

Editorial: Ask yourself, ‘How thick is my church?’

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Is your church thick or thin?



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This question has nothing to do with carbs or calories, paleo diets or splurging on double-chocolate fudge cake, or the average weight of your deacon “body.” It has everything to do with how well your church spiritually forms your members and creates a unified identity as the Body of Christ.

The basic idea is not mine. I picked it up from [David Brooks](#), the gifted [New York Times](#) columnist, who wrote a splendid piece titled [“How to leave a mark on people.”](#)

Brooks’ inspiration is a summer camp that still draws people together and provides a vital component of their shared identity, even three decades later. His reference point is the death of a fellow summer staffer at the camp, and particularly how the camp’s alumni continue to bond and support each other in time of need.

“Some organizations are thick, and some are thin,” Brooks explains. “Some leave a mark on you, and some you pass through with scarcely a memory. ... A thick institution becomes part of a person’s identity and engages the

whole person—head, hands, heart and soul.”

Thickening ingredients

“What makes an institution thick? If you were setting out consciously to create a thick institution, what features would it include?” he asks, and commits the balance of his column to providing an answer. Among other characteristics, thick institutions:

- Exist in a physical location “where members meet face-to-face on a regular basis.”
- Possess collective rituals and shared tasks.
- Occasionally offer overnight encounters, so “everybody can see each other’s real self.”
- Often “tell and retell a sacred origin story about themselves.”
- Incorporate music into their life together, “because it is hard not to become bonded with someone you have sung and danced with.”
- Have a common ideal.
- Share “an idiosyncratic local culture.”
- Follow “a different moral ecology” that frames issues in terms of virtue and vice and leverages “people’s desire to do good and arouse their higher longings.”

Blessed, or not?

If these traits describe your church, you are blessed. They should describe every congregation, but, unfortunately, that’s not always the case.

Congregations typically exist in a defined physical location, follow some

shared rituals and incorporate music in their worship. Even then, some fail to infuse ritual and music with meaning. Either they deny ritual, because they think it's "too Catholic," or they fail to talk about why they do what they do and about how it connects them to Jesus and to each other. And sometimes, rather than allow music to bond them, they fight over what they like and don't like and enable it to divide them.

The other "thick" factors require thought and intention, as well as a church culture that recognizes and treasures them. Some congregations go through the motions of implementing a church program and fail to appreciate all the factors that make them unique and that thicken their relationships with each other and their identity with the church.

Other congregations may think they possess those characteristics, but they're microwaved—quickly forced onto the church because they appeared in the latest book the pastor or other influential member read. If the traits that could make a church thick aren't natural and organic to the congregation, they're faux-thick. They'll thin out as soon as the leader's attention turns to the next hot marketing, management or church-growth scheme.

Let's also acknowledge a caveat: Some thick organizations—churches included—are not healthy. The variables that thicken a church can be manipulated and may be toxic. Cults, for example, are extremely thick. And some churches appear thick, but ties that bind are all about them, or all about their current leader, and not about Jesus. Quicksand is thick, but it'll kill you.

Go vertical

This brings us to Brooks' summary statement, which considers all the thickening qualities and explains the difference they make: "Thin institutions tend to see themselves horizontally. People are members for

mutual benefit. Thick organizations often see themselves on a vertical axis. People are members so they can collectively serve the same higher good.”

That vertical axis, a friend who read Brooks’ column noted, is transcendent. It points beyond the church or organization itself to something more noble, more important. In the case of congregations, all the elements that create healthy church thickness combine in transcendence. They point to God.

What a compelling thought for early Eastertide. As we are involved in our churches, whether as laity or clergy, let us focus on the Cross and the glad tidings of the Resurrection. Let us remember church is not about us, but about those for whom Jesus died. Let us invest ourselves in Jesus’ mission, and our churches will be thick.

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