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# THE EVALUATION PROCESS AND THE MEMBERS VOICE PROJECT: PERSPECTIVES AND COMMENTARY

## Introduction

Effective evaluation ensures that goals and objectives are met and whether the end product or project has significance. Does it contribute to and broaden our understanding of the subject pursued as designed? Were all available resources, networks, and contacts utilized? What aspects of the project demonstrate clearly the capacity of the organization to deliver as promised, illustrating identifiable strengths? How did the delivery of outcomes confirm quality management in completing the project, establishing the overall significance of the work?

## African-American Congregational Life Survey: Members Voice Project

In September 2003, Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) received a grant of three quarters of a million dollars from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. to develop a representative profile of Black worshipers and their congregations. This project was intended as a corrective to field research conducted by U.S. Congregational Life Survey (US CLS) in 2002 also funded by the Lilly Endowment. In that survey, Black congregations

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were underrepresented. In its African-American Congregational Life Survey, also described as the Members Voice Project (MVP), ITC collaborated with U.S. Congregations to provide a comprehensive portrait of congregational life in the United States to include the wide range of Black faith groups.

The study enabled the discovery of **four** critical connections on how worship and faith are expressed:

1. **Spiritual Connections**, which identify how faith and worship are connected to one another;

2. **Inside connections,** which describe worshipers' activities within the faith community;

3. **Outside connections,** which reflect how the congregation and its members reach out to serve those outside the congregation; and

4. **Identity connections,** which are intended to help worshipers understand who they are and how self-understanding enables them to envision and map their future.

The design for the project was quite useful. Three different types of questionnaires were available to local Black churches. The one for lay persons in congregations—the persons in the pew—provided an opportunity for the laity to make their voices heard, hence the MVP. Lay participants in the survey were to engage in self-examination, using what the drafters called "building blocks," to assess where their congregation was, to what extent the "building blocks" were present in their life, and perhaps most importantly how they assisted the congregation in a determina-

tion of its strengths. The two other questionnaires sought responses: one from the pastor and the other from the business or church administrator (if applicable).

There were several intended results for the project, including training doctoral students in research methodology. The identified students would form a team to assist in completing the project. A representative sample of 500 congregations were surveyed and distributed among Protestants (400), Roman Catholics (50), and Muslims (50). Collaboration was expected among other organizations and researchers, who would assist not only in arranging for identification of representative lists from which intended surveyed congregations could be drawn, but also in managing the administration, collation, and interpretation of the data gathered from the completed surveys.

A major part of the project was the dissemination and interpretation of the results of the surveys, primarily to participating congregations, but also to religious bodies involved in the project and to scholars and other entities interested in congregational life. The dissemination plan included developing and managing a website for public sharing, creating training materials to assist congregations in using the results, presenting papers, and writing articles about the research.

## Evaluation Process Selected

It seemed that outcome evaluation was best suited for this project. Outcome evaluation's primary focus determines whether stated goals are realized and how participants will benefit. A secondary goal, but one no less important, considers the broader implications of the data for

enhancing knowledge and understanding the field of congregational studies. "Outcome evaluation is another feature of a comprehensive evaluation plan. It assesses the short- and long-term results of a project. Outcome evaluation questions ask: What are the critical outcomes you are trying to achieve? What impact is the project having on its clients, its staff, its umbrella organization, and its community? What unexpected impact has the project had?"[2] For our purposes, that broad list of questions can be expanded, modified, and made specific for MVP.

## Task Interpreted

Some grantors require evaluation as part of the proposal. This is a necessity for the Lilly Foundation, Inc., which funded the MVP. In addition to providing information on "expected products and other results," the proposal, in the evaluation section, identified "specific outcomes":

- Number and types of faith communities surveyed;

- Identification and measurement of indicators of community service enhanced among worshipers within Black faith communities;

- Identification and measurement of faith and community service to foster an outreach orientation through public theology and community economic development; and

[2]The Kellogg Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook: Philosophy and Expectations (Battle Creek, MI: The Foundation, 2004), 28.

- Identification of aspects of this study for applicability within African-American faith groups and American pluralistic civil society.

Other expectations and outcomes were identified. The above statements made it easier to develop an evaluation of the project, focusing on outcomes.

## Process Applied

The proposal employed both internal and external evaluators, with the writer as the internal evaluator and Dr. L. Jeffery Tribble, assistant professor, Congregational Leadership, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, as the external evaluator. Also, in establishing an evaluation process, Dr. Stephen C. Rasor, the project director, and Dr. Christine D. Chapman, project manager, were consulted about plans and a timeline for completing the work.

## Field Visits Randomly Selected
## Congregational Participants

After the surveys were completed by the congregations, they were sent to U.S. Congregations, which collated and supplied the data for each congregation. U.S. Congregations sent, from time to time to the project office, lists of those congregations that had received their survey results. It was envisioned that the evaluators would have the completed results for the 400 Protestant congregations from which to make selections more quickly. This process took longer than expected. The evaluators were eventually able to

select six congregations for visits from among the list of the completed survey results. We sought to select one of these congregations for a random visit. We also wanted regional representation across the United States.

The pastors of the selected congregations were contacted and arrangements made for visits. There were four objectives:

- To inquire of participants' experience, particularly commenting on the survey instrument—its ease or difficulty to use;

- To offer further interpretations as needed;

- To inquire about the usefulness of the results for each congregation; and

- To learn what plans the congregation intends for its future in the light of the report's profile.

As part of the original design, our partners at U.S. Congregations committed to dispatch notes with the results explaining how to use the Connections Report.

During our visits to the selected congregations, we had varying experiences. The following was shared from one congregation:

- Some of the questions were difficult;

- For one person, her job title was omitted;

- Survey was lengthy. It took one to two days to complete. (This was an indication that the survey was done in parts.)

- The process "stirred up some things in my mind. It showed some areas of the church's ministry which could be unvalued but was not. It awakened me to the fact of some areas of ministry in which we as (denomination withheld) should be involved but are not."

- A consensus opinion was "we are willing to do what needs to be done to become the people God is calling us to be in this place."

One other congregation reported:

- Most of the persons in the room (between forty and fifty) had no idea of any survey or no memory that it was conducted;

- After a copy of that congregation's results was distributed, four of the persons present completed the survey;

- One person stated there was no difficulty in completing the survey; and

- One person indicated hesitancy in supplying

answers, because, as she reasoned, you don't want to 'down' your church or your pastor.

In all three situations this writer had to use time creatively. Two locations had different pastors. It appeared that the previous pastor received the results, did nothing with them, and took the files on moving. Even where the pastor acknowledged receiving the results, he could not find them; no effort to prepare for the visit was made. This "unexpected" additional time provided an opportunity to share models of congregational life.

Any congregation, irrespective of size or denominational culture, has four interrelated strands within its DNA—**welcoming, nurturing, empowering,** and **serving**.[3] Even though all congregations have these, what makes for distinctiveness and identity are ways in which each congregation manifests its strengths and weaknesses in each of its strands.

1. Every congregation has four components of its primary task:

- To invite and receive people as they are;
- To relate them to God;
- To nurture and develop them as disciples;
- To send them out into communities to make the love and justice of God known by all persons.

2. The process, a cyclical model, beginning with identity through mission, vision, planning, strategies, and action

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[3]See Robert Norton and Richard Southern, *Cracking Your Congregation's Code: Mapping Your Spiritual DNA to Create Your Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, September 2001).

to evaluation and celebration and back to a renewed under-
standing of identity, was shared.

Comments by other persons allowed us to share that
the church is apostolic—missionary by nature. It is sent
out into the world, there to engage with God in activities
that God is already doing in the world. The church is called
to be in mission. Emil Brunner proposes that the "church
exists by mission just as fire exists by burning."[4] Thus the ques-
tion: Is the church mission-centered? If so, mission will be at
the heart of the church. Brunner further elaborates: "Where
there is no mission, there is no church; and where there is nei-
ther church nor mission, there is no faith."[5]

Gustavo Gutiérrez suggests that the Gospel is both a
"talk" text as well as a "walk" text. "It is not enough to rec-
ognize that Jesus is the Christ; it is necessary to accept all
that [this] implies. To believe in Jesus Christ is also to
assume his practice."[6] As Christians, we are called not only
to "talk" about Jesus but also to "walk" [his] path.[7]

In each of the places where alternative uses for time
were required, persons commented on the usefulness of the
sharing session. Pastors acknowledged the value of the
insights and resolved to work with the results from the sur-
vey. At those sites where copies were not received or were
misplaced, this writer promised to send the results with sug-
gestions on how to use the information.

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[4]Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (New York: Charles Scribner's
Sons, 1931), 108.
[5]Ibid.
[6]Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual
Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 50.
[7]Ibid.

## Evaluating Project Management and Delivery:
## A Conversation with the Project Staff

The evaluators requested a visit with the project director, Dr. Rasor, and the project manager, Dr. Chapman, to discuss project outcomes. We then engaged in a three-hour discussion with the questions below as background, useful as discussion starters.

- What is your understanding of the fundamental objectives of the project?
- What are the outcomes you accomplished?
- What were significant challenges?
- What important findings have you discovered?
- What are some things you would have done differently?
- What is your overall assessment about the project's achievement?

The project staff was ready to meet the evaluators. Their responses indicated they had engaged in their own self-evaluation in preparation for the visit. The statements below are presented without ranking on our part. They also reflect responses to the scope of inquiry posed by the discussion starters.

- The churches that participated in the survey were selected both denominationally and regionally. This attempt was somewhat successful.

- The brochure developed for the MVP is fairly accurate in what was promised and delivered.

- Access to the pastors and churches was overestimated and not as easy as imagined. Indeed, the lists that formed the selection pool were largely the work of students, whose knowledge of and relationship with the pastors accommodated the process.

- The effort of developing and contacting pastors was part of the larger experience in social science research, which was a stated objective of the project.

- It was difficult to communicate the value of participation in the research for pastors and churches.

- It was agreed that the best approach to having the churches complete the surveys was within the scope of the worship service. Congregations elected to weave the completion of the surveys into the context of regular worship services or at a convenient opportunity before or after the worship service.

- A further challenge appeared to be the perception of importance in completing the surveys. Pastors establish their own priorities. Many are bi-vocational. Others must make the decision as to the value of completing the surveys and determining how to use the results.

- Even though our partners at U.S. Congregations were careful to include instructions on the use of the Connections Report in the limited site visits that were made as a follow-up, responses suggested that this dissemination strategy should have had several other approaches.

- It would have increased the impact of the research to offer some orientation for individual pastors or clusters of pastors to the values of social science research. This would probably have meant some modification in the project design.

- The experience in delivering the project suggested that more time was needed to achieve the stated objectives and desired outcomes.

- Pilot studies for the project, including pre-testing of the survey instruments should have been more extensive and would have increased the effectiveness.

- A significant observation about working with congregations is that the church is relational. This is particularly important in African-American congregations where this cultural posture is effective in achieving objectives.

## Evaluation of Project by Its Identified Phases

The delivery of the project by phases was a way of monitoring progress and the achievement of outcomes. The first phases, as designed, dealt with preparation to initiate the

project, train the research team (to include students), pilot test the project, and implement. It was noted above that this latter phase—pilot testing—should have been more extensive. The plan was carried out for developing lists and making the selection of churches for participation in the survey. Collaborators and partners were identified, contacted, and agreements made for their support.

The next several phases included parts not accomplished, or there was some difficulty in realizing goals. They were mainly in the areas of the resource development and dissemination strategies. There were, in some instances, modifications made to aspects of the project.

The following are significant:

- **Strategies for dissemination** were noted and included site visits, seminars, journal articles, brochures, and training materials. Others still in process, for which plans have been developed, are contact with denominations for sharing results of the research, a video project, enhancing the current Institute for Black Religious Life website for disseminations at selected levels.

- The project staff has been engaged in sharing information on the research at national scholarly organizations. This special volume of *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* presents the research results in a series of articles.

- **Interfaith Congregations Life Survey Conference** (Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims) was included in the study, intending to gather a forum of denominational leadership (pastors and lay leaders) to share learnings from the study and implications for ministry practice. Faith groups that participated in the survey were also invited as well as congregational leaders. This conference had to be scaled back because it was undersubscribed; it was not possible to sustain the original vision. A modification in design developed an alternative conference to which the seminary communities in Atlanta, as well as local pastors, were invited. A Symposium on Black Religious Life was held October 12, 2005. There were about 100 attendees invited to engage in dialogue on how to apply the survey data to pervasive social and economic issues. This event was combined with the viewing of a PBS documentary, featuring William "Pete" Duncan, who discussed his experiences of incarceration and substance abuse and how faith-based organizations, such as the Reentry National Outreach Campaign, could provide support for low-income African-American men within the context of incarceration and release.

- A modification to the original design for that interfaith conference has been made. There are now plans for regional conferences with the same objectives. Strategies are being developed to publicize the events and attract the numbers to make them worthwhile to achieve the desired outcomes.

## General Commentary and Recommendations

The project generally realized its desired outcomes but perhaps not at anticipated levels. The challenges that forced rethinking of the design and modification in strategies were identified and appropriate responses made. These circumstances did not radically affect the work of the project and its outcomes. However, they provided significant lessons for the project leadership. As a result, the project staff identified what they would do differently, and these changes are included among proposed recommendations:

- Develop realizable objectives for the timeline proposed. This will demonstrate capacity of designers to both conceive and execute what they determine. It also avoids returning to the grantor, requesting more time.

- Tighten the process for securing lists from which to draw congregations for research; the scope would more accurately represent the universe of African-American congregations both by denomination and U.S. geographic regions.

- Ensure that pre-testing is done so that challenges are identified and appropriate responses determined.

- Discover effective ways to assist pastors and congregations to interpret the analysis of results and to apply these understandings to their ongoing life and ministry.

- Deepen understanding of the relational nature of congregational life and how decisions are made and work accomplished, particularly in African-American congregations. A most important concern, especially in studying congregations, is determining ways in which the value and usefulness of research can be embraced by the target audience.

- Develop ways in assisting average African-American pastors to recognize the value and use of research and its results to enhance their ministries.

- Ensure that research in congregational life is congregation-oriented. Unless this perspective is emphasized, the apparent attitudes of neglect and indifference will persist. It is critical to involve everyone in discussions. "A commitment to ongoing dialogue and more interactive forms of communication will not only increase ownership and motivation to act on what is learned [but], will also assist in refining the evaluation design, questions, methods, and interpretations."[8]

## Conclusion

Evaluation is not a chore accomplished to satisfy foundations and render an account of ways in which a project was delivered or its outcomes achieved. Rather, a fundamental objective is to assist those managing projects, monitoring progress, making mid-course changes in program

[8]Kellogg Foundation, *Evaluation Handbook*, 96.

design, to develop knowledge, skills, and perspectives useful both in an ongoing project and instructive for future endeavors.

For the MVP the focus was project outcome evaluation, which seeks to discover the connection between stated objectives and desired outcomes actually achieved. Questions were developed, enabling self-examination how the project was managed and delivered, lessons learned, and enhanced skills-level to continue engagement in social science research.