

## YES, CONGREGATIONS CAN LEARN NEW HABITS

A regional church officer told of visiting a church with a puzzling worship practice. Whenever it came time to recite the Apostle's Creed, worshippers turned toward the back of the church. Puzzled, he asked why. A long-time member explained that years ago the words to the creed were posted on the rear wall. The fixture was removed when the sanctuary was renovated, but the habit remained.

### Three Ways Habits Are Formed

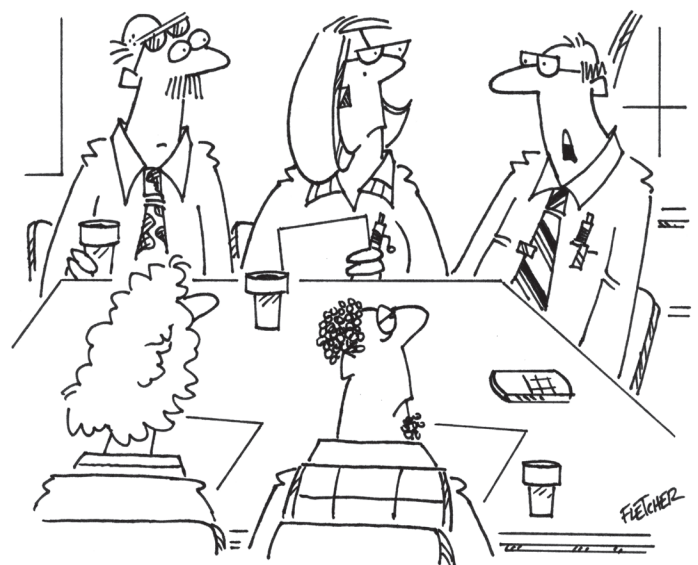
Like it or not, church life is governed to a large extent by habit. According to psychologist Wendy Wood, despite the importance we place on decision making, much of life resists executive control, operating outside of human awareness as a "second self." In a widely publicized study, Wood investigated the role that automatic actions (habits) played in everyday life. To her surprise, she found that 43 percent of the time our actions are habitual. This includes not only common morning routines, but also working, eating, socializing, and exercising.<sup>1</sup>

For the congregation, habits may govern how meetings are designed, how decisions are made, who speaks to whom after worship, where the light bulbs are stored, or any of a wide array of practices that make up church life in its totality. Given how pervasive habits are, it's more realistic to think in terms of dropping and adding habits rather than rejecting them and there are three key ways these habits are formed.

**Context Makes a Difference.** Context includes anything in the surrounding world that either drives or restrains our action, including people. In 1970, a new federal law banning cigarette ads on television and radio led to a decline in smoking in a way that the Surgeon General's warnings failed to do. This change in the environment interfered with the automatic nature of smoking, allowing change.

For congregations, the physical context can either make it easier or more difficult for a habit to form. Redesigning the seating in a sanctuary or introducing café tables in the lobby or vestibule can strengthen the habit of conversation. Occasionally shifting the governing board's meeting to a local café can change the way board members relate to each other and their work.

**Repetition Makes it Second Nature.** Habits do not develop all at once, but rather develop gradually through repetition. Every time an action is repeated, it takes both less time and less conscious thought than before. Eventually it becomes second nature. For example, every week in worship the collection plate is passed at the same time and in the same manner as before. Through the repetition of this habit, church members and guests learn the importance of giving. While the fall stewardship campaign highlights the importance of consciously determining what to give,



"SINCE NO ONE CAN REMEMBER THE ORIGIN OF THIS PARTICULAR CHURCH HABIT, I MOVE THAT IT BE UPGRADED TO A TRADITION."

passing the offering plate reinforces the stewardship ideal at a less conscious level. It does this through repetition.

**Rewards Keep it Going.** The repetition required to develop a habit from scratch can become monotonous. Rewards can keep motivation high. When development workers in Western Cape, South Africa, pondered how to motivate four-year-olds from impoverished families to wash their hands before meals or after using the toilet, they hit upon the idea of child-sized, toy-filled soap. Each bar was translucent and brightly colored, with a ball or plastic fish in the center. They gave out a new bar every two weeks for two months. It worked.

Can playful rewards work for congregations? Unexpected rewards seem to work best, which explains why electronic slots and video poker are the most popular activities at casinos, and why the average American checks a smartphone forty-six times per day.<sup>2</sup> This fact, if nothing else, argues for introducing a variety of themes, prayers, songs, and messages to every worship service. This variety rewards repeated attendance and fosters strong worship habits.

### The Role of Disruption

Though unexpected and sometimes unwelcome, disruptions can make it easier to let go of old habits and adopt new ones. Major life events such as moving, a new job, marriage, or children can remove the predictability and the cues that trigger habits, freeing the individual to act in new ways. Congregations can experience major disruptions, as the Reverend Sylvia Barrett found when fire destroyed her United Methodist church in the upstate village of Milford, New York. Engaging a study process to determine whether to rebuild, church leaders stumbled upon an insight: “It’s not about the building, but the people.” After rebuilding, the group also chose to form new habits by paying more attention to their neighbors and offering new small-group opportunities.

In 2017, Jason Butler, pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, called a total halt in operations. The church, founded in 1942, had dwindled to fifty members. Butler believed “an excess of bad habits” was to blame. For six months, the church stopped all its regular activities—worship, Sunday school, choir, prayer groups, women’s studies, and leadership meetings. Instead, church members

spent time getting to know people in the neighborhood and planning for a relaunch. After the hiatus, the church relaunched as Open Table United Methodist Church. Years later, its membership has grown to two hundred and fifty. “Disruption allowed us to stop doing the things that were probably preventing us from seeing ourselves and our future clearly. . . . It opened a crack in the system for change and opened our minds to a reimagination.”<sup>3</sup>

### The Role of Other People

Context is not just physical. Other people can serve as the context that shapes habits. When Rick Warren founded Saddleback Church, Irvine, California, in 1979, he focused on persons who never developed the habit of church attendance. “We thought long and hard about habitualizing faith, breaking it down into pieces. . . . The only way to get people to take responsibility for their spiritual maturity is to teach them *habits* of faith.” As the church grew, and Warren struggled with exhaustion, he shifted teaching responsibility from his shoulders to church members themselves, and from the church building to members’ homes. Eventually, every church member was assigned to a small group that met once a week. This made church participation into a habit and the home meetings are the cornerstone of growth. Within the group, “close friends help you focus on how to be faithful.”<sup>4</sup>

Any congregation can benefit from closer attention to its “second self.” Habits that are aligned with the church’s goals can replace habits that cut against those goals. By keeping a set of clearly defined, ambitious goals front and center, church leaders can move the congregation in the direction of its dreams, but only if its automatic actions are aligned with those goals.

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1. Wendy Wood, *Good Habits, Bad Habits: The Science of Making Positive Changes That Stick* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019), 24.

2. *Ibid.*, 123-129.

3. Jason Butler, “Disruption Is Often the Key to Renewal,” *Faith & Leadership*, July 23, 2019. [https://faithandleadership.com/jason-butler-disruption-often-key-renewal?utm\\_source=albanweekly&utm\\_medium=content&utm\\_campaign=faith\\_leadership](https://faithandleadership.com/jason-butler-disruption-often-key-renewal?utm_source=albanweekly&utm_medium=content&utm_campaign=faith_leadership)

4. Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, (New York: Random House, 2012), 235-237.