

Congregational Observational Guide

This is a set of Congregational Observational Guides that Scott Thumma has used to highlight the lenses or frames in the book *Studying Congregations*. These differ somewhat from those offered in the methods chapter of [Studying Congregations](#). Each of these sections also raises questions about the issues of theology and leadership.

Congregational Ecology

Define the community:

What are the physical structures? What are they for, or what functions do they serve? Is it mostly single family or multiple family residences, commercial, or industrial? How well-kept are the streets, buildings, landscape? What other religious groups do you see? What is the feeling of the neighborhood? How might the community change at night? Is the community in the process of changing, or has it changed in the past? Would you live here?

Describe the people:

Who do you see? What can you tell of their lifestyles, demographics? Are folks mostly walking, driving, exercising, strolling? Is there a difference between groups of people engaged in these activities? What is the pace of the activity? Is there a lot of interaction on the streets, in public spaces? What is the focus of attention? Can you perceive evidence of population shifts in the area?

Identify invisible people & institutions:

Who or what is missing from the picture? What groups are not on the streets? What businesses or religious groups are absent? Are there banks, grocery stores, pawn shops, small "mom & pop" stores, major chains? Are there "invisible" residents who are ignored, overlooked, or marginalized and kept out of sight?

Reflect on the unseen social forces at work:

What are the local economic, political, & societal forces that are shaping this community, both past and present? How might these influences affect the future? Do larger trends or conditions such as population migration, immigration, recession, aging population, technological advances have an impact on this area? Are there religious issues or prominent clergy voices which are at work here? What is the relationship between religious groups and the community historically? Are congregations seen as institutions with a prophetic spiritual voice, as service providers, or as leisure centers.

Examine the congregation's immediate environ:

What do the church grounds look like? Are they well-kept? Is the congregation and its activities or services (especially childcare areas) well-identified? Are there boundaries or

barriers to access (ramps, handicapped parking, hedges, sidewalks, parking, obvious entrances, gated & patrolled)? How does the church building & architecture compare to the neighborhood? Does the building connote anything about what takes place inside?

Theological Issues:

What does this congregation's place in and presence to (involvement in) the community say about their sense of God's role in the world? What does it say about their role in the world? What challenges and opportunities does this context hold for faithful theological involvement? Are there overt issues of economic justice, racial and ethnic intolerance, classism, ageism, or poverty which should be addressed, and how? Where is God in the community? Where are the "strangers" and the "least of these"? Given the community's ecological balance, what is the place, role, function of the church in this matrix? Is this a valid, faithful and just Christian expression in this community?

Leadership Issues:

What challenges and opportunities does this context hold for leadership of this congregation? In what ways does the context provide avenues or hindrances for the practice of leading this church and its members? What issues in this ecological matrix are being addressed by the leadership, and how? What issues need to be addressed further? How would you go about addressing these and motivating the membership to join you?

Congregational Culture

The Building Blocks of Culture:

What is the size and social composition of the membership, their race, age, gender, income, education, class and apparent family composition? How does this compare to the clergy, and the church's local community? What is the dress of the participants? Are there special uniforms or style of dress for clergy or laity? Are there minority groups within the membership majority? Are these groups isolated, segregated out?

What is the theological and denominational tradition of the church? Is this congregation denominationally loyal or a rebel? What salience does the denominational label have? With whom are they linked in partnerships for ministry or resources? To whom do they look for counsel?

What external context is brought in to the congregation? What evidence of these external cultural influences are there?

The Constructions of Culture:

Activities:

What happens in worship? What activities seem most central? What is the format, order of worship, segments of the service, what happens, for how long, and who does what? Are the activities formal or informal, ritualized or seemingly spontaneous? What is the dominant character and purpose of worship (praise, celebration, affirmation, supportive, honoring, etc.)? What is their sense of place/belonging? What is the choreography of worship? How active are members (standing, kneeling, swaying, dancing)? What other sensual stimuli are there (musical styles, silence, space, icons, smells, textures)? What are the patterns of interaction between members and with the clergy?

Who are the dominant players in the drama of worship? Is it clergy alone, or a mix, only one demographic group or a diversity, is participation individual, in unison, or in groups? Is worship insider knowledge or explained? Who orchestrates the event (worship leader, choir, minister, prayer book, bulletin, unspoken tradition or habits)?

What additional activities take place throughout the week which express this group's life? What educational, social, personal support, mission, and service events are there, how well attended, and by whom? What task oriented organizational groups are held (such as governance, management, maintenance, fund raising, planning, recruiting)?

Artifacts:

What is the design of the building, the interior decor and the use of space? What is the ambience of the sanctuary (dark and holy, well-lit and user friendly)? What is the arrangement of seating, of open spaces, of "sacred space?" What explicitly religious symbols, icons and artifacts are evident? How are these displayed and what prominence do they have? What other props and equipment are used?

Accounts:

What do you hear in interactions, greetings, jokes, and gossip? What is said in or written on official descriptions of the place (bulletins, sermons, creeds, etc.) What is said unofficially? What commitments are prayed, sung, confessed and what do these say about the group, the world and God?

What does the history of this group say about who they are? What do their stories, both official and informal, express about their identity and place in society? Who are the congregational "heros?" What celebrations and annual events are there? What are the functions and value of these gatherings?

Are there symbols, images, or metaphors which this congregation look to for unity for empowerment, or for group identity? What are the stories or myths which are common knowledge to insiders? What are the secrets that seldom get discussed? Is there a distinctive theological or ideological position, or a social cause, historical event, crisis or community role around which this congregation rallies and from which it defines itself?

Theological Issues:

What does this congregation's worship imply about the nature of God, and the Divine human interaction. What is the relationship between the sacred and the secular, between what is holy and everyday life, in the life of this community? What is the overt stated theology of this group? What are the informal theologies at work? Are these incongruent? How do these compare to the "official" denominational or historical theological position? What is described, enacted as the key task of the community and who is included and excluded from this vision? How is scripture used? What are the "authorities" for this group? How is God and a godly life understood and lived out in the practices of this congregation? In what practices is this congregational theology expressed and reinforced? Is the overall congregational theology, identity, and culture of this group, a valid portrayal of faith, from your perspective? Why or why not?

Leadership Issues:

What about this congregation's culture would facilitate or hinder leadership? What specific features of this group's life together would be fertile symbols, images, and stories to empower the members? What cultural dynamics would make change unlikely? Is this congregation engaged in growth, change, a process of sanctification? If yes, from whom does the impetus for change in this group come? How has this leadership (lay and/or clergy) mobilized for change, captured the imagination of the congregation? Out of what source(s) has this direction for the congregation arisen? In what is this direction grounded? How does the worship and communal life of this congregation feed, enrich, and ground the leadership of these people? If the congregation is not healthy, growing, adapting or changing, why are they stagnant? How would you move them to a vital spiritual existence?

Congregational Resources

Economic resources

Explore the budget, income and expenditures, past and present.

Identify the various sources of support. How much of this support comes directly from members? How much comes from other sources such as endowment, rent, denomination, government, foundations, and secular appeals.

What is the future "earning potential" of the congregation? What are the potential liabilities? Are there external circumstances that might drastically affect the church's financial position?

Human resources

What is the size, commitment level, and tangible resources of the membership, the church's paid staff and the clergy? What other demands on their resources do they have? What gifts, talents, skills and connections do they have? What programs are in place to nurture commitment and skill/leadership development?

What are the expectations, wants, and needs of the congregation, and the surrounding community? Are there many other places in the community to have these needs met?

What are the values and world views of members? What is the morale of the congregation and vision of its future? Is there a willingness to invest in this future? At what sacrifice?

Structural resources

What is the condition of the buildings, parking, sanctuary? Is there too little or too much space for the congregation? Is it being used efficiently and to its fullest extent?

In what ways is the building a cost or liability to ministry? In what ways is it an asset?

How many services and other meetings take place in the buildings in a week? Are these programs of high quality, well attended, effective, and serve a purpose? Do these programs support the overall vision and goals of the congregation?

Symbolic resources

What is the symbolic value of the building and its place in the community? What is its reputation - internally, in the local area, denominationally, on the Web, TV, other media?

What does membership mean to the congregation? Are they proud of their involvement and identify with the church? What are their spiritual commitments, professional and volunteer motives?

Organizational resources

How effectively and efficiently is the congregation governed? How is it organized and run?

What concrete partnerships does it maintain with other groups, such as other churches, denominations, social agencies, government, businesses. In what ways, and to what ends, does the congregation work with these groups? What formal or informal networks does it use to increase its effectiveness?

What formal or informal networks are the laity involved in? What power and pull do they have?

Theological Issues:

In what ways do the resources of this congregation shape its theological commitments? How do the sources of support condition the expression and practice of its faith? Does the congregational space support the ministry? Is it being used consistent to the vision of the

church? Are they "serving two masters" (a building, an endowment, a tradition, an identity)? What does the "treasure" of this congregation say about its "heart?"

Leadership Issues:

Given the resource limits, has this congregation realistically done all that can be done? How did or is this group being challenged to increase their resources? Are there creative ways to overcome or compensate for the reality of resource limitations that this congregation has not attempted? What are the costs of this leadership?

Dynamics of Authority

How authority is described:

What is said in the congregation about who is in charge, and who says it? What do the official church, denominational documents say? What do folks say informally about how things really get done in the congregation? What is the congregation's authority grounded in (tradition, a denominational polity, the leader's personality, a board, priesthood of all believers, the Holy Spirit)? Is leadership shared? By whom? How is it mandated? Is there a formal decision-making process? What are the formal lines of accountability? What is the formal leadership structure? Who selects the minister and what is the process?

How decision-making happens:

What does the patterns of interaction in committee or congregational meetings tell about the dynamics of leadership in the congregation? Who speaks and who doesn't? Who is in charge of the meetings? Are there appeals to Roberts Rules of Order, to the Holy Spirit, to a church document, or to the wisdom of the elders? Who brings a discussion to a close? Who interrupts? Do members say they have a voice and are well informed about congregational activities and decisions? Do all class, race, gender and ethnic groups have an equal say in the governance of the congregation? Who knows how to "get things done" in the congregation? Who knows the gossip? Who talks to whom in the halls after the meeting? What does the history of the governance of the church say about the way decisions are made?

How challenges to authority are handled:

How much dissent is there in the congregation? Is this diversity of opinion addressed openly or unacknowledged? How does the church settle conflicts between individuals, between program necessities? How do major decisions get debated and divergent perspectives reconciled? Do folks feel as if decisions are made "behind closed doors" through "under the table" deals? Does the minister address issues of church controversy from the pulpit? Has a split ever occurred in the congregation? What were the

circumstances? Was there a healing after the incident, and if so how did it happen, who was involved and what was the outcome?

Theological Issues:

What are the operative theological models for authority in this congregation? How is clergy authority understood (an expert teacher, a social visionary, a pastor counselor, a community leader, a spiritual guide, a friend)? What limits does a particular model of authority place on what can be done in this congregation? What does a particular model of authority imply about God and God's relationship to this church and this human community?

Leadership Issues:

Are there times in the history of this congregation where it was led (positively or negatively) in some direction? What were the circumstances around this leadership? What role does polity and denominational structure play in this congregation's leadership? What difficulties arise when the formal structures of authority and the informal processes of power are not congruent? Is it possible to lead a congregation that does not want to follow? What are the potential pitfalls of shared leadership? Is having authority in and the leadership of a congregation the same thing?