

# Who's Driving the Bus? Discovering the Hidden Forces Directing Your Congregation



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A call to strategic planning, visioning, and mission reflection may sound worthwhile and feel energizing at first, but the process often fails to steer a congregation through lasting creative change. How many visioning and planning processes has your board experienced in the last five years or so? How many sheets of flipchart newsprint are lying around, filled with big plans, specific, measurable, and attainable objectives, and bright innovative ideas?

Chances are you have a stash like that somewhere—maybe folded over on the back of a flipchart, perhaps rolled up in a corner cabinet somewhere, or even faithfully transcribed, sent out with the minutes, and stored on your hard drive.

So, as television personality Dr. Phil McGraw would ask, “How’s that working for you?”

Let’s be clear from the outset: we’re not against planning and visioning. In fact, we plan all the time in our ministries. But there are limitations to planning. What we’ve learned is that expecting rational, logical planning processes to drive creative and lasting change is usually expecting too much.

## Why is that so?

The late family systems theorist and leadership expert Edwin Friedman (author of *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* and *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*) observed that, in any human community, rational processes drive only a part of what’s really going on at any given moment. Within congregations we have identified two other drivers that are competing for control of the bus. Operating just behind our daily awareness, emotional and symbolic drivers have destinations of their own. And if we don’t know how and when they are operating, they can drive us badly off purpose, no matter how great our strategic plan is.

Consider a board meeting in a congregation. A recently developed plan for ministry renewal and growth included a recommendation to renovate the historic church sanctuary. The engineering report was complete. The architectural work was done. The financial plan was sound. All three aimed at showing how the space could better serve the congregation’s ministry now and in the future. Many volunteers were invested in the process. For the first time in a long time there was an air of anticipation and optimism. The board members were ready to move ahead—except for one long-standing, influential individual who disagreed. “I don’t care about architects and engineers and feasibility studies,” this individual argued. “I don’t feel that my church home—the place where my grandfather was married and buried—should be turned into a multipurpose theatre aimed at *entertaining* people. And I know there are a number of others—big donors, too—who agree with me. I

can't guarantee they won't pull their donations if this project goes ahead." Suddenly, the board was afraid—afraid of conflict that would spread, afraid of financial collapse, afraid it would be perceived as disrespecting the history of the church, afraid of offending or even hurting people they and others looked up to. As you might expect, regardless of all the planning and studying aimed at proving the viability of the project, the board stepped back from its commitment. Without a worship space that supported the planned ministry direction, everything was scaled back, including the anticipation, the optimism, and the actual ministry results. But boy, did they start with a great plan!

What happened here? Forces were at work that arose from somewhere besides the rational, logical world of research and planning. In this situation (and in others that may come to mind) *emotional* and *symbolic* issues can launch drivers that take over the wheel and steer congregations off purpose.

Emotional and symbolic drivers can be just as influential—maybe more so—than any rational plan or process in your church. Emotional and symbolic drivers can direct, redirect, and cut off the flow of energy among participants. And, as sociologist C. Kirk Hadaway (author of *Behold I Do A New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith*) argues, these nonrational forces can drive us right off purpose into a wilderness of “goal displacement”:

*...a process by which the primary mission of an organization is replaced by operative goals that have little, if anything, to do with the organization's original reason for being. In almost all cases, the new goals involve a focus on group maintenance and member satisfaction—particularly involving the satisfaction of group leaders and core members.*<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say, experiencing goal displacement a few times leaves even the most seasoned and dedicated leader confused, frustrated, and dispirited.

Here is at least part of the reason why all that flipchart paper hasn't yielded the results we expected: other drivers, forces we didn't write down on the newsprint, are taking their turn at the wheel! But how do we, as leaders, identify and address these drivers without getting run over in the process?

Revisiting the example above about the proposal to renovate the historic church sanctuary, what do we observe? The objector made his point on an emotional level, appealing to sentiment around personal history, expressing his anger, and successfully generating fear within the board. The objector also made his point on a symbolic level. He presented himself as the guardian of the church's history and tradition and as the gatekeeper for the deep pockets within the congregation. He may have earned his reputation as the “final word” on ministry direction both by controlling past decisions and by leading the congregation through difficult periods. As a symbol himself, he may hold the affection and trust of many. As the protector of other symbols within the worship space that might have been lost in the renovations, his symbolic role only increases.

In this example, emotional and symbolic drivers each take their turn at the wheel. Together, they are more powerful than all the work others have put into the congregation's “rational” plan.

People operate on rational, emotional, and symbolic levels. It's all a little obvious when we finally get there! In talking about congregational dynamics on all three levels, one colleague appreciated our holistic approach. That reminded us that God has always known that people need to be attentive to life on all three levels. It is not for nothing that, in the *sh'ma* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), God asks for our love on every level—the heart, the soul, and the might (which is re-expressed in Mark 12:29-30, Matthew 22:37, and Luke 10:27 as including “mind and strength”). In this foundational text there is a framework for our congregational work. The seat of our emotional

drivers is our heart. The seat of our symbolic drivers is our soul. The seat of our rational drivers is our mind. Every one of these drivers can be directed toward loving God. So, as individuals and as congregations, what does it mean for us to love God with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our minds? It means putting all our drivers into our individual and congregational discipleship—surrendering them to the transforming love of Jesus Christ. Then we can love God, ourselves, and our neighbor holistically.

But how do we bring these three drivers forward? How do congregations develop self-awareness on rational, emotional, and symbolic levels?

Remembering that emotional and symbolic drivers have tended to run just behind our awareness, they need to be brought forward safely—that is, not during decision making. Leaders can begin to uncover potential emotional and symbolic drivers by working with questions like those offered below.

### **For Emotional Drivers**

1. Does your congregation have “buttons” that, when pushed, trigger irrational responses and behaviors?
2. Within your congregation are there any dysfunctional patterns of emotional behavior of which you are already aware (for example, temper tantrums, emotional pleas for sympathy, the spreading of rumors and misinformation, a tendency to worry about particular people’s feelings, or anger that’s vented in the parking lot instead of in conversations where people directly address one another)?
3. When have those patterns emerged?
4. Have these patterns ever driven decisions that contradicted or defeated any existing rational plan?

### **For Symbolic Drivers**

1. Are there places, things, or people in your church who can’t be disturbed or changed in any way (for instance, a particular sanctuary fixture, a name, a long-standing leader in a women’s group)? Take your symbolic inventory.
2. Are there rituals and activities that simply must happen every year, regardless of whether or not they support planned priorities (such as a community fowl supper, a rummage sale, a certain Christmas ritual on a certain Sunday, or the annual Easter egg hunt at a certain family’s house every year). Create your symbolic calendar.

### **For Rational Drivers**

And finally—and only after you’ve considered the other two processes—get back to considering the rational drivers of your bus:

1. Get a copy of what your congregation has in print to govern its overall planning and direction: mission statements, core values statements, etc. How has this material been used—if at all—in your experience?
2. Are these statements actually helpful in supporting the kinds of outcomes toward which you are now aiming? Can you define the outputs for which the statements are actually aiming? Do your statements adequately account for the “thruput” influences (those of the emotional and symbolic drivers) in your congregation? If not, do they need to be set aside until after the emotional and symbolic drivers are identified more clearly?

Friedman and other systems theorists suggest that emotional processes can enfold, direct, and redirect congregational energy without our awareness, in spite of what we might be saying “on paper.” Hadaway and

other sociologists suggest that symbolic processes can have these same unintended and unconscious effects. Emotional and symbolic drivers are as real in your church as anything that's written on a flipchart. Their reality, however, is just behind everything you are doing all the time. The critical task for the leader who wants to bring about creative and lasting change is to identify, describe, and analyze the impact of the emotional and symbolic drivers. Some may be relatively harmless. Others will hold captive the congregation's imagination and drive it off purpose.

Leaders who understand the full range of rational, emotional, and symbolic drivers influencing people in their church will lead far more effectively, avoiding that terrible cycle of great plans derailed, congregations dispirited, and gospel purpose unfulfilled. Congregations loving God with all their hearts, with all their souls, and with all their minds will need this kind of self-awareness and understanding.

So, this year, after you dust yourselves off from the latest heart-stopping u-turn in ministry, don't start seeking out a new plan that will succeed where others haven't. Instead, take a first step toward understanding the emotional and symbolic drivers that may be at work in your congregation. Begin with the holistic call of loving God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. Take the time to ask: Is there something else driving this bus, just behind our awareness?

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#### **NOTE**

I. C. Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 8.

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