

Vicious cycles: The anxious congregation

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [November 2, 2004](#) issue

As I travel around the country visiting and consulting with congregations and clergy, I find that many are caught in vicious cycles. The vicious cycles seem more common than the virtuous ones. They are easily recognized by a chilly climate of anxiety, which these days seems to be more common than the common cold. Such anxiety, what Reinhold Niebuhr described as “the precondition of sin,” is heightened by the mainline’s awareness of its institutional decline and vulnerability.

Members express this in statements such as “we must do more,” “we must do better” and “we must work harder.” There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these sentiments. We usually can do what we do a little better. But in the vicious cycle, this anxiety leads to a heightened level of activity that is without clear focus or sense of purpose. It gives rise to “strategic plans” that are not so much plans as laundry lists of everyone’s great ideas and particular interests. While most items on these lists have value, the attempts to accomplish everything on the lists result in congregations that are spread too thin.

A friend of mine dubs this the Pecos River Syndrome (“A mile wide but only a foot deep”), referring to a lack of effectiveness and success that further depresses the spirits of a congregation’s leaders and stakeholders. Being fatigued and scattered makes people even more vulnerable to the anxiety that sent them into a downward cycle—anxiety leading to activity that results in more fatigue and anxiety. People feel they are getting nowhere; nothing changes or improves; clergy and lay leaders may throw up their hands and give up. Nothing I or we do makes any difference.”

Psalm 127 speaks to a congregation experiencing sleepless nights and eating the “bread of anxious toil.” Luke’s story of Martha and Mary is one case study of such a situation. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious about many things . . . Mary has chosen the better part,” says Jesus, shining a bright and often disturbing light on the matter.

Perhaps the most extended reflection on the vicious and virtuous cycles is in the Letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews repeatedly juxtaposes the priests of the old rites with our new high priest, Jesus. The old priesthood is characterized by relentless, repetitive and ultimately ineffective activity. “Every priest stands day after day at his service offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins” (10:11). As the author tells it, the priests of the old cult are like rats on a wheel, constantly running faster and faster but getting nowhere. In contrast, “When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.”

The postures are telling. The old order priests stand at their work—imagine legions of people running in place at modern fitness centers or rows of gamblers cranking the levers on “one-armed bandits” in casinos. They are constantly, relentlessly, at their same labors while Christ has completed his work and has sat down. He doesn’t keep on sacrificing for sin. He has done it once, for all, for all time.

This posture suggests the starting point for the alternative to the vicious cycle. Christ offered one sacrifice for sins and then sat down—the same posture assumed by Mary, who “sat at the feet of the Lord.” A church’s virtuous cycle begins here. By God’s grace in Christ, we have confidence to enter boldly into God’s presence. “Let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, with hearts that have been purified from a guilty conscience and with bodies washed with clean water.” Virtuous cycles begin with a sense of confidence in what *God* has done and is doing, rather than in anxiety about what *we* must do.

This confidence in powers that are not our own can help clergy and congregations to focus on “the one thing” or the few things needful and central. Christ’s “once and for all” act does not mean that there is nothing left for us to do. Hebrews notes that his “enemies have not [yet] been made a stool beneath his feet.” In other words, Christ has sat down, but we have work to do and our role to play—Christ has not yet put his feet up! The choice is not between “It’s all up to us” and “It’s all up to the Lord.” God’s grace calls forth and enables our response.

I ask congregations, “What are your vital few—the vital few things that your board, your staff or your church must do and do well to be faithful and effective? How can the resources God has placed within and among you be channeled for the greatest effect?” Our trust in God’s work and grace leads us to focus. Or, as a successful microbrewery in Seattle says in its slogan, “The main thing is to keep the main thing

the main thing.”

A clear focus tends to produce greater results. Focus on the one or the several things needful tends to lead not only to clarity but to confidence. The virtuous cycle repeats and deepens, and the congregation finds itself on a spiral up rather than down.

I visited a congregation that decided its focus would be “Sunday morning at Second Church.” You wouldn’t think a church would need to plan to focus on Sunday morning, but when the congregation emphasized its two Sunday worship services, its teaching ministry for adults and children, and its hospitality and fellowship on Sunday morning, they found themselves changed.

“We discovered,” says the pastor, “that if we get Sunday morning right, everything else seems to take care of itself, or at least flow from that.” She adds, “I love Sunday mornings at Second! There’s so much joy.” Her enthusiasm is infectious. The congregation is lively and everyone seemed reasonably clear, in board and committee meetings that I attended, about their focus. “It’s not that other things aren’t going on or being done, but they tend to spring from our Sunday morning emphasis, rather than competing with it,” says the pastor.

The vicious-and-virtuous-cycle phenomenon rings true in personal lives and experience as well as in congregations. When high anxiety hovers around me like a toxic cloud, I am no longer creative or productive. I work faster and harder, but often the only thing I have to show for it is a case of simmering resentment. The biblical Martha articulates this resentment memorably. “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!” In churches with a strong vicious-cycle pattern, one hears, or overhears, resentment. “So many people around here never do anything!” “A few of us do all the work!”

But in congregations where virtuous cycles are at work, there is a sense of shared ownership of the core goals. Because people are focused on a clear set of priorities, it’s easier for more people to buy in and to participate. Instead of hearing, “A few of us do all the work,” one hears affirmation of the shared vision. “At Second Church, Sunday mornings are powerful.” Or as the prophet Habakkuk said, “Write the vision, make it plain, so that even one who runs may see it.”

Pastoral and congregational leaders may not need to come up with or import the right program or dazzling new technique. They may not need to work even longer

hours and tell everyone how busy they are. They may need, however, to help their staffs and congregations discover virtuous cycles and the grace that is both their starting and their ending point.