

Examples of Unhealthy Congregational Norms

Norms are the silent, unspoken rules by which we live in congregations and all other social settings, such as work or family. While people do not often talk about these social agreements and may not even be fully aware of them, they guide our behavior – for good or ill. Some norms are helpful and healthy, others are not. Below are a few examples of less-than-helpful norms that have been found in congregations in areas critical to leadership. Do you find any of these norms operating in your congregation? What are the norms that you follow in the five areas below?

Decision Making

- All of our decisions must be unanimous; therefore, we don't say what we really think, nor do we disagree with one another.
- Once a decision is made by our governing board, members of the board are free to tell people in the congregation that they disagree with the decision and didn't vote for it.

Information Sharing

- Only the two or three primary leaders have all the information, and it seems as if decisions are made before we get to the meeting.
- We are expected to vote on important issues in the same meeting in which we receive information about the issues.

Conflict

- We believe conflict is bad so we never tell others when we disagree with them.
- When there is a conflict, we expect our clergy to back down and to apologize to whomever is hurt or angry.

Complaints

- When someone complains, we stop everything to try to figure out a way to make that person happy; therefore, anybody in the congregation has the power to stop us with a complaint.
- People are allowed to complain anonymously in our congregation so that we often know that people are upset, but we don't know who they are.

Leadership

- Only the longest-tenured members are listened to, no matter who is elected to the governing board.
- We expect the clergy to be the one(s) to produce all the new ideas for us to talk about and try.