
Everyday Empire

Doing a congregational empire audit

by Nanette McKay and Scott Douglas

Okay, so you've been following along with the theme of "Challenging Empire: A Call to Community." Maybe you're still not quite sure exactly what empire is, except that from the church's perspective it's the "big bad." Or maybe you've learned a lot about that huge, nebulous conglomeration of dominating forces that we're naming "empire"—its global effect on the poor, its disregard for the environment, its use of military and economic force to maintain its power base, and so forth. But it's all still kind of *out there*, isn't it? What does the complex interaction of institutions and organizations like the World Bank, first world governments, and multinational corporations have to do with you and your worshipping community?

A congregation is the basic unit of Christian belief, teaching, and practice. This is where Christianity lives and, at its root, Christianity is a resistance to empire forces. So it's time to take a closer look at how your Christian community fares in the midst of empire. Pick up your magnifying glass, bring some people together, and examine your congregation.

Have you ever noticed that it's sometimes hard to see what is right before your eyes? Some things are so commonplace that they slip into the background and become almost invisible. This exercise is about *noticing* things in and around your congregation—objects, activities, patterns of interaction—and then asking yourself, "Does this thing benefit the empire?"

You may feel some resistance in yourself and your congregation to this exercise, as though, by participating, there is a risk you will discover yourself blamed for the entire global system of domination and exploitation.

This exercise is not intended to make you feel guilty. Rather, we hope you will notice in this process that some elements in your everyday congregational life seem to support empire, and other elements seem to resist it. You may even find some elements that could go either way, depending on how you understand them. Then you'll have the interesting question of what to do with what you discover. But, the first step is *noticing*.

Here's a process for noticing empire in your congregation.

1. Review the list of "focusing questions" (page 26). Pick one to start. The questions ask you to look at an element (whether it's an object like the pulpit or

the carpet, an activity like the coffee hour, or a pattern of interaction like the power structure of the church

board) **as if it were a symbol or a clue pointing to your congregation's relationship to empire.**

2. Once you've focused on a thing, activity, or pattern, try to decide, overall, whether it represents your support or resistance of empire (see "How Does My Congregation Support Empire?"). Then repeat the process with another question, and another.
3. Got the idea? Now start looking around to see what other signs and symbols of support and resistance you can find.

By the end of this exercise, you may want to start chucking out everything that looks like empire! Enthusiasm is an important sign of hope, but treat it gently. Throwing away the war memorial doesn't change history; it only creates rifts. And putting the pews in a circle doesn't automatically change people's notions of authority. The *noticing* is about seeing the signs of empire. The work of resisting empire must lead from a deepening understanding and a community conviction.

As a next step in your congregational empire audit, write down all your symbols of support and symbols of resistance in a force field diagram (see example page 26). Depending on how much each aspect of your church seems to support or resist empire, give it a large or a small arrow. This will help to create a picture of where your congregation stands in relation to empire when you add everything together. Then the question becomes: What do you do about it now?

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How Does My Congregation Support Empire?

Assuming that your congregation doesn't possess a 10-foot-tall placard reading, "We support empire!" (it doesn't, right?), what are some of the less obvious ways that a congregation might support empire? Once you identify these, you can move to identifying opposing practices that resist empire.

Financially/materially—The empire needs our buy in. We have to work, we have to spend, and we may be doing all this within a framework that directs resources into the hands of a wealthy few. Your congregation may support empire by spending or investing its money in ways that benefit large multinational corporations rather than local producers. But it may resist empire by being part of alternative economies (e.g., fair trade, buying locally, or bartering).

Politically—The empire needs control. We have power, which we use or lose. Political power is the power of the people. It may be invested in one person (a monarch or a dictator), or it may be spread more widely. Military power is the clout behind political power. Your congregation may support empire politically by remaining silent when government policies benefit the powerful at the expense of the weak. But it may resist empire by encouraging critical thinking and debate and advocating for the rights of the politically marginalized.

Culturally—The empire needs our engagement, either active or passive. Culture is the fibre of our society—what we watch, what we wear, what we talk about, the language we use, and the things we find beautiful. Culture can reinforce values like materialism, the justification of violence, and blindness to injustice. It can also encourage generosity, forgiveness, and hope. Your congregation may support empire by affirming and normalizing the values of domination and hierarchical power through sermon, story, and hymn. Mimicking the shape of empire by structuring your church board like a business or thinking of worship like a consumer service can be a kind of support

for it. Conversely, your congregation may resist empire by telling different stories and engaging different structures.

Because empire is so pervasive, it's really easy to support. Much of the world is set up for the benefit of empire. Not doing anything—"just going along" and uncritically accepting the benefits and abuses doled out by empire—defaults into a kind of unconscious support for the status quo. Resistance, on the other hand, is a bit harder. In order to resist empire, you need to be conscious and determined. It can be an uncomfortable discussion, and there are no easy answers.

Suppose I asked, "What words do you use to talk about God?" Maybe you'll bring up the example of the word "king" used in a couple of the hymns you sang on Sunday morning. Does the reference to God as "king" support or resist empire? Does it support empire by normalizing, and even making holy, the idea of hierarchical power? Or does it resist empire by delegitimizing so-called world leaders, claiming that the only true authority—and the only power we owe allegiance to—is God? What the speaker intends and what is heard may be different.

What happens during your congregation's coffee time following worship? Where does the coffee come from? Who grew the coffee beans and who gets most of the profits? What do you serve it in? What is the environmental impact? Who does most of the serving and cleaning up? What are the patterns of interaction? All of these questions will point you toward specific aspects of your congregational life. Then you can ask, "What is the relationship here to empire? Is it support or is it resistance?"

You will likely run into differences of opinion in trying to gauge empire. For example, you may say hanging a flag in the sanctuary is a sign that politics have invaded the holy. Someone else may say that we resist empire when we hold our nation before us as a responsibility. These discussions aren't easy, but they're worth having.

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Focusing Questions

Here are some questions to get you started noticing empire. Let these questions help you focus on a specific aspect of your congregational life and then ask, “Does this support empire or resist it?” But please create your own questions too. What needs examining close up in your congregation? Once you’ve got the idea, you should be able to critically examine anything, from your hymn book to your church supper.

- Where does your congregation get its money? What does it do with its money? Does it borrow, invest, hold assets, pay taxes?
- Does your congregation ever distribute food or drink? For sale or for free? Where does the food or drink come from?
- What are the most valuable things (aside from the building) that your congregation holds?
- Is the church locked when not in use?
- Does your congregation pay for services: worship leaders, musicians, office staff, building staff?
- How is your sanctuary laid out? How is seating arranged? In what direction do people look? Where is the worship leader in relation to the rest of the congregation?
- What symbols or images can be found in your worship space? What do they represent? If there are people depicted in the art, what kinds of people?
- Do worshippers mix or always sit in the same place?
- Who speaks for the congregation?
- What’s on the floor (carpet, wood, locally crafted rugs)?
- How does your church board work? Where does the power cluster?
- Is your congregation “influential”? With whom? How is this influence used?
- Where is your church building located? Who are your neighbours? How much real estate does it take up?
- What message is communicated by your external architecture?
- What products does your congregation buy regularly? Where are they bought?
- What environmental impact does your congregation have (think energy/fuel, cleaning products, disposables)?
- What kind of people are part of your congregation? Are they ethnically diverse or homogenous? How do people dress on a Sunday morning?

Force Field Diagram

