

# The Parish Paper

Ideas and Insights for Active Congregations  
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## WHAT PROMOTES HOPE?

Do we see a snake or a rope? In this metaphor, the snake is fear, disappointment, discouragement, despair, anxiety, distrust, bitterness, or dejection. What is the rope? It is hope. All churches have hope, but they may occasionally experience snake-vision: the illusion of no hope, only despair about the future.

### A Theory of Hope

A leading researcher in positive psychology, C. R. Snyder,<sup>1</sup> wanted to understand how hope and forgiveness might be beneficial to health, educational attainment, successful work experiences, and a sense of personal meaning in life. He believed that children could be taught a set of skills that shaped what they did naturally: think about the future. His theory of hope involves three main ideas related to hopeful thinking:

**Goals.** These targets or objectives serve as the foundation of the model. To approach life in a goal-oriented way suggests identifying the important things that create meaning.

**Pathways.** If people are to reach their goals, they must also be able to imagine one or more routes to those goals. Individuals need the mental capacity and flexibility to think of different approaches to achieve their goals. Obstacles and challenges always arise as we pursue our goals. The key is to find another route when the previous pathway did not achieve the desired result.

**Agency.** This third component of hope rests on the belief that one has the capacity to take independent action and make free choices. The knowledge that one can control his or her life and the confidence that one can influence personal thoughts and behavior generates agency.

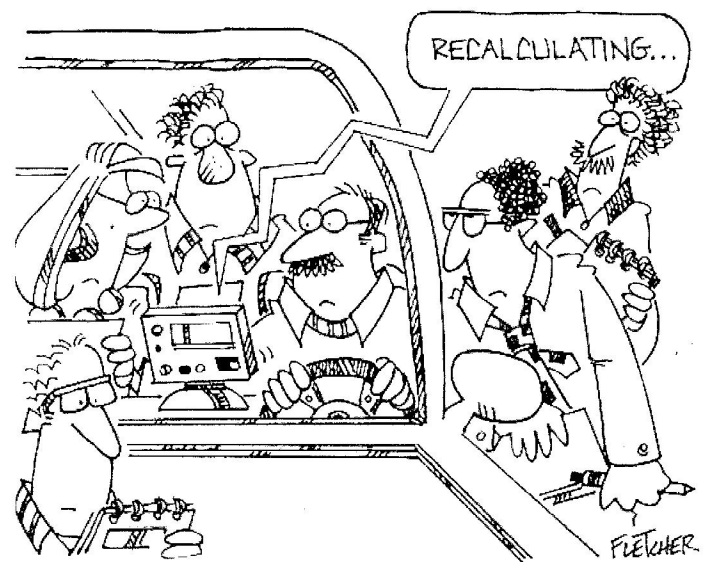
The research shows that hope is a psychological strength. Investigations reveal significant relationships between hope and problem solving, optimism, self-

esteem, self-efficacy, and future-oriented identity. Additionally, studies find that hopeful people heal faster when battling illnesses.<sup>2</sup>

### Faith-Based Hope

The Bible identifies hope as one of three key virtues of the Christian faith: faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). Hope is translated as “a strong and confident expectation” of future reward. Accordingly, hope changes how we see ourselves, what we value, and what we do with our lives.

Biblical stories provide multiple examples of how faithful leaders found alternative routes when they encountered obstacles. These leaders exhibited resiliency and resisted negative “self-talk.” Today's church leaders can learn to transform negative goals (“we must stop fighting with each other”) to positive goals (“we want to find new ways to work together”). Unfortunately, “fear motivates faster than hope.”<sup>3</sup> Appeals to the snake of fear and distrust



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should not drive decision making in communities of faith.

## Promoting Hope in Churches

Not all congregations are equally focused on the possibilities tomorrow might bring. A national study of worshipers found that one in four attendees were not aware of any vision, future goals, or direction for their church, or knew of some “ideas” but not clear goals.<sup>4</sup> Worshipers rely on their leaders to help them catch a glimpse of their congregation’s future. A clear vision that is relayed repeatedly to church members cements in worshipers’ minds what their congregation’s future can hold. This future portrait—one that is positive and optimistic—moves worshipers to support and invest in that future.

Here are several ways for a church to do a “Hope Checkup.”

*Involve the governing board.* First, ask the board members to write down as many words and phrases as they can to describe what the congregation will be like five years from now. Are these positive or negative images? Do these words and phrases match your existing church vision or mission statement?

Pick three or four of the most inspiring and hope-filled words or phrases. What is the congregation currently doing that moves it in the direction of fulfilling those aspirations? Do these current activities give us a sense of agency? What one or two additional actions (achievable sub-goals) could the congregation currently undertake to more fully live out those aspirations?

*Involve the worshipers.* Consider using this or a similar short survey during a worship service to get a sense of the hopefulness of current attendees about the congregation’s future. Ask them to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree to the following statements:<sup>5</sup>

1. I think our church is doing pretty well.
2. We can think of many ways to get things done that are most important for our church.
3. We’re doing just as well as most other churches.
4. When we encounter an obstacle or problem, we can come up with lots of ways to solve it.
5. The things we have done in the past will help us in the future.
6. Even when others want to give up, most members believe we can find ways to meet our challenges.

*Involve the youth group or other small group.* Ask participants to take pictures of people, places, or things that represent “hope” to them over the course of a week (or several weeks). When the group meets again, invite each participant to show one to three images that they found most powerful. What about the image denotes hope for them? What impact did the exercise have on them personally? What lesson does the image convey for a more hope-filled church? Are specific pathways suggested? The group could consider making a presentation based on their experience to the board or a whole church gathering.

## Friends of Hope

Certain actions and attitudes diminish hope and foster despair. Deception and habitual grumbling undermine the church’s sense of community. Sorting out what is going on is difficult work. However, spiritual practices—those actions people do together to address human needs—are central to the big picture of promoting hope.

Paying attention to keeping promises, telling the truth, offering hospitality, and expressing gratitude are key to Christian faith and they are the friends of hope.<sup>6</sup> As expressed by Martin Luther King Jr., “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”<sup>7</sup>

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1. C. R. Snyder, ed., *Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures, and Applications* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2000).

2. J. T. Pedrotti, L. Edwards, and S. J. Lopez, “Promoting Hope: Suggestions for School Counselors,” *Professional School Counseling*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (December 2008).

3. Nato Thompson, *Culture As Weapon* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017), xi.

4. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 101–7.

5. This survey was modified from a Goals instrument used to assess school students; see Pedrotti, Edwards, and Lopez.

6. Christine D. Pohl, *Living Into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 2012).

7. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).