

# Shadow Sides of Churches/Congregations

Based on: Parker Palmer, chapter 5 of, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

## 1. Insecurity about identity and worth

*Manifestation:* encourages people to make the church their lives; not a lot of understanding when people say, “No,” to a volunteer job in the church. Do lots of community service to show they are worthy of being a church and being a community of Christians. Creates lots of classes/programs/ministries to address issues and create an identity in the community as a church that does stuff and has stuff for people. May also do lots of thinking/processing as an organization – at least the staff and/or executive team of the Church Council – so as to “evaluate” their identity and worth.

From here, could move into functional atheism – thinking that they have to do everything if it’s going to be done well. Thinking they need to do everything can give them a temporary sense of identity and worth – they are “needed”.

## 2. Belief that the universe is a battleground

*Manifestation:* congregation sees life as a competition for souls, for a greener world, for the most educated pastor and staff, for the most Bible studies in town, for whatever it is they are “fighting” for. If we don’t compete with other churches for young people, we’ll lose out and someone else will get them.

From here, a congregation could move into a denial of death. They could actually take on the radical thought that they will be a martyr – an example – if need be, to prove they are winners and right in the battle. A congregation can also move into a denial of failure. They just keep fighting the battle with more and more intensity because they don’t want to admit they have lost the battle.

## 3. Functional atheism – holds belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us

*Manifestation:* Many in the church feel burdened. There is a feeling of being overworked and yet, “There’s no one else who can do it.” “If I don’t do it, who will?” The congregation may have this attitude toward community worship services and other community functions in which they participate, (“The community Thanksgiving service won’t happen this year if we don’t offer to host it.”). Perfectionist.

From here, a congregation can become depressed as a community – feel there is no hope for the future. They can also move into a fear of the natural chaos of life – “There’s too much out there. We can’t do it all! We have tried and we can’t!”

## 4. Fear of the natural chaos of life

*Manifestation:* overly organizes and structures everything. Very little spontaneity. Have meetings to plan meetings. Executive committee/staff meets often. Creates lots of short-term classes/programs/ministries to address issues – do things that have a clear beginning and end. Like to have a sense of accomplishment.

From here, a congregation can move into insecurity about identity and worth if they feel that life is so out of control they don’t know which way is up and what is coming next.

## 5. Denial of death and denial of failure

*Manifestation:* continues to allow a Sunday school teacher or youth volunteer to work, even though the person does not relate well to young people. Lack of willingness to try new things, or to allow anyone in the church or on the staff to try new things. Or, if they allow people to try new things, the congregation finds ways to subconsciously abort the new thing right before it starts – in doing this, the project can’t fail because it never began!

From here, a congregation can move into the “life is a battle” mode if they begin to think that they are going to lose something that they don’t want to lose (ex: their building, their youth ministry, their sr. pastor)

## **How to operate in ministries with young people within the shadow sides**

### **Insecurity about identity and worth –**

- Live and Model healthy work-life balance and let volunteers and staff know
  - Let people know your basic schedule so you can show you’re getting the work done
  - Don’t constantly overwork
  - Care for self
- Don’t have meetings for meeting’s sake.
- Don’t take on the urgency of others just because they think you should.
- Be clear about your own personal passions, identity and call so you don’t lose them in any uncertainty the congregation may be experiencing.
- Realize people may try to drag you down or slow you down when they see you are clear on your mission. Don’t allow people to derail you. Be polite, firm; love them where they are – don’t pick fights.

### **Belief that the universe is a battleground –**

- Try not to get defensive immediately when someone confronts you.
- Respond from a grounded, calm place within yourself

### **Functional atheism –**

- Don’t promise things you can’t deliver – it could drive them deeper into their shadow

If we are willing to go deep, we can learn and experience that God is with us and the community of faith is around us – we don’t have to do it all ourselves or go it alone.

### **Fear of the natural chaos of life –**

- Give them program plans, calendar and study topics for a semester, ½ year or even full year.
- Do not create programs, lessons, studies, mission experiences out of fear
- Do not respond to the fears of others – allow yourself some time to think and pray before responding. Most situations – if not life-threatening – can wait.

### **Denial of death and denial of failure**

- Don’t begin new programs out in left field – or what seems like left field to authority figures
- If something has been approved and you think it’s of God, don’t allow it to be derailed – show them the process, even map it out for them if necessary
- Build a vision for/with them about how and why a certain program is dead and why it should be dead; also giving clear vision of what can now be born (discernment process). May need to talk with individual staff/council members and then the whole.

Don’t feed the shadows of congregations! Don’t do and say things that drive the authorities deeper into the shadows. This behavior by them will more than likely tighten the reins on your ministry.

Each of us has a shadow side also. Knowing our own shadows and how they bump into those of the senior pastor, significant others, congregation etc. can help us be more effective leaders and create fewer surprises in our work – fewer bumps!

[http://www.inter-actions.biz/blog/2007/10/the\\_shadow\\_side\\_of\\_organisatio.html](http://www.inter-actions.biz/blog/2007/10/the_shadow_side_of_organisatio.html)

<http://www.johnniemoore.com/blog/archives/001847.php>

<http://nakedsamadhi.blogspot.com/2007/09/unruly-organization.html>