

9-2008

# Leading in the Midst of Change: A Theologically Grounded, Theoretically Informed Hermeneutic of Change

Terri L. Elton

Luther Seminary, [telton@luthersem.edu](mailto:telton@luthersem.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty\\_articles](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles)



Part of the [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Elton, Terri L., "Leading in the Midst of Change: A Theologically Grounded, Theoretically Informed Hermeneutic of Change" (2008). *Faculty Publications*. 207.

[http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty\\_articles/207](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/207)

## Published Citation

Elton, Terri Martinson. "Leading in the Midst of Change: A Theologically Grounded, Theoretically Informed Hermeneutic of Change." *Journal of Religious Leadership* 7, no. 2 (September 2008): 13–38.

---

**LEADING IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE:  
A THEOLOGICALLY GROUNDED, THEORETICALLY  
INFORMED HERMENEUTIC OF CHANGE**  
TERRI MARTINSON ELTON

**Abstract:** This essay proposes a hermeneutic of change, grounded in theology and theory, which can inform church leaders' strategic actions in the midst of change. Drawing from the work of practical theology, it looks at four vantage points proposed by Don Browning: *descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic*. The descriptive view offers two insights: God is active and present in the midst of change and God's people are simultaneously saints and sinners. The historical perspective points out that God has always been in the midst of change, but God's love and promises for the world have not changed. Systematic theology fuses the descriptive and the historical in a thoughtfully crafted argument that seeks to be true across time and place. Finally, strategic theology offers leaders the tools to use languages, relationships, and practices in managing change.

### **Introduction**

Each September several students, having returned from internship, end up in my office frustrated. Their frustration has a common theme. These students, appreciative of their learning in systematic theology, church history, and Bible, know there's something missing in their theological education. The articulate ones identify the source as a gap between knowing theology and leading God's people in these changing times. As a teacher, I enjoy these teachable moments and engaging students as they reflect on the contemporary

*Terri Martinson Elton directs the Center for Children, Youth and Family Ministry, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

challenges of ministry, but, as a seminary leader, I find this reality disturbing.

This annual ritual launched me into exploring the views congregational leaders, clergy and lay, have on leading in the midst of change. What I discovered is that while most leaders report they are required to lead in the midst of change, few feel equipped or have done the work of crafting their own hermeneutic of change. The concept itself even seemed to be a novel idea.

Having led faith communities in the midst of change for almost two decades, I empathize with church leaders. My experience with leading in the midst of change is that it is complex and multi-faceted, often raising more questions than answers. Congregations are complicated and exist within a dynamic, ever-changing world. How does one lead in the midst of such realities? And while concrete actions do need to accompany the change process, how does one get to the origin of what is taking place? These, and other questions, stirred and haunted me.

Several years ago, when first preparing to teach a course on leading change within congregations, I discovered several things. First, the resources on leading congregations in the midst of change are limited, and often simplistic. Second, the default approach of church leaders, both those asking the questions and those offering answers, is often pragmatic in nature, mostly presenting change in a negative light. And third, there are an abundance of theoretical resources on change, emerging from various disciplines,<sup>1</sup> yet finding one's way through these resources can be overwhelming.

Believing that church leaders need to address change with their primary and secondary disciplines in hand, I have been about the work of developing a way forward. This essay is one way, proposing a hermeneutic of change, grounded in theology and informed by theory, which might inform one's strategic actions. Any

---

<sup>1</sup> Change theories have emerged out of arenas such as social science, business, organization leadership, and communication, to name a few.

hermeneutic is living and dynamic, challenged and refined over time. A hermeneutic of change is no exception. Since most leaders are leading in the midst of change while cultivating their own change hermeneutic, working on this process may feel like building a plane while flying it. While this process may feel schizophrenic, leaders today have few options, for without thoughtful, reflective thinking regarding change, leaders of faith communities are often blind to the reality in front of them. So, let this essay serve as an example of one hermeneutic for leading in the midst of change, as it also challenges leaders to do the hard work of developing their own hermeneutic of change and offers a framework for the work ahead.

### Four Vantage Points

There is a folk tale from India about six blind men that encountered an elephant. The first approached the elephant's side and said that an elephant is like a wall, broad and immobile. The second, having felt the tusk, said the elephant was sharp, round, and smooth. The third felt the squirmy trunk and said an elephant was like a snake. The fourth approached the knee and described an elephant as sturdy and tall like a tree. The fifth, having been cooled by the elephant's ear, was sure an elephant was like a fan. And the sixth, having swung from the tail, was sure an elephant was like a rope.<sup>2</sup> While each man was not wrong, each failed to have the whole picture and was only partially correct. At times, it seems as though this story of the blind men describes church leaders trying to lead in the midst of change—not necessarily wrong, but working with a limited perspective. Without stepping back, asking questions, researching, and reflecting, church leaders often miss the mark on leading in the midst of change. What is needed is intentionality in exploring the whole picture.

---

<sup>2</sup>John Godfrey Saxe's (1816-1887) version of the famous Indian legend. Accessed September 27, 2008 @ [http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind\\_men\\_elephant.htm](http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind_men_elephant.htm)

In developing a hermeneutic of change that is theologically grounded and theoretically informed, I have discovered the work of practical theology to be helpful. “Practical theology describes practices in order to discern the conflicting cultural and religious meanings that guide our action and provoke the questions that animate our practical thinking.”<sup>3</sup> Practical theologian Don Browning offers four sub-movements for working practical theology: *descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic*.<sup>4</sup> Each movement gives an important and critical theological perspective, yet one alone does not adequately describe the whole. Browning’s four vantage points build upon and inform each other, together creating a rich and robust theological view. These four vantage points will serve as the skeleton for this hermeneutic of change on which theological and theoretical ideas will be attached.<sup>5</sup>

### **Descriptive: Where is God in what is?**

The key question for Browning’s *descriptive* perspective is *where is God in what is?* Any hermeneutic of change needs to live in the world and this vantage point lifts up a

---

<sup>3</sup> Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, paperback ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note the location of the author in creating any hermeneutic. Therefore, let me lay out some realities that have shaped my life and thinking. As a lifelong Lutheran, I acknowledge that this hermeneutic comes from a mainline church insider. While I have been intentional about being in conversation with people that have other experiences, I myself have always been supported by a family actively living their faith, been myself active in Lutheran congregations, and received my education from Lutheran institutions (college and seminary). As a lay leader that has worked all of her life in ministry, I have had the opportunity to serve in various settings (congregational, parachurch, synodical, and seminary), with each experience both challenging and affirming aspects of the Lutheran tradition and theology. While I’m Christian first and Lutheran second, I do believe that Lutheran Christians have a rich theology and tradition from which to speak to the larger church as it seeks to be a vibrant presence in the twenty-first century. Trained as a missiologist, I am excited about my current call of teaching at an ELCA seminary and about the opportunity to be part of equipping a new generation of church leaders, not only for North America, but also for the global world in which we live.

theological description of human actions.<sup>6</sup> The descriptive vantage point acknowledges all Christians engage in theological work. If one believes God is in the world, then one has to wonder, “Where is God present in the world?” and “How is God working today?” If one believes in God as creator of the universe, as incarnate Son, and as the Spirit living and moving among us, then one must believe that God is present in the world today. God is present in new life: babies being born, couples exchanging vows, new friendships being formed. God is present in reconciliation: lovers offering forgiveness, siblings saying they are sorry, friends apologizing, neighbors making amends. God is present in suffering: in hospitals, in hospices, in struggling families, in the hearts of those divorcing, in those that are lonely and depressed. And God is present in communities of faith: the faithful gathering for worship, God’s people serving in the church and in the world, the young and old reading Scripture, hearts joined in prayer. God is present in the world in hidden and mysterious ways. Hence, from a descriptive vantage point, looking at elements of everyday life can awaken Christians to God’s dynamic character and can shed light into what God is doing in our midst. A descriptive view puts these moments into conversation with theological commitments and questions.

Any hermeneutic of change, therefore, can build upon the foundation that God is living and active. If God is present in the world, a world in which change is a regular part, one can conclude that God is also present in the midst of change. While this might seem like an obvious statement, this reality calls forth a fundamental belief: *God is active and present in the midst of change!*

A descriptive vantage point might be an obvious perspective in pastoral situations, but it is also a helpful perspective for communities of faith walking in the midst of change. Asking God’s people to look for and name God’s presence in change and/or conflict can lead to

---

<sup>6</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 112.

deep and powerful conversation, for descriptive theology “begins with questions about present practices, the symbols and legitimations of these practices, and challenges these practices.”<sup>7</sup> The main objective of descriptive theology “is to form questions that are brought back to the classics for the creation of new horizons of meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, descriptive theology not only names reality by describing and identifying God’s activity, but it also discovers the points of tension that exist.

One of descriptive theology’s gifts is that it explores both the universal claims as well as the particularities of faith communities, for this vantage point encompasses the rituals, traditions, and contextual realities that give meaning to a particular people. Starting with descriptive theology in creating a hermeneutic of change unearths what gives meaning to a community of faith, identifying where meaning is shared, as well as highlighting different interpretations.<sup>9</sup> Key questions for descriptive theology include: What, within a particular area of practice, are we actually doing? What reasons, ideas, and symbols do we use to interpret what we are doing? What do we consider to be the sources of authority, legitimating what we do?<sup>10</sup>

Before moving forward it is important to note that this vantage point can be addressed both individually and communally. It certainly is imperative for a community of faith to be about this work together, but it is also critical to note the personal aspect. Faith communities are made up of individual human beings, and, for human beings, change is always personal. That fact cannot be escaped. This reality is both the gift and challenge of leading in the midst of change and leaders must deal with it.

The French author Anatole France writes, “All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind is part of

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 48.

ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter into another.”<sup>11</sup> As people of the cross and resurrection, addressing this truth is central to any change hermeneutic. Humans are created in the image of God and filled with the Holy Spirit. However, humans are also sinners and, left to themselves, sin, turn in on themselves, and go against God’s ways. Therefore it is important to recognize that humans are both saints and sinners. Christians cling to the belief that God has transformed them, taken away their sin and offered another way. As redeemed people, called to participate in God’s creative and redemptive mission in the world, Christians need to be drawn out of themselves and into the world. This human reality, of being both saint and sinner, is no more real than when people are living in the midst of change. Therefore, added to the core belief that God is active in the world is a second belief—*God’s people are simultaneously saints and sinners*. Any hermeneutic of change must acknowledge this and offer a way through this tension.

### **Historical: What do normative texts say?**

Browning’s second perspective, *historical*, raises the question, *What do normative texts say?* “[G]uided by the questions emerging from the first movement,”<sup>12</sup> the historical movement asks, “What do the normative texts that are already part of our effective history *really* imply for our praxis when they are confronted as honestly as possible?”<sup>13</sup> Individuals and/or faith communities working theology are not isolated from the larger Christian community. Historical theology draws leaders back to the biblical narrative and to one’s own denomination/faith tradition. While descriptive theology rubs up against historical theology, affirming and/or challenging it, historical theology is where traditional

---

<sup>11</sup> Quote found in William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, 2d (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 24.

<sup>12</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.



disciplines like church history and biblical studies enter the conversation.

All communities of faith are part of a bigger story—the overall Christian story—as well as being part of a faith tradition. This bigger story has a past, present, and future. One of the roles leaders of faith communities have is to highlight this time dimension. A natural tendency for those experiencing change is to narrow their focus. Widening a community's horizons to include a more distant past and future possibilities, while also attending to the present, opens up and expands imagination and meaning. Across time God's people have experienced certain things, held certain beliefs, and valued certain practices. How might these realities inform this situation?

The Bible is not the only source of understanding the Christian story, but it is the primary source for Christian communities. This is not the time or place to do deep exegetical work on leading change within Scripture, yet it is important to address this area briefly. If one scans the grand story, with an eye toward leading God's people in the midst of change, a few big ideas surface. First, *some things are constant about God's relationship with God's people and the world*. God loves the world—that does not change. Sin and evil exist—that does not change. And God offers the gift of salvation—that does not change. God has always loved the world, and always will. Yet there is a power, a force, which pushes against and seeks to redirect God's love. Into that reality, that tension, God offers another way with the promise of salvation. Second, *some things do change, for God and God's world are living entities*. God's love for the world is expressed in various ways. This is most explicit in the triune nature of God: God as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. While the challenges God's people encounter vary, God offers a response to each challenging time. God is, and has always been, in the midst of change: sometimes initiating it, other times interrupting it, and other times simply accompanying God's people through it. Third, *Christian community is dynamic*. Being a living community, situated in the now

and not yet, means dealing with a fallen world. Here the acknowledgement of being saint and sinner surfaces. Christians, with their own sinful nature and living in a world where sin is present, strive to live as God's redeemed people. As Christian communities seek to participate in God's mission in the world, there is movement, a give and take, an ebb and flow. There is both the opportunity for celebrating God's work and the need for extending grace and forgiveness. Fourth, *leaders of communities of faith live in a tension*. Christian leaders are leading people in need of a Savior in a world that needs redemption, as they are both agents of God's love in the world and sinful human beings themselves. At times God's people become drawn into themselves; at times rituals are contested; at times beliefs are challenged for the sake of including others. Christian leaders live in tension.

But what does this mean for leading in the midst of change? For one it means that communities of faith can rest in a broader story, a story filled with change and promise. While the outward expressions of faith communities have changed throughout history, God's love and promises for the world have not. Second, there is a dynamism that exists. Death and life are part of the story. This world is not the end; it is only a foretaste of God's future, not *the* future. And finally, leaders have always been called forth to lead God's people in the midst of change, and leading means living within tension.

One of the key activities in which leaders of faith communities can engage is bringing God's people back into the biblical story. Each faith tradition does this in various ways. For Lutherans the idea that God's Word is a living word is essential. God's Word is to be proclaimed in Christian community, into living, breathing communities, placed in time and space. This proclamation makes room for God's promises to come alive in vibrant ways, allowing God to continue to speak to God's people again and again! Engaging Scripture, for Lutherans, is a communal activity, an activity that both

centers and holds God's people. Lutheran communities find their identity in God's living word.

What impact could the belief in a living Word have on a faith community in the midst of change? Could clearly articulating this view of God's Word be at the heart of guiding God's people to faithfully live in this changing world? Could holding Scripture at the center of communal activities keep the living God central? What difference would that make for communities moving through change?

The biblical narrative is not the only normative text. Each faith tradition has developed its own set of normative texts and has its own history and faith claims. Each denominational tradition has rich resources from which to draw. This is where hermeneutics of change become varied and diverse, something that is both a gift and a challenge. For example, Quakers have practices that can help communities of faith work discernment in a faithful and communal way. Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox Christians offer deep commitments to tradition and ancient practices that span time and place. Independent churches offer particularity and witness to the Spirit working in and through God's people. All faith communities are expressions of God's people being the body of Christ and can inform Christian leadership about leading in the midst of change.

Let us drop into one faith tradition, my tradition, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.<sup>14</sup> As a reforming church birthed out of protest, Lutherans created an identity that was shaped by both a response as well as independent thinking. The Lutheran Church emerged in the seventeenth century as a group of people protesting against beliefs and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. When the Roman Catholic Church would not change, the reformers set out to articulate their core beliefs and created their own identity. Out of this origin, Lutherans have become known as a reforming

---

<sup>14</sup>While many of the claims made in this article are true of various Lutheran traditions, in the rest of this essay *Lutherans* will refer to ELCA Lutherans.

church and have had to work and rework their identity many times and within various contexts. Hence Lutherans' identity is not static, but dynamic; it is as much a verb as a noun.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the past four centuries, Lutherans have danced between being a people that travel light and a church that holds on to certain traditions. They have held tightly to beliefs on Word and sacrament and have adapted worship practices. They have held key theological documents, like the Augsburg Confession, as core to shaping their doctrine and revised and expanded the ways the church has been expressed in the world, like ecclesial and mission practices.

So what about your faith tradition? How might your faith tradition inform and expand your theology of change? Are there core elements that beg to be part of your theology of change? Are there clues to faithfully leading your church in its history? Do your Christian practices offer ways to faithfully walk through times of change? What obstacles get in the way of working out a theology of change in your faith tradition?

### **Systematic: Is this theology coherent, congruent, and ethical?**

The third perspective, *systematic*, asks the question, *Is this theology coherent, congruent, and ethical?* Systematic theology is “the fusion of horizons between the vision implicit in contemporary practices and the vision implied in the practices of the normative Christian texts.”<sup>16</sup> It “tries to gain as comprehensive view of the present as possible.”<sup>17</sup> Descriptive theology is messy and often a mosaic of various theological nuggets. Historic theology

---

<sup>15</sup>Through history, Lutherans have had to clarify and claim their own identity, often in response to the changing world around them. One example of this is when European Lutheran immigrants came to North America and no longer existed in a state/church system. During this time their beliefs and practices were tested and refined. The Lutheran church in North America emerged with many different elements from those of its sister church in Europe, but its foundational theological beliefs were the same.

<sup>16</sup>Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 51.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

places God's people within a larger story across time. Systematic theology offers a thoughtfully crafted argument that seeks to be true across time and place. Said differently, while descriptive theology can serve as a working framework for individuals and for communities of faith, eventually there is a call for a more coherent theology. Systematic theology, therefore, draws upon trained theologians whose prime work is to struggle with and articulate a view of God for the sake of God's people. Systematic theologies seek to guide larger groups of people and offer another important vantage point.

Two key questions guide this perspective: "What new horizon of meaning is fused when questions from present practices are brought to the central Christian witness?"<sup>18</sup> and "What reasons can be advanced to support the validity claims of this new fusion of meaning?"<sup>19</sup> This vantage point is the critical and philosophical move of theology with the main objective being "the search for generic features of the Christian message in relation to generic features of present practices."<sup>20</sup>

Christian leaders developing a theology of change need systematic theologians as conversation partners. Theology from this vantage point asks hard, complex questions like: How does one's view of God impact one's view of what it means to be the church? What is the operational view of humanity working within this view of church? How does God reveal God's self to the world? While communities of faith need leaders to be engaging such questions, it is important to remember that systematic theology is not the end or pinnacle, but simply one perspective.

There are an abundance of theological resources that can inform a leader's theology of change. Most Christian leaders already have primary theological partners, be they individual theologians or a stream of theological thought. Engaging one's primary partners is an excellent place to

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 58.

begin developing and deepening one's theology of change, for most theological arguments have implicit within them some aspect of change. Here are some examples. Within the stream of Feminist theology, power structures are challenged, equalitarian leadership is advocated, and the proposition that language informs one's view of God is espoused. From the missional theology stream comes a triune view of God that is both communal and for the world. Within this perspective the role of the other is highlighted, changing both individuals and communities. And there are streams that lift up the agency of God's people and vocation, streams that engage liberation themes, as well as confessional streams, evangelical streams, orthodox streams, and process streams. The array of theological streams to draw from is vast.

One theologian that has captured my imagination with regard to change is Miroslav Volf. Volf's book, *Exclusion and Embrace*,<sup>21</sup> emerged out of his own journey of dealing with change<sup>22</sup> and puts evil, *exclusion*, into dialogue with God's welcome, *embrace*. Rooted in a trinitarian view of God, Volf unpacks the concepts of identity and otherness.

---

<sup>21</sup>Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, Abingdon Press: 1996).

<sup>22</sup>Like most theologians, Volf's work arises out of this personal struggle. As a Croatian that lived through an unjust war and as a theologian that believes in the gift of forgiveness, Volf crafts a theological argument out of his personal journey. He says, "The tension between the message of the cross and the world of violence presented itself to me as a conflict between the desire to follow the Crucified and the disinclination either simply to watch others be crucified or let myself be nailed to the cross. An account of an intellectual struggle, the book is also a record of a spiritual journey. I wrote it for myself—and for all those who in a world of injustice, deception, and violence have made the gospel story their own and therefore wish neither to assign the demands of the Crucified to the murky regions of unreason nor abandon the struggle for justice, truth, and peace." *Ibid.*, 10.

Volf sets forth his ideas for others to chew on, push up against, and integrate into their own way of being. Like Volf, many theologies come out of the theologian's own personal questions or struggles. One thing Christian leaders can learn from Volf is that in discerning their own struggles they might find a clue to discovering their own theological quest.

As God's people, living in a broken world, there exists a tension: a tension between the hostility that, as a result of sin, exists in the world and the need to receive this hostility into divine communion. Given this reality Volf offers four claims: *identity matters, Christians are all social agents, the cross is at the center of our identity, and we have a promise to hold on to as we live in a broken world.*<sup>23</sup> As social agents with an identity in the cross, Christians are called into a process of opening themselves to the other. This process of opening and offering one's self takes place through four movements: repentance, forgiveness, making space in oneself for the other, and healing memory.<sup>24</sup> These four movements are the process of moving from exclusion to embrace. To illustrate this process, Volf uses the simple, but powerful, metaphor of embrace.

An embrace has four structural elements: *opening, waiting, closing, and opening.* These movements correspond with the core ideas of moving from exclusion, or hostility, to embrace, or welcoming. *Opening* is the first move of an embrace and is a signal of creating space, of making one's self vulnerable to the other.<sup>25</sup> Opening indicates the desire, the invitation to the other, but also requires hosts to be self-reflective and willing to admit they are not all they could be without the other. Opening requires hosts to acknowledge a void in their own lives. *Waiting*, the second movement, includes an element of vulnerability. For an embrace to be an embrace, hosts cannot force themselves onto another. Waiting, then, is an offering that hopes for, longs for, a willing response. When offering an embrace one does not know, nor control, the outcome.<sup>26</sup> *Closing*, the third movement, is the closing of the embrace. It can only occur once the invitation has been offered, the waiting taken place, and the offer accepted. As the other moves into the opened

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 16-28.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 100.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 142.

space, the closing provides a boundary for creating intimate space. The one who welcomed, now becomes the host and what was once two is now one.<sup>27</sup> The final movement is *opening* again. The two cannot stay one; there are times to come together and times to separate. To have the embrace honor both persons, the embrace must open up again. If not, one exerts power over the other. Yet, this final movement is not the end, for it sets into motion the anticipation of another embrace, continuing the cycle.<sup>28</sup>

Volf's claims and metaphor provide an interesting theological partner for Lutherans as they seek to live as sacramental people. At their core, Lutherans are Word and sacrament people. Highly valuing the proclamation of the Word and the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, Lutherans have let their lives together be formed by these elements. Proclamation emphasizes God's Word as living and communal; the sacraments not only inform but also shape the shared, ongoing life of God's people. The two are living and dynamic, transforming both individuals and communities. Having briefly addressed the Word previously, let us now move to the sacraments.

Being sacramental people, Lutherans create their lives together by regularly gathering around the font of baptism and the communion table. The font is the place of welcoming people into Christian community and of extending God's grace; the table, dressed with bread and wine, is the tangible reminder of God's unconditional, forgiving love. The font is God's initial opening to us; the table is the ongoing practice of God's people living into and out of God's promises. Both are identity shapers; both are core practices.

Both sacraments are free gifts from God offered to all, yet each plays a different and important role in creating Christian community. In baptism God, the primary actor, offers salvation. The gathered community,

---

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 144-145.



on behalf of those baptized, accepts this gift and commits to journey with them as they seek to discover, individually and communally, the Christian way of life. In baptism the one baptized is justified before God and welcomed into and embraced by the Christian community. Hence, baptism is the welcoming sacrament. Communion, then, is the forming sacrament. As the arms of the community embrace the baptized at the font, the table not only defines, but also shapes the community's life together in a regular, tangible way. The table is the time to remember Christ's death and resurrection and for the community to once again live as forgiven people, not only before God, but also with one another.

Worship is the gathering time in which the sacraments are celebrated. For Lutherans the pattern of worship has theological significance. Lutheran worship begins with confession and absolution. Starting with confession is an acknowledgement that we, God's people, are sinners and corporately, as well as individually, come before God confessing our sins to God and one another. The proclamation of the Word is a central part of worship. Proclaiming God's Word to the gathered community, Lutherans believe that in hearing God's living word, persons and communities are changed. Professing the corporate faith through ancient creeds ties Lutherans to Christians past and present and celebrating the sacraments provides markers for the community's life together.

Clearly there are other aspects of Lutheran theology and tradition that could be named, but these core elements give definition to Lutherans' lives together and demonstrate the rich soil from which Lutherans can develop and shape a theology of change that fits within their particular Christian tradition. How might the sacraments be both the stabilizing elements of a Lutheran faith community, as well as the seeds from which change sprouts? For Lutherans, could a vibrant theology of the sacraments inform a vibrant theology of change? How might the rhythm of worship be an ongoing opportunity

to lift up the changing aspects of what it is to be God's people?

**Strategic: What languages, relationships, strategies, and practices best accomplish the mission and ministry?**

The final perspective, *strategic*, asks, *What languages, relationships, strategies, and practices best accomplish the mission and ministry?* Strategic practical theology is that “which establishes the norms and strategies of concrete practices in light of analyses of concrete situations.”<sup>29</sup> The four basic questions are: “How do we understand this concrete situation in which we must act?”<sup>30</sup> “What should be our praxis in this concrete situation?”<sup>31</sup> “How do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this concrete situation?”<sup>32</sup> and “What means, strategies, and rhetorics (sic) should we use in this concrete situation?”<sup>33</sup> Within this vantage point, change becomes multi-faceted. Change is both an event and a process, both adaptive and technical; change includes natural developmental change, cultural shifts, addressing conflict, tending systems, and challenging paradigms, to name a few.

This final section highlights theoretical resources that can inform a hermeneutic of change. While primarily theoretical, this section assumes that Christian leaders operate with their theological lens in hand, even suggesting a few theological connecting points along the way. Within this vantage point it is important to remember that theological interpretation goes two ways: theology informs one's actions, and one's actions are interpreted theologically. Words and actions, finally, are all that leaders have to communicate and live out what they believe. So this hermeneutic of change ends by taking a brief look at language, strategies and practices, and relationships.

---

<sup>29</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Common language is vital to creating shared meaning. Language regarding change, however, is often loose and not clearly defined. Therefore one aspect of a change hermeneutic is being attentive to and clarifying language. There are many angles one could take here, but two significant thinkers regarding change, William Bridges and Ronald Heifetz, offers a place to begin.

According to William Bridges, “It isn’t the changes that will do you in, it’s the transitions.”<sup>34</sup> There is a difference between the two. “*Change* is situational: the move to a new site, the retirement of the founder....*Transition*, on the other hand, is psychological; it is a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about.”<sup>35</sup> One important difference between change and transition is that change focuses on an outcome and transition a process. In other words, one knows when a change has occurred (a pastor left a congregation) but one does not always know when the process of transition has ended (grieving the departure of that pastor). Most often leaders talk about change when they really are referring to the process of transition. Hence, one fundamental question Christian leaders can ask is, *Is this a change or a transition?*

One significant element with regard to transition is that all “transition starts with an ending. This is paradoxical, but true.”<sup>36</sup> Framed theologically, transition is a death and resurrection process. In many ways managing transitions is similar to walking with people in the process of grief, yet it’s communal. While several have studied the process of transition, the work of William Bridges stands out. Bridges’ three-stage model includes: *letting go, the neutral zone, and new beginnings*. Leading through transition means not only understanding these stages, but also knowing how to lead within each stage, for there is particular work assigned to each stage

---

<sup>34</sup>Bridges, *Managing Transition*, 3.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 7.

of the transition process. To move through the process of transition in a healthy way, communities need to address the work in each stage.<sup>37</sup> How does seeing change as a communal process of death and resurrection inform leading in the midst of change? What available resources might leaders of faith communities draw on in such times?

Ronald Heifetz offers another key distinguishing factor in understanding change. According to Heifetz, there are two types of change situations: *adaptive and technical*.<sup>38</sup> *Technical situations* are those where the solutions to problems come from applying knowledge and skills that exist within the current structure. *Adaptive situations* are those where a new method or way of thinking is required and core beliefs are challenged. The first looks to the leader, or one in authority, to handle the problem. The second requires the leader to help others own the situation and then move the organization through a process of discovery, experimenting, and adjusting.<sup>39</sup> Given these two, Heifetz addresses leadership within adaptive situations, for this is the more difficult type of change.

While Heifetz's distinction may seem basic, my experience with faith communities is that most leaders approach change situations with technical solutions, hence the pragmatic perspective. Certainly there are situations that need to be addressed technically, but frequently the situations facing faith communities today are adaptive ones. Technical solutions are not going to resolve adaptive situations, and leaders cannot be the ones solely responsible for tackling change. Leaders of

---

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert Rendle in *Leading Change Is the Congregation's Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders*, (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998) applies Bridges' ideas to congregations (see chapter 5, 105-131).

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard Press, 1994) and Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 13.

faith communities need to be able to identify adaptive situations and help others own the situation of change.

Certainly more can be said about the language of change, but the main objective here is to recognize that all change is not the same. Today most of the change leaders are facing is actually transition and the situations primarily adaptive. Yet all transition is not the same, and neither is adaptive change. Another aspect is needed.

Language is not the only important aspect of the strategic vantage point; strategies and practices are also crucial. Strategies provide the framework from which a leader leads and practices provide the concrete actions. This section will touch on theories that unpack another layer of change.

Sometimes leading change is like accompanying friends as they learn and grow. Such a journey is filled with expected and unexpected change. As leaders walk with organizations encountering changes that come with normal growth and development, patterns emerge. LifeCycle theories offer a framework of organizational change that is developmental, suggesting practices that accompany each stage. Ichak Adizes,<sup>40</sup> a LifeCycle theorist, claims that LifeCycle theories “explain why organizations grow, age, and die, and what to do about it.”<sup>41</sup> His aim is to help leaders of organizations understand the process an organization goes through so they can most effectively lead the change the organization is experiencing. “The role of leadership is to lead the necessary change that creates new problems, reintegrate the organization to solve those problems, [and] prepare it to be changed again, and have new problems.”<sup>42</sup> This is the type of change many leaders expect to encounter.

Sometimes, however, the change process is deeper and requires a different framework. Ronald Heifetz states that “To lead is to live dangerously because when

---

<sup>40</sup> *Corporate LifeCycles* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988) and *Managing Corporate LifeCycles* (Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall Press, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Adizes, *Managing Corporate LifeCycles*, xv.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear—their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking—with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility.”<sup>43</sup> *The Dance of Change* uses the term *profound change* “to describe organizational change that combines inner shifts in people’s values, aspirations, and behaviors with ‘outer’ shifts in processes, strategies, practices, and systems.”<sup>44</sup> This is the level of change John Kotter<sup>45</sup> outlines in his eight-stage process of organizational change.<sup>46</sup> Acknowledging that profound change is not a linear, one-time process, but ongoing, repetitive work, Kotter touches on the reality that most faith organizations overlook. Unless leadership is willing to step out and lead a group of people that can tap into the power and core values of an organization, profound, cultural change will not happen. Profound, cultural change is the adaptive posture of change Heifetz suggests applied to the overall organization. This is the type of change seventeenth century reformers were inviting the Roman Catholic Church to consider. This type of change does not require abandoning all of a community’s tradition or practices, but it does require being open to asking foundational questions, being willing to set forth a vision, and having the ability to move a community toward that new vision, in words, in behaviors, and in beliefs. Cultural change is not short-term problem-solving; it is long-term change which requires dedicated, shared leadership willing to

---

<sup>43</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 2.

<sup>44</sup>Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, George Roth, Rick Ross, and Bryan Smith, *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 15.

<sup>45</sup> John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. Kotter’s eight stages include establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture.

challenge core beliefs and assumptions. The aim of this type of change is to change the DNA of an organization.

As leaders work with adaptive change, it is imperative to know about conflict. *Leadership* magazine reported in 2004 that 95% of the church leaders surveyed had experienced conflict in their congregations, 20% of whom were experiencing it at the time of the survey.<sup>47</sup> Conflict is present in faith communities and, in and of itself, a particular type of change. According to Speed Leas, “When conflict occurs in a local parish it is often the case that the church leadership is in disagreement not only about the issues involved but also about how bad it is.”<sup>48</sup> As Leas worked with congregations in times of conflict, he identified five levels of conflict: *problems to solve, disagreement, context, fight/flight, and intractable*.<sup>49</sup> As in other theories, each level has particular work to address and requires certain leadership skills. Knowing these dynamics, and how to lead within, is vital for Christian leaders. When leading in times of conflict leaders have the opportunity to help communities of faith act as God’s redeemed people. This is the point when Lutherans return to the font and the table, reclaiming their identity as God’s people and confessing their sins before God and one another.

The strategic vantage point also highlights relationships. Certainly relationships are embedded in each of the above strategies. Tending these relationships is important. Yet there are also relationships between faith communities and the greater environment. All faith communities are systems, systems within other systems. Margaret Wheatley, having worked organizational theory through the lens of the new sciences, believes that organizations that thrive work with their environment by self-organizing. Wheatley says:

---

<sup>47</sup>“Keeping Conflict Healthy,” *Leadership* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 25.

<sup>48</sup> Speed Leas, “Conflict in the Parish: How Bad is it?” *Word & World* 4, no. 2 (1984): 182.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 186. See also Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church Through Conflict* (Washington, DC: Alban, 1979).

In organizations, we typically struggle against the environment, seeing it as the source of disruption and change...Even though we know we need to be responsive to forces and demands beyond the boundaries of our organization, we still focus our efforts on maintaining the strongest defensive structure possible...But as I read about self-organizing systems...here are systems that stay strong by staying open.<sup>50</sup>

Organizations that both survive and thrive are those that have an open posture toward their environment. Such organizations have the ability to self-regulate by reorganizing themselves as they face changes. This self-regulation comes from having a clear identity and a process by which one can reference oneself against that identity.<sup>51</sup> Lutherans, as a reforming church, have built into their DNA this ability. Faith communities, however, in times of dramatic change tend to close themselves off from their environment, rather than opening themselves up. While this might be a natural defense mechanism, it does not promote health and vitality. What theological beliefs must faith communities hold on to as they seek to remain open to the world around them? How might keeping a clear sense of identity help a faith community ride the waves of change?

If organizations are open to and influenced by their environment, then it is imperative that leaders pay attention to the mega-context in which they lead. The authors of *The Missional Leader* suggest that we are currently living in the midst of rapid, discontinuous change. Continuous change has been the mainstay of society; it is change that builds upon the past and works toward advancement. Discontinuous change, however, is different; it is surprising, disruptive, and unanticipated. It can be both exciting and terrifying, for discontinuous change “creates situations that challenge our assumptions

---

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 82.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 84-85.



[and] the skills we have learned aren't helpful in this situation."<sup>52</sup> Discontinuous change is the dominant type of change when a culture is in the process of transforming and shifting to something new.<sup>53</sup>

Paradigms are worldviews, the mega-structures that hold together a greater community's shared assumptions. Thomas Kuhn transformed the notion of paradigms when he asserted that worldviews do not simply evolve steadily, but after a period of stability, a revolution takes place.<sup>54</sup> At that point, a paradigm shift takes place and everything goes back to zero. Paradigm shifts take place after a point of discontinuous change.

If this is a time of discontinuous change and if discontinuous change is a sign of a paradigm shift, then what does this say about leading in the midst of change? For one thing, current structural frameworks are being challenged and no longer function as they once did. One example of such a shift is from a modern worldview to a postmodern one. While addressing this shift is beyond the scope of this essay, it is vital for leaders seeking to effectively and faithfully lead in the midst of change to be attentive to those discussions and discourse. Being attentive requires a posture of being open, of learning to engage one's environment, and of being clear about one's identity. Such shifts invite all Christian leaders to put into practice Volf's metaphor of the embrace and to exercise their hermeneutic of change.

Language, strategies and practices, and relationships make up the sub-movement of strategic theology, for embedded within each are particular values and theological commitments. Any hermeneutic must be attentive to how God's people are living in real time with the real challenges and opportunities any particular faith community faces.

---

<sup>52</sup> Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 7.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996).

## Conclusion

Change is a part of our everyday world: nature changes, people change, relationships change, and seasons change. But all change is not the same. Change challenges, stimulates growth, and can be transformational. Yet change can also paralyze, immobilize, and overwhelm. Change can be disruptive and surprising, as well as welcomed and embraced. Thinking more deeply about change can help leaders more effectively lead people through such times.

Leading in the midst of change includes bringing theological resources into dialogue with theoretical ones. Knowing and identifying various types of change not only set the leader of an organization on the right change path, but they also define the vocabulary, strategies, and practices that go along with it. Leading in the midst of change, be it continuous or discontinuous, developmental or conflictual, is not new for leaders of faith communities. What is new is the vast array of resources leaders have to draw from.

This essay set out to challenge leaders of faith communities to take leading in the midst of change seriously by developing their own hermeneutic of change. Using Browning's four vantage points of practical theology (descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic), the author proposed a framework for developing a theologically grounded and theoretically informed hermeneutic of change. Built on the foundation that God is active and present in the midst of change and that God's people are simultaneously saint and sinner, the theological aspect of this hermeneutic of change drew on the biblical narrative, Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace*, and Lutheran commitments of being Word and sacrament people. This theological perspective was put into conversation with various theoretic resources that suggested language, strategies and practices, and key relationships that need tending as one leads in the midst of change.

This example of a hermeneutic of leading in the midst of change still only scratches the surface. Undergirding

and guiding each of these sections are deeper, more complex arguments. Yet this is a start. The real work comes as these four vantage points are woven together in real time with real communities of faith encountering real situations of change. It is the hope of this author that this essay will ignite critical and creative thinking about leading in the midst of change. The real test, however, comes not in critiquing what is written on paper, but in developing one's own hermeneutic of change and living into and out of it. May you faithfully find your way through these changing and challenging times.