic planning,” as well as the necessary and contextual tools for such planning.

The text is divided into four specific areas: *Part One – What Is Strategic Planning?*; *Part Two – Taking The Process Apart*; *Part Three – Issues in Strategic Planning*; *Part Four – What Planning Looks Like in Practice*. At the end of the book, the authors have provided many resources. Some are protected by copyright with The Alban Institute and not reproducible without their written permission. Some of the resources can, however, be downloaded from the Alban web site.

I have appreciated reading this text and working my way through the journey of strategic planning. I also appreciate the authors’ focus

on strategic planning not simply as an organizational or administrative process but as a spiritual practice for congregations to engage, especially around the questions: Who are we now? What is God calling us to do and to be now? Who is our neighbor now? I also appreciate their perspectives on leadership, primarily helping people and congregations participate in “Holy Conversations”!

This is a storehouse of treasures that can help strengthen leadership particularly at the congregational level, but also in judicatories and in seminaries. It is also a text that I commend to seminarians and to seminary professors teaching in practical theology.

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The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts

Luther K. Snow
Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004
148 pages, \$18.00 Softcover

The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts is a unique resource for pastors and congregational leaders. While there is no shortage of books and articles on congregational vitality and renewal, few of them are as versatile and broadly applicable as this one. In a refreshing twist, and contrary to the conventional order most often taken by authors, Snow moves from first presenting a practical application of the “asset mapping” procedure, then to explaining the theory behind it and finally to theological reflection on it.

Thus *Power* is divided neatly into three sections: *The What*, *The How*, and *The Why*. In the first section, Snow outlines the three-step process of asset mapping in a “Quick and Simple Experience,” a convenient guideline giving enough practical information for the venturesome reader immediately to begin facilitating a group through such a process. This three-step process involves recognizing a group’s assets and resources, connecting them together in creative