

ARE YOU LEADING A ZOMBIE CONGREGATION?

Take this ten-item quiz to discover whether your faith community is *undead*

(for members of the leadership/governing board)

By Ken Howard

Zombies are becoming more popular these days. Gone are the old-time Zombie movies with their slack-jawed, shuffling Zombies. Nowadays the Undead are appearing in Zombie action movies, Zombie romantic comedies, and Zombie Bollywood flicks.

Zombies have even made their way into business literature. Companies and non-profit organizations that are operating but not growing have come to be called Zombies, because they are in a state of limbo – not dead, yet not exactly alive either – and because they maintain their undead existence by draining resources away from healthy organizations.

So what about Zombie congregations? Could there be faith communities in which the individual members were alive, but the congregation as a whole was undead, having lost both the desire and the capacity to grow? It's not just possible but true. By the standard just articulated, a significant portion of our faith communities (perhaps even a plurality) could be classified as Zombies. In fact, faith communities may be more at risk of becoming Zombies than other kinds of organizations, because they can blind themselves to their condition by convincing themselves that their lack of change and adaptation to new contexts is due to the strength of their traditions. And they can often maintain their undead existence for decades by consuming their own endowments and/or denominational resources that might otherwise go to healthier congregations.

Are you leading a Zombie congregation? Take this ten-question quiz and find out...

1. **Your typical congregant thinks the purpose of your faith community is to minister to the congregation.**
 - a. **True.** Our typical member thinks the purpose of the faith community is to minister to them.
 - b. **Uncertain.** I have no idea how our average member thinks about the purpose of our faith community.
 - c. **False.** Most of our members believe that our faith community exists not only to minister to them, but to the community and the world around us.
2. **Your faith community's growth rate is lower than that of the zip code in which it is located.**
 - a. **True.** The community in which we are located is growing faster than our congregation.
 - b. **Uncertain.** I do not know the growth rate of my congregation or the community.
 - c. **False.** Our congregation is growing faster than the surrounding community.
3. **Your faith community's social-cultural-demographic makeup roughly reflects that of the zip code in which it is located.**
 - a. **True.** The makeup of our congregation is similar to the makeup of the neighborhood.
 - b. **Uncertain.** I don't know how to answer this question.
 - c. **False.** Our congregation is less diverse than the surrounding community.
4. **The makeup of your faith community's zip code is changing and your congregation is growing.**
 - a. **True.** Our neighborhood is in flux and our numbers are growing.
 - b. **Uncertain.** I'm not at all sure how the two compare.
 - c. **False.** Our neighborhood is changing and numbers are declining as long-time members leave (or die).
5. **Your faith community has an endowment.**
 - a. **True.** Our congregation has an unrestricted endowment.
 - b. **True.** Our congregation has a restricted endowment.
 - c. **False.** Our congregation has no endowment.
6. **The leadership board has done a demographic study of the faith community's zip code in the last five years.**
 - a. **True.** Our board has conducted a demographic study and verified it "on foot."
 - b. **True.** Our board has conducted a demographic study but has not verified it.
 - c. **False.** Our board has not conducted a demographic study.
7. **The leadership board has asked itself why your faith community exists at least once in the last three years.**
 - a. **True.** Yup. I've heard that asked...answered, too.
 - b. **Uncertain.** I don't really know.
 - c. **False.** I don't think so. Why would they do that?
8. **The leadership board has asked why a ministry or program exists at least once in the last year.**
 - a. **True.** Indeed, the Vestry regularly asks that question.
 - b. **Uncertain.** I don't recall. Maybe it was at one of the Vestry meetings I missed.
 - c. **False.** Wow! That would be awkward. I think not.
9. **The leadership board has purposefully allowed at least one program or ministry to end and reported to the congregation what they have learned from the experience within the last three years.**
 - a. **True.** Yes. I remember when they "retired" the [insert name here] committee.
 - b. **Uncertain.** I couldn't tell you.
 - c. **False.** Not on my watch!
10. **The average active participant in the congregation can describe in one or two sentences the congregation's vision/mission.**
 - a. **True.** Yes. I hear it every Sunday.
 - b. **Uncertain.** I'm not sure.
 - c. **False.** Nope. Don't think I've ever heard it spoken. What was that slogan?

SCORING GUIDE

1. Your typical congregant thinks the purpose of your faith community is to minister to the congregation. True = 0
Uncertain = 1
False = 2

Explanation

- **Vital congregations believe the purpose their faith community exists is not just to serve those inside the building but also their neighborhoods.** As a result, they tend to focus on nurturing and challenging their congregations and their neighborhoods.
- **Undeared congregations put insufficient effort into developing neighborhood presence, connection, and openness.** As a result, they tend to focus primarily on nurturing their congregations.

2. Your faith community's growth rate is lower than that of the zip code in which it is located. True = 0
Uncertain = 1
False = 2

Explanation

- **Vital congregations work to develop a significant neighborhood presence and connection.** As a result, they naturally tend to expand (and contract) along with their neighborhoods.
- **Undeared congregations put insufficient effort into developing neighborhood presence and connection.** As a result, their growth rates tend to be less than that of their neighborhoods.

3. Your congregation's social-cultural-demographic makeup bears a roughly positive relationship to that of the zip code in which it is located. True = 2
Uncertain = 1
False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital congregations work to establish and maintain organic connections and relationships with all the various social-cultural-demographic groups that make up their neighborhoods.** As a result, their diversity bears a relationship to that of their neighborhoods.
- **Undeared congregations put insufficient effort into connecting and relating with the various groups that make up their neighborhoods.** As a result, remain less diverse than their neighborhoods.

4. The makeup of your faith community's zip code is changing and your congregation is growing. True = 2
Uncertain = 1
False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital congregations work to establish and maintain connections and relationships with the social-cultural-demographic groups that make up their neighborhoods.** As a result, they tend to grow as the demographic makeup of their neighborhoods shift.
- **Undeared congregations put insufficient effort into connections and relationships with groups that make up their neighborhoods.** As a result, they tend to stagnate or shrink as the demographic makeup of their neighborhoods shift.

5. Your faith community has an endowment. Unrestricted Endowment = 0
Restricted Endowment = 1
No Endowment = 2

Explanation

- **Vital congregations tend to rely on income rather than endowed wealth to fund ministries and their structural maintenance. If they have endowments, they restrict themselves to using them only for capital expenses that will grow the congregation or benefit their neighborhoods.** Personal investment leads to personal engagement in and responsibility for the wellbeing of the parish. Greater engagement and responsibility lead to greater vitality.
- **Undeared congregations rely substantially on endowed wealth to fund ministries and structures, and tend to have unrestricted endowments, which makes this easier to do.** Lower levels of personal investment, lead to lower levels of personal engagement and responsibility which lead to congregational decline.

6. The leadership board has done a demographic study of the faith community's zip code in the last five years. Verified demographic study = 2
Unverified demographic study = 1
No study = 0

Explanation

- **Vital congregations regularly study the social-cultural-demographic make-up of their neighborhoods.** This allows them to better tailor their ministries and programs to the needs of their neighborhoods. Really vital parishes really get outside the building to verify their assumptions and programmatic conclusions about the results.
- **Undeared congregations rely on unverified assumptions and stereotypes about their neighborhoods.** Because of this, the programs they offer their neighborhoods, if any, tend to be poorly conceived and poorly received.

7. The leadership board has asked why your congregation exists at least once in the last three years. True = 2
Uncertain = 1
False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital congregations regularly get beneath WHAT they do (ministries/programs) and HOW they do it (organizational structure/processes), and ask WHY they exist (their calling or purpose).** This encourages them to listen to what God's Spirit is calling them to do, allows them to be more creative, enables them to take appropriate risks on behalf of the Gospel.
- **Undeared congregations, by definition, are faith communities that don't know why they exist but pretend to be alive.**

8. The leadership board has asked why a ministry or program exists at least once in the last year. True = 2
Uncertain = 1
False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital congregations regularly assess the vitality of their ministries and programs.** This allows them to take prayerful and thoughtful action to improve them or to end them if they are no longer serving a purpose.
- **Undead congregations have undead programs.**

9. The Vestry (or Board) has purposefully allowed at least one program or ministry to end and reported to the congregation what they have learned from the experience within the last three years. True = 2
Uncertain = 1
False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital congregations regard failure as something to learn from rather than something to sweep under the rug.** Faith communities with a theology that accepts failure and death as a natural part of life can harness the power of resurrection to learn, adapt, grow, and experience rebirth.
- **Undead congregations have undead programs.** Faith communities with a theology that cannot accept failure and death as a natural part of life are unable to harness the power of resurrection to learn, adapt, grow, and experience rebirth.

10. The average active participant in the congregation can describe in one or two sentences the congregation's vision/mission. True = 2
Uncertain = 1
False = 0

Explanation

- **Vital congregations regularly communicate their vision and mission in a way that it can be clearly and easily grasped by all engaged in the life of the congregation, and that they can explain it to others.** A faith community's vision/mission is the DNA that both forms the congregation and allows it to adapt itself to its changing environment. As Albert Einstein once said, "If you cannot explain it to a six-year old, you do not understand it yourself."
- **The membership of undead congregations has little sense of the faith community's vision/mission, if one indeed exists at all in any meaningful way).** They don't understand it themselves, they can't explain it to others, and so they just keep on shuffling forward, sapping the life force of all around them.

Add Up Your Points

Write Them Here

Interpreting Your Score

- 16 to 20: Congratulations!**
Your congregation is alive and well.
How will you work to keep it that way?
- 11 to 15: Warning!**
Your congregation may be at risk.
What can you do to build up their resistance?
- 0 to 10: Condolences...**
Your congregation is undead.
*What will you do to bring it back to life?
(Or is a funeral in order?)*

OMG! I'm leading a Zombie congregation. Now what do I do?

Okay. You've taken the quiz and found out you're leading a Zombie congregation or a congregation that's at risk for becoming Undead. What do you do now?

Neither condition is easy to deal with. But stretching our Zombie metaphor just a little further, clearly a faith community that is at risk for going Zombie would be a lot easier to deal with than one that has already become Undead. After all, a faith community that is "merely" at risk still has a mind capable of critical thought. But by "definition," a faith community that has actually gone Zombie no longer has a functioning mind and has therefore lost the capacity for independent thought and with that the capacity for self-critical reflection.

If your faith community is merely at risk of becoming infected with Undeadness, you may be able to engage the congregation's critical faculties by having the members of your leadership board take the same quiz you just did, then engaging them in a discussion of what they make of their scores. While the quiz is admittedly somewhat tongue-in-cheek, engaging your leadership playfully on issues such as these may gain a lot more traction than a more somber approach. After all, while it may really piss you off first, knowing the truth will ultimately make you free (John 8:32).

Dealing a faith community that has already joined the ranks of the Undead is an infinitely greater challenge. Just as Hollywood Zombies do pretty good jobs of emulating many activities of the living, a Zombie faith community can also do a more than halfway-decent job of imitating healthy congregational life: often good enough to lure in the occasional non-member, and generally good enough to convince its own leadership and membership that a healthy, friendly, welcoming congregation. They may have even convinced themselves that they want to grow (but just can't seem to figure out why they don't). More often, however, they may be found employing rationalizations like, "Growing in number is not the only kind of growth: growing in depth is valid, too." Not that there's anything wrong with growing deeper. For Christians, it's just that actually deepening one's relationship with Christ usually translates into a deeper encounter with Christ's transforming love, which is usually marked by a natural desire to share that love with others.

When a faith community becomes so thoroughly convinced by its own rationalizations that it no longer retains the capacity for self-criticism, the only recourse may be the proverbial "bullet to the head." Once in a while, a Zombie faith community, as it grows closer to actual death, may benefit from the salutary effect of staring death in the face. Occasionally, this insight, combined with new leadership at the helm, may be capable of beginning the long road back to health. I've seen it happen, but it is rare. Unfortunately, many Zombie faith communities would rather die than change. And if this is the case, the only options left are either: (a) let it "live" until it depletes the last of its own (a perhaps other's) resources of time, talent, and treasure, or (b) put it out of its misery now while sufficient resources remain to start a new faith community or invest in the living in some other way.

Daunting, right? Yet I can offer two rays of hope: Question #7 and a lot of prayer. If you can help your faith community remember WHY it exists – its reason for being – its first love – the Truth that can make it free – there may be a chance to come back from the brink. And prayer because, as Jesus said, "This kind can come out only through prayer" (Mark 9:29).

Author's Note

I wrote it with tongue firmly in cheek, striving mightily to emulate the elegant *Cosmo Quiz* style. My intent was to use humor in a healthily subversive way, to slip a serious issue past the defenses we faith leaders always seem to have in great quantity. I freely admit that this issue is more complex than a 10-question quiz could ever hope to explicate. I'm mean, it would take another 20 questions just to address the role dioceses and other adjudicatories play in the creation, care, and feeding of Zombie faith communities, for heaven's sake. Still, if I have given you even a little something to think about, I will be content. Even in small doses, critical thinking prevents Zombie brains.