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# CONGREGATIONS

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## Border Crossings

Churches Living Boldly into the Future

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The statement hung in the air and caught my breath: "It seems to me that you might be finding yourself on the border between being *safe* and being *alive*." For just a moment, time stopped. My heart leapt. Safe or alive! That was exactly it! This wise woman, a therapist whose insights I sometimes sought, had just named the physical, emotional, spiritual space I had been living in. Teetering somewhere on what felt like a great divide between comfortably living within the familiar and being alive—filled with new energy and possibility!

As I thought more about it, it became clear to me that we need to be both safe *and* alive. How can you be alive without being safe? Moving off in a new direction usually requires grounding of some sort. How can you be safe without being alive? Even safety requires some degree of creativity and positive tension. And yet as soon as I heard those words, I knew that question was where I found myself—somewhere on the edge between holding onto things because they were familiar (even if they no longer worked) and stepping off into the unknown because I felt it calling me. It has become my question to ask over and over again: Do I want to be safe or alive? It's a question for many of us, and in these days it is also a question for the church.

This is a tumultuous time in the life of our congregations. Change is happening rapidly in our world, and the church is not exempt from the cultural, political, social, and economic whirlwinds that surround us. The technology that brings us closer to one another doesn't teach us how to appreciate the diversity and difference that is suddenly in our midst. We move at a quicker pace, filling every moment with activity, yet wondering at the same time about the lasting value of the choices we make. While the language that many of the X and Y Generations speak rolls easily off their tongues, 40-somethings like me (and folks older) struggle to catch up in conversations that include the latest from bloggers, podcasts, and Blackberries. We own more, we know more, and we are polarized more than ever before. Life isn't simple, choices aren't clear, answers aren't neat. It is a time of great change, an exciting and challenging time, as we move from one era to another.

We live in the movement from modernism to postmodernity (a term we will live with until we can look back and name what has really happened); it is a time of great uncertainty but also a time of great possibility. It seems to be a season in which the church is being asked if all that we hold sacred—our history, our theology, our denominational ties, our way of doing things—is really about safety or new life. Are we taking risks and experiencing joy as we live daringly into the future or are we circling the wagons, holding the fort, protecting ourselves with all that is reassuring, comforting, and safe?

We find ourselves living in a border land, somewhere between what has been and what is yet to be. What we know, while safe, may also be restrictive. What we envision, while enlivening, is also risky. What will we need to take with us for this journey? What are we being asked to leave behind? How do we as congregations cross borders of our own making and journey freely into a new and promised land? These are questions many congregations finding

themselves asking. How do we remain faithful living in the liminal space between safety and life?

Of course, there is no one answer to any of these questions; living into our own answers is part of both the struggle and the freedom of this time! Each congregation has its own history, its own present reality, and its own call into the future. But there are common elements we encounter along the way. Choosing between being safe and being alive is a border crossing that is all about identity. It forces us to examine who we really are, to discover what is essential to our community, and to discern where we are headed—all potentially disarming and invigorating questions for a congregation to consider.

The question "are we safe or alive?" (or in what ways are we both) invites us first to examine ourselves. Who are we as a community of faith? Many congregations with long histories respond to the question of identity with recitations of people, eras, and actions long past. While celebrating a heritage is fine in and of itself, it can sometimes become a cover for what is and isn't happening in the present. Examining ourselves in the present not only gives us the opportunity to feel good about who and what we are today, but it also invites us into honest contemplation about who and what we are not. Such a reality check may leave us with a vision and a desire to be and do more; it may also give us an opportunity to celebrate our ministry just as it is and to honor its effectiveness in our community and the world.

Looking at who we are moves us to identify the essentials. What is most important to our community of faith? The church I serve is a part of the American Baptist Churches, USA. Our congregation includes many persons who have responded to ministerial calls to denominational leadership over the last six to seven decades. Our roots stretch deeply into both our historical Baptist identity and a long tradition of action in, and witness to, social justice. Currently, our denomination, like many others, is being torn apart in the discussion of how to respond to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons in our churches and society. Our particular congregation has a history of being welcoming and affirming of sexual minority persons; our denomination does not. So, while constituents of our denomination wage battles with one another over issues of inclusion, our congregation finds itself on the border between historic principles and alignment and progressive witness and gospel values that welcome everyone! What is safe? What is alive? And more pointedly, what is essential to us as a community of faith? How do we honor both our historic Baptist roots and our widening vision of the reign of God? These are difficult questions for our community as we struggle to find our place in this unfamiliar territory.

Sometimes, in response to the question of what is essential, the answer for congregations is so clear that a compelling action is appropriate. Some churches in our denominational life are choosing to leave because their essential nature now calls them to relate elsewhere. Others, like ours, continue to live in the tension, endeavoring to honor all that we consider precious without compromising any of it. While we remain committed to ABCUSA, a new relationship with the Alliance of Baptists (a welcoming communion) supplements what we experience as lacking in our current denominational experience and helps us envision what it can mean to be alive even in the midst of the struggle. Our answer to the question "who are we and what is essential?" gives us direction as we consider crossing the border to new life.

As we discover who we are and what is essential to us, inevitably we uncover things we want to hold onto and things we need to let go. Knowing which is which can be tricky, however. A congregation begun as a house church that has grown may discover that they really wish they had a larger place in which to meet. The issue of space becomes a question of identity. Are we who we are because we meet in small, localized groups that we must maintain in order to maintain our identity? Or are we who we are because of something other than size—mission, passion, or theology, for example—and therefore our growth is a welcome opportunity to change our format for meeting? Deciding which is more essential will lead to choices about the future: to add more groups or to rent or purchase larger space. Some things will remain while others are let go.

How essential something is to a congregation might be tested in any number of ways. We can ask ourselves "is this life-giving or life-draining?" as we assess a tradition, program, mission, or value. A ministry that was life-giving to a

congregation 40 years ago may in later generations have become something that feels like a burden to fund and staff. Rather than keep a program on "life support," wouldn't we do better to discover ways to celebrate its effectiveness, honor its participants, provide effective and appropriate closure, and cross the border into something new? That which is life-draining will neither nourish a ministry nor encourage new participation. Postmodern believers, like most of us, want to be engaged in meaningful activity; sometimes congregations need to make difficult decisions about letting go before there is room to begin anew.

It is only when we begin to let go that we can undertake the work of starting something new. The invitation to discernment—to intentionally, prayerfully listen for God's call to new life—is an invitation to deepen our sense of calling and to envision what lies ahead. As we reaffirm our identity, as we clarify what is essential, as we begin to let go of what is past, ineffective, or complete, we begin to open ourselves to the transformational power of God's Spirit with an honest desire to discover ourselves named and called again. What is God inviting us to do and be in this new time and for the days to come? What is God's desire for our congregation, for our community, for the world of which we are a part? What is the new thing at work in and among us? These are the questions that invite us into the place of God's desire—God's desire for our ministry and for our spirits as we live, change, and grow.

For many congregations, this is an exciting and frightening border on which to stand! Like the Israelites in Egypt, we discover that in the face of the uncertain, what we already know can be a sad relief! Daring to imagine the possibilities of God's desire for us will lead us on a wild and amazing journey. Will we insist on remaining safe or dare to be alive? How we listen and respond to God's invitation could mark our rebirth or our death.

For better or worse, moving into the future will become a life-or-death issue for many congregations. We face the delicate balancing act of holding onto the best parts of our tradition while seeking distance from those things that prevent us from being a relevant and transformative voice in our culture today. We will need both to have integrity. Some opportunities to cross borders come upon us without our choosing: people leave and people arrive that we didn't expect, a building outlives its usefulness, leadership ages, denominations take unexpected turns. Other changes we bring upon ourselves: beginning a new outreach, creating a new alliance, embracing new believers, charting a new direction. In all these circumstances we must seek ways to be vital and effective in order to thrive. Congregations who choose to remain strictly in familiar territory will find their effectiveness, energy, and attraction diminishing. They may be safe for the time being, but they will not be alive for much longer.

An urban church I know has crossed the border of a self-made comfort zone to respond to God's invitation to do something new. For years their traditional building and worship have stood amid a changing neighborhood where white flight has provided an influx of people of a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. In spite of their new neighbors, this church did nothing different and wondered why others didn't come to their safe space. But after examining who they believed themselves to be and what was essential to their life and ministry, they entered a season of intentional discernment to listen for God's new direction and voice. Before long they were clearly convinced that they should add two staff persons to their church: a Spanish-speaking pastor and a female African American pastor. They didn't have the money to add staff, but they had a vision so compelling that they could not hold back. They dared to cross the borders of limited vision, of staying safe within their walls, of financial constraints, of uncertain results. They hired a part-time Spanish-speaking pastor, asked surrounding congregations for financial support, and they are doing ministry in their neighborhood that was never possible before. They chose to be alive with the passion and energy of Christ! They chose to trespass on the boundaries they themselves had set. They chose to dare to live into a vision they are certain is a gift of the Spirit. It is without a doubt the most risk-taking and energizing thing that's happened in that congregation's life. There is little doubt that in a matter of years, had they not been able to look to the future, this congregation would have died. They risked their safety for new life. They held onto what was essential and allowed God to lead them into a responsive, engaging vision for the future.

Many of us find ourselves and our churches standing on the border between being safe and being alive. This is an exciting and risk-filled moment! Perhaps like no other time in our history, churches must be willing to envision a future radically different from their past, engaging a society in the midst of change with a message of love and grace

that is timeless. This is a time that calls for new vision and new insight. It demands that we know who we are and what is essential to our communities, and it challenges us to discern anew the Spirit's invitation to us as participants in the emerging reign of God: what is our call, our role, our opportunity to bring forth something new?

Clearly, there is no one right way to cross this border into the future, to move between safe and alive. It's a free-form dance that invites us to move our feet even without knowing all the steps. In some instances, the choice and direction will be very clear; in others there will be an ongoing struggle to discern as we faithfully watch the horizon and move ahead. One thing is certain: in order to be alive we must be willing to change. What shape that change takes will vary according to our particular call and need, and indeed, it may take several shifts before we hit our new stride, find our new form. But what an exciting journey this can be! Claiming what is best about ourselves and envisioning what is possible with God's Spirit, we are invited to cross the border into the future. Will your congregation be safe or alive? That's the ultimate question for all of us.

### Questions for Reflection

- How would you describe your congregation—as "safe" or "alive"? Why did you choose the adjective you did?
- If you were to ask your congregation to describe themselves, what would they say? Can you form a single sentence that captures the heart and ministry of your congregation?
- What values, traditions, theological beliefs, and ways of doing things would be considered essential by your congregation? Are these life-giving or life-draining?
- Looking to the future, what do you anticipate will be the greatest challenge to your congregation? To the community that it serves? What steps can you take toward discerning God's invitation to meet these challenges?

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[Back to Top](#)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

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