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# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

FROM PLATEAU TO TRANSFORMATION:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR REFORMED  
CHURCH IN AMERICA CHURCHES

Written by

JILL K. VER STEEG

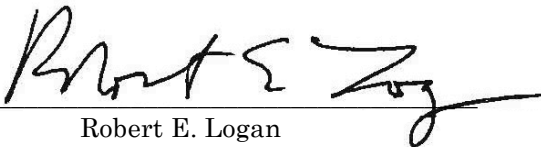
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requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

  
Robert E. Logan

  
Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: February 21, 2017

FROM PLATEAU TO TRANSFORMATION:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR REFORMED  
CHURCH IN AMERICA CHURCHES

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JILL K. VER STEEG, M.DIV.  
FEBRUARY 2017



## ABSTRACT

### **From Plateau to Transformation: The Development of Learning Communities for Reformed Church in America Churches**

Jill K. Ver Steeg, M.Div.

Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2017

The goal of this study was to argue that in order for churches to move off plateau and into transformation, they must engage an adaptive change process called a learning community. In the Reformed Church in America, a number of churches are aging and in a period of decline. The church in the twenty-first century ought to look and be different than the church has in the past, even as recently as a decade ago. The postmodern society and the rise of secularism have contributed to the decline in church attendance. The emergence of a new generation, social media, and the frenzied lifestyle of families have all contributed to the changing landscape of the church in North America.

The reasons for plateau were discussed in this study. A historical review of the RCA was provided along with a literature and theological review of adult learning, results-based conversations, and adaptive change. The study outlines the process of a learning community, as well as its goals and outcomes.

Content Reader: Bob Logan

Words: 166

To Shane, Sam, Will, Owen, and Wes, my chief supporters,  
for your tireless and enthusiastic encouragement

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A big thank–you to Dr. Bob Logan, my content reader and advocate, and Rev. Grace Claus, my editor, colleague, and friend.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
PART ONE: MINISTRY CONTEXT	
INTRODUCTION	2
Chapter 1. PLATEAUED CHURCHES AND THE NEED FOR TRANSFORMED & TRANSFORMING	9
Chapter 2. AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE RCA	23
PART TWO: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION	
Chapter 3. LITERATURE REVIEW	31
Chapter 4. THE THEOLOGY OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY	47
Chapter 5. FROM PLATEAU TO TRANSFORMATION	61
PART THREE: MINISTRY STRATEGY	
Chapter 6. THE FRAMEWORK OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY	77
Chapter 7. IMPLEMENTING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY	89
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY	114

PART ONE  
MINISTRY CONTEXT

## INTRODUCTION

It was 5:52 a.m. on Sunday, June 13, 2012. The alarm clock hummed as Dan clumsily reached for the snooze button. Dan found himself in that liminal phase of sleep. With a long sigh, he said, “Another Sunday,” and slowly put his feet on the ground. Raising the window shade, Dan observed the beginning of a beautiful sunrise and immediately felt conflicted. On the one hand, he was grateful for the breath he drew and the possibility of a new day, and on the other, he felt the pinch of reality, knowing that a number of his parishioners would be at their lake homes or on their boats and not in the pews that morning.

Dan served as the lead pastor for New Life Community Church in a Grand Rapids, Michigan suburb. He had been in that role for eight years. This suburb was home to a variety of business and industries, including three higher education institutions. He had served another congregation in upstate New York as lead pastor for five years prior to coming to New Life Community. During his time at New Life, the church had grown from 300 to 450 in worship, and the congregation was deeply rooted in caring for and blessing their community and neighborhood around the church. Dan finished making his coffee and sat quietly in his home office. Staring at his desk, he remembered his task for

the afternoon: to prepare a funeral service for a member of New Life Community. He opened the morning worship bulletin to acclimate himself to the announcements. The associate pastor had recently received a call to another church and Dan had been leading solo for two months. Dan and the search team were in the midst of interviews to hire a new associate pastor.

As Dan picked up his Bible, a bookmark fell out. The bookmark said, “New Life Community Church: Growing Disciples Who Make Disciples. 2010–2020 Ministry and Mission Goals.” *This is a great document*, he thought to himself. *But that’s all it is*. He wondered what he and his congregation had accomplished in the past year. Where did the energy and passion go for executing the ministry goals? Where was the congregation’s passion for the mission? As he read the header over and over, he thought to himself, *This plan is so esoteric. I’m not even sure what “living and loving like Jesus” means*. He couldn’t remember the last time he was excited about his leadership and the church. He struggled to differentiate between the outputs and the outcomes of New Life. What difference had his leadership made in the past year? Or, for that matter, during his entire time at River Community? Sometimes he wondered if he was losing his faith in God.

On Sunday mornings, Dan was more eager to get back to his office than to greet folks after worship. He felt safer in his office. He didn’t want to engage another conversation about the church not growing or listen to another person lament, “Where have all the young people gone?” And he realized he was isolating himself from his congregation. He wondered what happened to the vigor and energy that his congregation had for reaching new people. Dan recognized that it had been awhile since he had seen New Life searching out new people who had visited that Sunday. The thought of trying to

“sell” New Life Community Church to consumer-driven church shoppers made him angry. He would rather quietly slip into his office after worship than deal with new people with a thousand questions. Moreover, it seemed to Dan that in the past year he had spent more time putting out fires than planning for spiritual and numerical growth.

Dan’s eyes locked on a sticky note that read, “Call Rob.” *Hmm*. He shook his head. Rob was the lead pastor of Elevation, a new church plant three blocks away. They met in an abandoned warehouse that had been remodeled and refurbished. In six months, Elevation had grown from 20 to 300. Some of those 300 were those who left New Life. “We want our church to better engage our culture and community,” he could hear the families say as they left. “New Life is filled with great people; the ministry here is just tired.” Not only did these comments crush Dan, the truth behind them was devastating. This was the pinch of reality. There was a gap between the growth of the city and the growth of the church, and Dan was well aware of the decrease in church membership while acknowledging that the city had grown significantly faster in that same year. His mind was filled with cynical thoughts toward Rob and Elevation.

Historically, New Life had been a church that offered good programs that produced positive results. Last Advent, the worship director put on *Ebenezer*, a Broadway-style musical that brought together a number of people from other churches in the community. The musical ran for four nights and was sold out every night. It brought a sense of community to the church, but that was all it did. New Life did not see an increase in attendance after the production. The intent from the planning team was that unchurched people would come to see *Ebenezer* and then attend the Alpha Course in January. The planning team was discouraged and confused after realizing that though

2,400 people attended *Ebenezer*, the Alpha class had fifteen participants, eight of whom were slated to be table leaders and were not actually new people. Did *Ebenezer* make people feel good during the Christmas season? Were grandparents delighted to see their grandchildren dressed in costumes with sparkles? Yes. Did *Ebenezer* serve to help grow disciples who make disciples and bring authentic life transformation to people's lives and in the community? No.

If New Life wanted to simply receive positive results then they could continue what they were doing. Dan would continue to lead his New Testament class on Thursday nights and those in his class would speak the predictable response after the class. "Nice teaching tonight, Dan," or "Appreciate the study," members of the class would say. A few years ago, he led New Life through Rick Warren's *40 Days of Purpose* and then *40 Days of Love*. Both campaigns brought good synergy to the congregation and alignment of various church programs—but nothing more. At the end of both campaigns, there was little evidence of real or lasting change in the life of the church. There were no adult baptisms or new people. A handful of new people attended for a week or two and then stopped coming. Moreover, Dan had taken his staff to various conferences and workshops, each with the accompanying marketing piece that promised to "grow your church" or "see catalytic innovation come to your team" or "multiply your mission." However, at the end of the day, the conference was just the conference. The program just the program. The New Life team went home. The mission and vision statement and goals were just a sheet of paper. As Dan leaned back in his chair, he exhaled and muttered to himself, *I'm working harder than I've ever worked before with worse results than I've ever had. I want nothing more than my community to embrace the gospel and live the*

*gospel. I cannot get my consistory to make any real traction in our mission and vision statement. One thing is clear: New Life Community Church is stuck. And, working harder at what we've been doing is not the answer.*

New Life Community Church had plateaued. Over the past twelve months, Dan heard countless times from Cael, the youth director, that his volunteer numbers had decreased. “No one has stepped forward to lead the sophomore small group, and I cannot find anyone to lead the Kentucky mission trip,” Cael recently told Dan. Though Dan and his staff team had strategically focused on leadership development and serving, ministry volunteers had stalled in some areas. He also knew that many of his volunteers were overworked and underappreciated. Within a span of twenty-four months, New Life had seen two key staff people resign—Sue, the associate pastor, and Paul, the outreach director. Both were beloved by the congregation and collectively had nine fruitful years of ministry at New Life. In their exit interviews with Dan, both Sue and Paul expressed disappointment over the lack of staff development and training. Dan could remember Paul’s words, “An environment of learning and development used to be a key part of staff culture at New Life. My perception is that each staff member has become a silo within his or her own ministry.”

Another effect of plateaued leadership on the congregation is that facility issues were disregarded in order to handle urgent shortfalls. Rick, the lead custodian recently asked Dan to do a walk-through of the church. Dan was shocked by the number of cracks, chips, divots, and stains on the walls, floors, and furniture. It seemed that Dan was too short-sighted to see the church’s need to remodel. The physical condition of New Life pointed to a larger concern about how the church self-identified. Moreover, one of the

stories New Life frequently told not only itself but also other people started with “remember when,” a reference back to some healthier time in the past when the was growing and thriving. (“Remember when we had 600 people on Easter Sunday?”) Young families seemed to flock to Elevation, but rarely did visitors to New Life Community stay.

New Life Community Church is not unlike other churches across the Reformed Church in America (RCA) today. It is not a surprise that some RCA congregations are aging and dying and many struggle to see real transformation in their context. There are a number of reasons for this, including the lost efficacy of the attractional model of church, the way the church is living in the past and fears irrelevancy, the church’s consumer mentality for ministry, staff dysfunction within the system, the resistance to change, the reality that many Christians do not live their faith beyond the Sunday morning experience, and a lack of understanding of discipleship.

Moreover, the world is changing. The people that God is calling into relationship with Jesus and with local congregations through the work of the Holy Spirit look very different. These people love Jesus; they are often less interested in the church. They are spiritual; they don’t necessarily consider themselves religious. They are eager for personal growth and transformation; they don’t look primarily to local congregations to find it. Many congregations are trying to respond to this new reality. New Life Community Church was not immune to many of these obstacles. They knew they were called to partner with our Triune God to make a difference in the lives of people and their communities. Congregations all over North America are in prayerful discernment and careful planning. They desire to provide pathways for all the people that God entrusts to



them to begin a life with Jesus and then to experience deep change through their life in Christ over time—for their sake and the sake of others. In order to move off plateau and into a healthier place of growing reproducible disciples, New Life Community Church needed to participate in an adaptive change process called a Discipleship Learning Community.

## CHAPTER 1

### PLATEAUED CHURCHES AND THE NEED FOR TRANSFORMED & TRANSFORMING

In his book *Leadership Is an Art*, Max De Pree states, “The first job of a leader is to define reality.”<sup>1</sup> One word describes the current reality of the Reformed Church in America: decline. Not only are churches declining because of aging members, but many congregations are also seeing millennials leave the church. The challenge is to identify and understand the current landscape of the church and then to map a way toward vibrant, growing, and healthy churches. This chapter will define the current reality in the RCA and the nature of plateaued churches, including common threads and themes. It will also consider and offer a rationale for Transformed & Transforming, the RCA’s 15-year goal.

How drastic is this decline? According to the Pew Research Center, adults in the U.S. who identify as Christians fell from 78 to 71 percent between 2007 and 2014.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, those who identify as “religiously unaffiliated” (meaning atheists,

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<sup>1</sup> Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” (May 12, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

agnostics, or people who are “nothing in particular”) jumped seven points, from just over 16 percent to 23 percent.<sup>3</sup> In that same seven-year period, mainline Protestant adults declined from 41 million to 36 million, a decline of approximately 5 million.<sup>4</sup> “An extensive new survey of more than 35,000 U.S. adults finds that the percentages who say they believe in God, pray daily, and regularly go to church or other religious services all have declined modestly in recent years. The recent decrease in religious beliefs and behaviors is largely attributable to the ‘nones’—the growing minority of Americans, particularly in the millennial generation, who say they do not belong to any organized faith.”<sup>5</sup> The best research available tells us that 50 to 60 percent of students drift away from the faith after graduating from high school.<sup>6</sup> This statistic is of the millennials who were actually raised and nurtured in the church—young people who were leaders in youth group, involved with organizations like Young Life, and committed to going to church during high school. Of young people who were committed to the Christian faith, half have completely abandoned their faith within five years of finishing high school.

How did we get here? As James K.A. Smith asks in his book *How (Not) to Be Secular*, “How did we go from a world where belief in God was the default assumption to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious” (November 3, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the research coming out of the Fuller Youth Institute at [www.fulleryouthinstitute.org](http://www.fulleryouthinstitute.org). Also see Kara Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith for Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

our secular age in which belief in God seems to many unbelievable?”<sup>7</sup> The reality is that many people are devoted to exclusive humanism, “a way of being in the world that offers significance without transcendence.”<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor asserts that our neighbors inhabit the immanent frame, which means they are no longer bothered by the God questions. This world of significance is not bothered with questions of the divine.<sup>9</sup> Smith claims that this secular age is messier than any of us would believe and is actually a “mirror to help us see how we have come to inhabit our secular age.”<sup>10</sup> Unbelief has become the default option. Writes Smith, “A society is secular insofar as...belief in God is understood to be one option among others, and thus contestable.”<sup>11</sup> This is, according to Taylor, “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among other and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>12</sup>

This self-sufficient humanism means that people come with completely different mental maps, managing their affairs without any reference to God. Smith claims that we cannot tolerate living in a world without meaning; therefore, we do not live in an age of disbelief but in an age of believing otherwise. For many people, nothing seems to be

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<sup>7</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 3.

missing from their lives, which means that we cannot come, proclaiming that there is a God-shaped hole in their hearts. In the postmodern society in which we live, people have constructed webs of meaning that provide almost all the significance they need in their lives. God is unnecessary.

This is not a shocking claim, nor is anyone immune to its grip and consequences. As the church, we must ask ourselves who we are in this secular age. How shall we be faithful to our gospel witness? The secular age and its foundational assumptions are the air we breathe. In such a world, investing in faith just does not seem relevant. We lack the cultural institutions, symbols, and primary narratives to hold a collective belief in God as a norming norm. The days when God seems like a probable wager are gone, and they are not coming back. In the words of Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, “Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious faith.”<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, today’s millennials have absorbed a new kind of religion. Christian Smith describes this new religion as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, or MTD.<sup>14</sup> This is the dominant religious belief system of today’s culture. MTD can be summarized as follows: “(1) A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth. (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. (3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about

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<sup>13</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 171.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

myself. (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. (5) Good people go to heaven when they die."<sup>15</sup> MTD is a doctrine of a God who is available only in crisis. This is a vision of God that is more about us than about God. God is simply a cosmic lifeguard on duty to help us, but only if we get ourselves in trouble. Other than that, it is a vision of a God whom we are more than happy to keep at arm's length so that God doesn't interfere or disrupt our daily life.

RCA churches are not immune to the realities of the North American spiritual landscape; they too have seen their numbers plateau or decline. RCA pastors and leaders are fully aware of the frenzied, consumer-driven, and technologically saturated culture in which they minister. What does it look like to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ in a time of division among people groups with differing value systems enveloped by varying degrees of uncertainty? If RCA churches are going to not only survive but thrive, the church must stop working harder at what it have always done and instead be courageous enough to risk and to innovate. In his book *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger uses the story of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery as the metaphor for the historical moment in which we find ourselves. Writes Bolsinger, "In every field, in every business, every organization, leaders are rapidly coming to the awareness that the world in front of us is radically different from everything behind us."<sup>16</sup> The reality is that many RCA churches have been in maintenance mode—keeping the church running as its always run—which

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>16</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 27.

is why they find themselves among plateaued churches. The following section describes four common characteristics of such churches.

First, plateaued RCA churches have lost their passion for mission. They have forgotten their purpose for being, which ought to drive everything they do. In *Deep Change*, Robert Quinn asserts that organizations tend to lose focus on their mission and become stagnant over time. As this happens, the organization must make a conscious effort to change. If change does not happen, the organization will continue to decline. When Lesslie Newbigin, a missionary in India, returned home to Great Britain after forty years, he discovered that his “beloved homeland was a more difficult mission field than he left behind.”<sup>17</sup> Plateaued churches posture themselves to keep the programs of the church running; they stay internally focused rather than externally focused on the place and the context that God has placed them. Opportunities to lead and serve and teach are not given to the younger generations and thus there is no one to take the baton when the current leadership ceases to exist. This way of doing church eventually causes those churches to die. When the *modus operandi* is simply to continuing doing church as it has always been done, then changes in demographics and shifts in population affect churches unfavorably. Other churches struggle with staff dysfunction, failed transitions from one pastor to the next, unresolved conflict, or even unsettled moral issues. Quinn refers to this as “the deep change or slow death dilemma.”<sup>18</sup> Some of these churches sense their

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 16.

perceived irrelevance. They execute a fight-or-flight response in the current secular culture.

Second, plateaued RCA churches use the wrong methods for ministry and mission. One of these methods is the attractional model of church, which may have been effective in the first eight or nine decades of the twentieth century but no longer works. In the attractional model, it's all about getting people to come to you. Churches evangelize by marketing events and worship services that attract their target demographic. It's similar to the "seeker-sensitive" model, which focuses solely on getting the crowd in the door to the detriment of the honest and accurate proclamation of the gospel. According to Brad Blocksom, "The attractional model seems to always involve the marketing of the local church: 'We're a cool, fun group of people who love and support each other, so come be part of us! And look! We have a cool church logo!'"<sup>19</sup> The local church has its own make, model, logo, and slogan to do whatever it takes to fill the seats.

Another method that leads to plateaued churches is the consumer model of church. The consumer mindset is captured by the sentiment, "I'm just not being fed by this church." This model sees the church, writes Marva Dawn, as "a vendor of religious goods and services."<sup>20</sup> The church exists to meet attendees' needs through quality programs and through professionals who teach their children about God. As long as the church is meeting attendees' expectations and "feeding" them, they will continue to

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<sup>19</sup> Brad Blocksom. "The Missional Model vs. The Attractional Model for Church" (February 17, 2015), <http://thinktheology.org/2015/02/17/the-missional-model-vs-the-attractional-model-for-church/>.

<sup>20</sup> Marva Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being the Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 141.



attend. This model of church-as-vendor shows up in some of the RCA's multiplication and revitalization efforts, as George Bullard, president of the Columbia Partnership, notes in his assessment of the denomination (see Chapter 2). These efforts tend to be programs that try to make a church successful rather than processes that are a pathway to significance.<sup>21</sup> Churches who adopt this model of ministry may enjoy short bursts of success but acknowledge no real or lasting outcome.

Third, plateaued RCA churches resist change. It is not that churches do not want to change but that they do not know how to change. Moreover, as Scott Cormode, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary states, "People don't resist change; they resist the loss that comes with change."<sup>22</sup> Some congregations see a pattern of decline but are convinced they are on the verge of turning a corner toward effectiveness in reaching their communities. These churches might make minor incremental changes and experience a brief upturn before the decline resumes. Many pastors are looking for the quick fixes, what Ronald Heifetz calls "technical changes."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, plateaued RCA churches exhibit stagnant leadership. The pastors and leaders of these churches are on autopilot or, worse, are incompetent to lead the church. One of the various reasons for this stagnation is the leader's resistance to learn. Such

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<sup>21</sup> George Bullard, "Report for Reformed Church in America on External Audit of Outputs and Outcomes of Church Multiplication and Church Revitalization Efforts for the Period of 2002 through 2011" (Columbia: The Columbia Partnership, April 20, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Scott Cormode, "Multi-Layered Leadership" (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, August 14, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie, "The Work of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review* 75, no. 1 (January–February 1997).

leaders refuse to engage in any learning that might benefit him or her and the church. The business theorist Chris Argyris says learning is prevented by defensiveness, projecting blame, and the belief that one has nothing to learn.<sup>24</sup> Consider defensiveness: defensive routines are the actions we put in place to prevent ourselves from experiencing embarrassment or threat. When leaders discover that they must look inward in order to change—rather than rely on external factors such as role reassignments, performance reviews, or leadership training—they often become threatened.

Given this composite of plateaued churches, what is the response of the Reformed Church in America? It is clear that doing nothing is not an option. Given the cultural and historical moment there is an urgency to Jesus' words in Matthew, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20).<sup>25</sup> The church that embodies the Great Commission is a people sent on a mission, who gather regularly to worship, to grow in community, and to be nourished by the Word of God in order to live as disciples who make disciples in their neighborhoods, communities, and the world.

In the words of Tom De Vries, general secretary of the RCA, "The Reformed tradition is not a narrow street, but a superhighway on which Christians are prompted by the Spirit to risk the continued reshaping of the church in order to be effective in the

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2009), 178.

<sup>25</sup> All Scripture quoted is from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

context of a postmodern world.”<sup>26</sup> The Apostle Paul admonishes, “Do not be conformed to this world...but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom 12:2). God wants to transform the church for the sake of the world. This means learning new ways of being the church in the twenty-first century and offers an opportunity to live into what it means to love and serve Jesus. Leadership is about transformation *and* mission, about growing *and* going, about personal development *and* corporate effectiveness—all simultaneously.<sup>27</sup> The call for congregational transformation is urgent. How would our world look different if RCA churches had a discipleship pathway, growing disciples who made reproducible disciples? If we looked at our neighbors as fellow image bearers of God? That, at the same time as we were being transformed in the image of Christ, we also were joining God in God’s redemptive work of mercy and justice in our streets, towns, and cities? Churches that exist solely for the edification of their own members, that do not look outside their doors, engage their neighbors, or live in relationship with others outside the church, and that simply seek to maintain stable attendance and preserve their traditions will experience a slow death. They will not experience transformation.

Underlying the vision for transformation in the RCA are two assumptions. The first, writes Tom De Vries, is that “the church at one time had vitality. To revitalize is to restore to a former vitality, to bring to new life. In turning around a congregation it is assumed that it was once strong and full of life. Otherwise, it could not be re-vitalized.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Tom De Vries, “A Revitalized Church for a Renewed Future,” *The Acts and Proceedings of the 192nd Regular Session of the General Synod*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press, 1998), 393.

<sup>27</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 42.

<sup>28</sup> De Vries, “A Revitalized Church,” 394.

The second assumption is that “a church in need of revitalization is not experiencing the vitality of ministry that is described and demonstrated through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.”<sup>29</sup> Often plateaued churches cannot see their own need for transformation. They cannot see it or they do not choose to see and acknowledge that the church is dying. The present reality and future uncertainty of ministry direction is overwhelming to the church system.

For the RCA, the journey toward transformation began in October 2009. The General Synod Council had instructed then–general secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson “to develop a plan that engages the assemblies of the church (consistories, classes, regional synods, and the General Synod) in a process of discernment of the RCA’s continuing call to mission and ministry.”<sup>30</sup> This grassroots process engaged thousands of RCA members—including leaders from hundreds of congregations and all of the delegates to two General Synods—who prayerfully took part in this process that led to *Transformed & Transforming*.

The first step in the process was the Congregational Discovery Workshops. These workshops invited all RCA congregations to engage in biblical reflection and discernment through three questions at both personal and congregational levels: “How is God working within you? How is God working through you? How is God working ahead of you?”<sup>31</sup> Congregations discovered all that God was doing within and through them,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *The Acts and Proceedings of the 204th Regular Session of the General Synod*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press, 2010), 47.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 48.

were challenged by the work that God was doing ahead of them, and were hopeful for the future God was preparing for them.

The second step in the Transformed & Transforming process was a major denomination-wide discernment gathering called Conversations, in which more than 500 people gathered in Orlando, Florida, in February 2012. Congregations sent members and leaders, who came with their own congregation's story and an open, receptive spirit to help the RCA hear how God was leading. This gathering included large-group times primarily focused on worship, an all-day discernment process, and preaching by Efrem Smith, who brought a challenge intended to focus the RCA outward. The guiding question for the gathering was, "Where does God's work in our past and our present point us into the future?"<sup>32</sup>

During General Synod 2012, delegates devoted two all-synod advisory group discernment experiences to review the work from Conversations, to listen to what else God might want to say to the denomination, and to work toward greater focus. This then led to the third step in the process, Discovery Events.

Throughout late fall 2012 and winter 2013, approximately 1,500 people in twenty-four locations attended these events. Working in small groups, the participants engaged in two exercises, each designed to help them listen to God more clearly. During these events, participants reviewed the work that was done by General Synod 2012 and named three areas they saw as God's preferred future for the RCA.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

In February 2013, the General Synod Council appointed four of its members to process all of the data from the twenty-four Discovery Events and create an initial recommendation to bring to the General Synod Council at its March meeting. Over two days, the group of four reviewed more than 500 individual data points from the Discovery Events. The three areas of concentration were loosely referred to as “up,” “in,” and “out.” In March 2013, the General Synod Council gathered in retreat, focused on the recommendation brought by the small group. After a time of silent prayer and group discussion, the group unanimously affirmed the three categories as the foundation of God’s call to the denomination. The categories were transformation, leadership, and mission. The GSC then created its complete recommendations to General Synod 2013, a document called “Transformed & Transforming: Radically Following Christ in Mission Together,” upon which the General Synod reflected. Upon approval by a 201 to 18 vote, Transformed & Transforming was adopted, and the General Synod joined hands in celebration and together sang the Doxology.

In fifteen years, the RCA will be characterized by a culture that fosters transformation in Christ as a foundational value, where every congregation is equipped to provide pathways for all people to experience deep change through the power of the Holy Spirit. Transformation is the common thread that runs through the future we espouse. The future we believe God has called the RCA to. In order for congregational transformation to become a reality, leadership must first be transformed. As Bolsinger writes, “No one is going to follow you off the map unless they trust you on the map.”<sup>33</sup> It will take leaders

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<sup>33</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 14.

who lead authentically, who understand and embrace the hard work of adaptive change, who will lead new church plants into existence and existing churches from surviving to thriving. This means transformed leaders who have been captured—or recaptured—by the way Jesus lived his life and who model their leadership after Jesus. Transformed leaders will bring a new mental model for discipleship and leadership in their context, one that focuses on multiplying disciples and leaders, one that convenes and empowers the next generation. Transformed leaders will lead transformed churches to engage their communities missionally in creative and bold new ways. For the RCA to fully live out this goal, the church must be transformed.

## CHAPTER 2 AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE RCA

The Reformed Church in America has been around a long time—since 1628—and its history has included growth, decline, and plateau. In this chapter I will lay out an historical survey of the RCA and will discuss briefly how plateaued churches have been handled.

George Bullard was tasked with performing an external audit of outputs and outcomes of the church multiplication and church revitalization efforts of the RCA from 2002 to 2011. His report identified stages of church health using a medical model: hospice, emergency room, prime car, annual physical, and fitness center.<sup>34</sup> Prior to the beginning of the Transformed & Transforming discernment process, the continual decline in membership was a glaring reality and deep burden. Between 2010 and 2013, many regional synods of the RCA reflected a decrease of 8 to 11 percent in confessing membership.<sup>35</sup> Not only were there fewer confessing members; there was also a decline in average worship attendance. From 2010 to 2013, the average worship attendance

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<sup>34</sup> Bullard, “Report,” 4.

<sup>35</sup> RCA Constitorial Report, “Church Statistical Data,” <http://crf.rca.org/public-stats>



across the RCA declined by 16 percent.<sup>36</sup> The RCA was experiencing a downward trend in confessing members, baptized members, and total membership. Moreover, there was a decline in the number of infants being baptized, people making profession of faith in Christ, and new members being received by transfer.<sup>37</sup>

Bullard maintained that it takes a lot of time, space, conversations, sensitivity to diversity, and collaboration to turn around such an “oil tanker.”<sup>38</sup> His report provided a different perspective on the impact of Our Call, the ten-year mission and vision statement approved by the 2003 General Synod. The mission and vision statement, originally approved in 1997, states, “The Reformed Church in America is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.”<sup>39</sup> The vision for Our Call was to focus on starting new congregations and revitalize existing congregations. An additional focus was added in 2008, to imagine “a multiracial future freed from racism.”<sup>40</sup>

The RCA had a choice to make. Maintaining the status quo was not one of the choices. Turning the oil tanker around would not be a quick fix, but rather slow, steady,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Bullard, “Report,” 5.

<sup>39</sup> *The Acts and Proceedings of the 197th Regular Session of the General Synod* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press, 2003), 61.

<sup>40</sup> *The Acts and Proceedings of the 202nd Regular Session of the General Synod* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press, 2008), 267.

and intentional. Adaptive change would be needed to bring about transformation and revitalization. With a view from the balcony, the RCA was not the same denomination in 2013 as it was in 2003. How the RCA thought about church revitalization and multiplication had shifted. How it thought about leadership, discipleship, and mission had shifted. The RCA realized that North America was the primary mission field to which the denomination was called. The denomination better understood the value of unity around common mission and better embraced diversity with all of its challenges. In fact, the diversity of the RCA has come to be seen as a major means for engaging in mission.

Bullard also identified challenges that needed to be addressed if the RCA was to move toward a future of denominational health and strength. During the period of Our Call, multiplication and revitalization had been working as functional silos. In response, Bullard asked, “How can the RCA discover a true synergy of efforts?”<sup>41</sup> Collaboration among churches and pastors was and continues to be essential to the efficacy of Transformed & Transforming. Organizational silos lead to mistrust and unwanted competition. Silos prevent existing churches from learning from and with new church plants and thus from bringing changes to the overall culture of collaboration. Bullard noted in his report, “To do multiplication without revitalization is hurtful. Revitalization and multiplication actually have a lot of synergy that can develop between them to the point of some revitalization efforts actually becoming multiplication efforts, and some multiplication efforts becoming revitalization efforts.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Bullard, “Report,” 6.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

The audit finished with a dozen recommendations. They focused on how to maintain the RCA's strategic focus, capacity building, partnerships, diversity, stretching of our faith, and commitment to mission. In the end, Bullard's audit was both encouraging and challenging, requiring the RCA to question what it valued and assessed.

In order to shift the narrative from plateaued churches to transforming churches, four shifts would need to happen. These shifts would be denomination-wide and would inform the fifteen-year Transformed & Transforming goals.

The first shift is from *program* to *process*. Reggie McNeal frames this shift with a question about kingdom expansion: "Where is the front line?"<sup>43</sup> The front line is no longer church property and programs. The church is not a vendor of religious goods and services, nor is it a hub where its time, energy, and attention focus on programs within the walls of the church. What has worked in the past—classes, seminars, and workshops—does not and will not work in a postmodern society. The pinch of reality is that many RCA pastors and leaders have been trained and educated for a world that no longer exists. If programs are designed to keep the church going, then the church can expect a slow death. However, as RCA churches shift to discipleship processes and leadership development processes, for example, they are better able to facilitate change and transformation. Processes that include information, reflection, action, and reflection on the action will insure greater congregational buy-in and systemic ownership. The idea

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<sup>43</sup> Reggie McNeal, *Revolution in Leadership: Training Apostles for Tomorrow's Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 40.

of process serves the vision that RCA churches are on a journey where movement exists, where ministry and mission is changing as churches take their next faithful step.

The second shift is from *institutional* to *missional*. For generations the RCA has been engaged in building the RCA as a denomination. The institution called the Reformed Church in America has been at the center of churches' efforts as they have served Jesus Christ and lived out their faith. The institution has been valuable: it provides a framework and foundation for local congregations. In his 2014 report to the General Synod, general secretary Tom De Vries said, "During Our Call, and into the future, the preservation of the institution is becoming less important, and our cooperative mission as local RCA congregations, and engaging in that mission together as a missional alliance, is becoming more important."<sup>44</sup> A new awareness of the missionary nature of God, "a God who sends," was reaffirmed as part of the RCA's ecclesiology and of the nature and mission of the wider church. As Reformed, the RCA recognizes that participating in God's mission means restoring creation and calling people into a reconciled relationship with God. The shift from institutional to missional requires embracing the mission of God, being sent as the church of Jesus Christ, and being empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the gospel. Being a missional denomination is being committed to radically following Christ in mission together.

The third shift is from *structural* to *contextual*. Part of being Reformed is to be defined by our presbyterian polity and the *Book of Church Order*. That structure provides

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<sup>44</sup> Tom De Vries, "Report of the General Secretary," in *The Acts and Proceedings of the 207th Regular Session of the General Synod* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press, 2013), 37.

the form from which we function, but now the RCA is shifting to churches that are formed by their individual ministry contexts. The church is more than a structure. In order to make disciples and live out the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, a church must understand the ministry context into which God has placed it. Bringing the gospel in relevant ways into North America missional environments is part of God's call upon the RCA. The RCA's response to God's leading through Our Call reflects this shift: "How do we become a Jew to the Jews, and a Greek to the Greeks? How are RCA churches becoming all things to all people so that they might save some? Are we shifting from how we define ourselves on our terms to how God is calling us into foreign and unfamiliar contexts that are right outside our doors, in order to communicate a relevant gospel?"<sup>45</sup> One of the hoped-for outcomes of Transformed & Transforming is that RCA members will make a contribution as leaders, teachers, and people of influence within their congregations; that as these disciples follow Jesus and are transformed by the Holy Spirit, their congregations will thrive; and that the communities that God has called them to serve will flourish.

The fourth shift within Transformed & Transforming is from *doing* to *equipping*. This is a shift in mental models. If the RCA is going to be effective, expanding ministry and mission within the local context, then we need reproducible leadership. The discernment process of Transformed & Transforming was a grassroots process, emerging from the prayerful and thoughtful work of leaders throughout the RCA. The RCA seeks to add value to what many of our congregations are already doing. Rather than operate

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

with a top-down approach—assuming that the denomination knows what local congregations needs—the denomination will listen in order to equip. The RCA will listen to the local church. It will listening well to the church and ask not just good questions but the right questions. If a thousand new congregations are needed in the next generation, where will the new leaders come from for these new congregations? Those leaders will emerge in part because they will be equipped. That equipping will happen through classes, consistories, and congregations, partnering to develop processes for identifying, growing, and mobilizing leaders for kingdom mission and ministry. Equipping the church for ministry includes the dynamic interplay between information, imitation, and innovation.<sup>46</sup>

Transformed & Transforming, the RCA’s fifteen-year goal, focuses on what it means to radically follow Christ in mission together. Through the strategic priority areas of cultivating transformation, equipping emerging leaders, and engaging in Christ’s Kingdom mission, the RCA is committing to come alongside congregations as they discover God’s unique assignment for them and their communities. According the De Vries, “We want every church in the RCA to have a discipleship pathway, a leadership pathway and to engage in local and global mission.”<sup>47</sup>

The hoped-for outcome of these shifts is that RCA congregations will be thriving, missional, and culturally relevant. Churches will thrive as they live out God’s call for the congregation in their context. Churches will be missionally driven, embodying sacrificial

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<sup>46</sup> Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People Like Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 41.

<sup>47</sup> Tom De Vries (lecture, Interchange Partnership Gathering, Grand Rapids, MI, August 2016).

service, authentic relationships, and spiritual transformation. And churches will be culturally relevant, equipped for ministry that serves their context.

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION



## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The way the RCA is approaching transformation is through “learning communities.” These learning communities are groups of congregations that “work together to discern, design, and implement experiences and unique pathways that will enable all the people they are called to serve to be transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit into passionate, outwardly-focused disciples that live for the sake of others.”<sup>48</sup> These congregations learn from and with one another as they engage the process, invest in the provided accountability through coaching, and ultimately discern the pathway that grows disciples who make reproducible disciples in their unique context.

But how do we know that learning communities bring about transformation in RCA churches? In other words, how will learning communities help to move churches from places of plateau to places of transformation? In this chapter I will provide a literature review of how adults learn, what prevents adults from learning, and the dynamic interplay of transformative learning that encompasses content, process, and

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<sup>48</sup> Tom De Vries, “2015 General Synod Council Monitoring Report,” (2015).

people. I will also look at learning communities as adaptive change processes that include coaching and group dynamics. As a result of these findings, I hope to observe churches become vibrant places of transformative learning—that is, communities where people are consistently mentored into a life of apprenticeship with Jesus.

### **Transformative Learning**

According to Chris Argyris, success in an organization depends on learning, “yet most people don’t know how to learn.”<sup>49</sup> Why is this? Argyris makes the claim that most people misunderstand what learning actually is: “Most people define learning too narrowly as mere ‘problem solving,’ so they focus on identifying and correcting errors in the external environment. If learning is to persist, managers and employees must also look inward. They need to reflect critically on their own behavior, identify the ways they often inadvertently contribute to the organization’s problems, and then change how they act.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, in order to learn, Argyris argues that pastors and leaders must be willing to carefully examine their own behavior with a willingness to do the hard and important work of changing oneself. Certainly this takes a degree of humility.

Historically, learning has been seen as something that happens when a person attends a conference, reads a book, or attends a lecture—and, by doing so, solves a problem. The bookshelves of ministry leaders are filled with three-ring binders from conferences. These are helpful, but merely receiving new knowledge isn’t enough to

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<sup>49</sup> Argyris, *Teaching Smart People*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

bring about deep change. Rather, lives are transformed by inward learning. When a leader is willing to change him or herself, then that leader is able to learn. Real learning occurs when adults take responsibility for their own learning. In the same manner, adults must take responsibility for their unlearning, recognizing that in order to facilitate transformational movements in the twenty-first-century church, new mental models are needed and old ones must be discarded. Mental models will be discussed later in the chapter.

Argyris calls learning as problem solving “single-loop” learning, and learning as changing one’s behavior “double-loop” learning.<sup>51</sup> Let me offer an example from the staff at New Life Community Church. Due to a full-capacity worship service and a number of competing sports and extra-curricular activities on Sunday morning, Pastor Dan and the staff were exploring the possibility of a Saturday night worship service. The problem seemed clear to Dan: New Life needed an alternative worship service time. The solution seemed equally clear: they would add a Saturday night service and offer children’s activities and nursery care, staffing the worship service in order to ensure success and thus solve the problem.

However, one staff person asked, “Does a Saturday night service solve the problem?” Another asked, “How does this support New Life Community’s mission and vision?” A third said, “What are the consequences of a move like this and how are our church’s values served?” Pastor Dan became defensive. When the reasons for a Saturday night service did not hold up, Dan’s single loop strategies failed. He did not have the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 7.

resources to look beyond mere problem solving to the underlying values, mission, and vision—the “why” behind the need for an alternative worship service time. This is consistent with Argyris’s argument. When Dan’s single-loop strategies were ineffective, he became defensive, blocked out criticism, and blamed on anyone but himself. Writes Argyris, “By constantly turning the focus away from their own behavior to that of others, the professionals bring learning to a grinding halt.”<sup>52</sup> Double-loop learning reflects more than people’s feelings; it also reflects the “cognitive rules or reasoning they use to design and implement their actions.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Obstacles to Learning**

According to Argyris there are three things that prevent learning: defensiveness, projecting blame, and the belief that one has nothing to learn.<sup>54</sup> To that list, I would add fear. The first, defensiveness, arises when people feel threatened or try to prevent embarrassment in social situations. And that feeling of being threatened often happens when leaders discover that they must look inward in order to change rather than rely on external factors such as a shift in role, an annual performance review, or competency trainings. Humans have an innate need to protect themselves, and so people put up their guard, certain that all the problems in the organization are unrelated to them.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>54</sup> Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 178.

Defensiveness and projecting blame are rooted in human nature. It goes back to the Garden of Eden, when God asks Adam, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” Adam’s response is to blame both God and Eve: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” The blaming has a ripple effect. God says to Eve, “What is this that you have done?” Eve replies, “The serpent tricked me” (Gen 3:11-13). This is defensiveness at its core: “It’s not my fault!” Neither Adam nor Eve took responsibility for their actions. Defensive reasoning brings learning to a grinding halt.<sup>55</sup>

Like defensiveness, projecting blame involves saying, “If I could just get everyone else to change” or “I choose to be passive until they change.” People react defensively to protect themselves even when their colleagues, parishioners, or bosses are not acting in threatening ways. When leaders do this, they bypass their chance to change, which causes them to plateau. Up to this point, Adam and Eve had experienced God as gracious and loving, the One who fed and clothed and took care of them, who walked with them in the cool of the evening (Gen 3:8). Defensive reasoning occurs when one person disapproves of another in order to protect him or herself from the embarrassment of admitting that he or she had contributed to the problem. On the other hand, leaders who move beyond plateaued leadership and learn to make deep change do so by refusing to blame anyone or any circumstance for the challenges they face. Instead they focus solely on personal responsibility, on what they can do, and on how they can act

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<sup>55</sup> Argyris, *Teaching Smart People*, 21.

differently.<sup>56</sup> In the words of Ed Friedman, “The leader in the system is the one who is not blaming anyone.”<sup>57</sup>

Fear also prevents leaders from learning. Leaders like Pastor Dan put pressure on themselves to meet unrealistically high expectations. They believe that they must execute a task with excellence and that their performance must receive the highest accolades. This narrative implies that a leader cannot make mistakes. But Argyris observes that few people have a capacity for tolerating failure. In addition, rarely do pastors and church leaders discover the importance of learning from mistakes and dealing in healthy ways with the feelings that accompany failure. Argyris writes, “This in turn has led them not only to fear failure but also to fear the fear of failure itself.”<sup>58</sup> This high fear of failure leads to shame and guilt. Dan remembers the words of one of his seminary colleagues, as his peer group was reflecting on a case study about a failed church plant. Dan’s classmate admitted, “I hate making mistakes.” That fear of making a mistake prevents learning, which prevents change. But, when a leader learns to relinquish control over the outcome of a situation, he or she has chosen to overcome the fear of not changing.

In her opening chapter of *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg asks, “What would you do if you were not afraid?”<sup>59</sup> How would Pastor Dan answer that question? He could answer it in a number of ways: he would tackle the difficult conversation with the worship director.

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<sup>56</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>58</sup> Argyris, *Teaching Smart People*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 12.

He would stop procrastinating and pick up the phone to return Pastor Rob's call. He would set up a meeting with the deacons and find new ways to approach the difficult benevolence budget agenda. When Dan reflects on his years in ministry, he recalls occasions when he realized that his fears were unfounded and when he was willing to take a risk in a meeting. What if Dan's greatest fear is the fact that *he* has to change? Though he does not yet realize it, Dan needs to stop looking outside himself, at his colleagues or the struggle with volunteers or the changing landscape of the neighborhood. Instead, in order for Dan to move off his leadership plateau, he has to change his entire approach. Before New Life can move to a place of transformation, Dan and his staff must experience transformation.

This is a central dilemma for most Christian leaders. They are called to help people to grow, change, and be transformed, but unless they themselves are growing, how can they expect the congregations and organizations in their care to grow? Pastor Dan and leaders like him find themselves in new realities embedded with problems for which there are no easy answers. Many pastors in North America are worn down from trying to bring change to churches that are stuck and declining, churches that are clinging to the past, or churches that are jumping at quick fixes for what clearly are bigger challenges. The assumptions and values that were effective in previous generations no longer hold. A new set of rules applies. But if "the purpose of learning is to become agile,"<sup>60</sup> then many leaders are failing because they are simply maintaining the same

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<sup>60</sup> Scott Cormode, "Becoming a Change Leader – Interview with Dr. Scott Cormode," Leadership.com.sg, April 1, 2014, <http://www.leadership.com.sg/leaders-chat/interviews-with-ceo/interview-with-dr-scott-cormode-becoming-a-change-leader/#.WFC4RdUrKM8>.

mindset, which causes them and their churches to plateau. Though leaders cannot anticipate the situations they will encounter, they can change their mindset to adapt to those situations. As Tod Bolsinger writes, “While leadership in uncharted territory requires both learning and loss, once we realize that the losses won’t kill us, they can teach us. And we will learn that to thrive off the map in an exciting and rapidly changing world means learning to let go, learn as we go and keep going no matter what.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Adaptive Change**

Having addressed some of the obstacles to transformational learning, I will now turn to the process of transformation—specifically, the process of adaptive change. Adaptive change is the result of responding to what Ronald Heifetz calls an “adaptive challenge,” which must be distinguished from a “technical problem.”<sup>62</sup> These two kinds of problems—technical problems and adaptive challenges—must be approached in radically different ways.

Technical challenges are those problems that are fixable; there are solutions to these sorts of problems and those solutions are readily available. For example, technical challenges at New Life Church include the time the boiler malfunctioned (on that occasion, an expert came in, diagnosed the problem, offered a solution, and fixed the boiler) and the time that, during a routine inspection, it was discovered that the sprinkler system in the west wing was not up to fire code (that time, Dan instructed the executive

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<sup>61</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 14.

<sup>62</sup> Heifetz and Laurie, “The Work of Leadership.”



pastor to resolve the matter). These are fixable problems. Things return to the way they were. When Pastor Dan wanted to strengthen his pastoral counseling skills, he attended a workshop where he learned pastoral counseling skills and best practices from an expert in the field. This is another example of a technical change.

Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, require something more than incorporating new technical skills into your current mindset. Writes Heifetz, “Adaptive work is required when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge.”<sup>63</sup> Adaptive challenges create a multiplicity of opportunities for leaders and their congregations to learn. This learning involves practice and reflection, allowing the learners to control the process. Thus, a readiness to learn and embrace uncertainty is a necessary prerequisite to doing adaptive work. Adaptive work surfaces when the world around us has changed but we continue to live on the success of the past. Facing adaptive challenges is serious work: Scott Cormode says engaging it is a long and painful process.<sup>64</sup> These challenges demand that leaders make hard choices about what to preserve and what to let go. Not only is one’s ability to learn required for adaptive work, but so is a willingness to embrace loss, the loss that comes with deep change.

An adaptive challenge, as Bolsinger writes, is not about finding the best-known or most-available fix to a problem, but instead “adapting to the changing environment or circumstances so that new possibilities arise for accurately seeing, understanding, and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Cormode, “Multi-Layered Leadership” (lecture).

facing challenges with new actions.”<sup>65</sup> These are the challenges that require pastors, leaders, and congregations to learn and to change. They are the challenges that require leaders like Pastor Dan to experience and navigate profound loss. Bolsinger paraphrases Marshall Goldsmith, saying, “What got us *here* wouldn’t take us *there*.”<sup>66</sup>

The deep and sustainable change that churches who move from plateau to transformation is internal and systemic change. This change happens in the life of the pastoral leader and in the life of the congregations. These adaptive challenges are met by transforming our mind, which Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal call “reframing.”<sup>67</sup> In order to move off a plateaued state of ministry, pastors and leaders will need new categories to make sense of the various situations in which they find themselves. Great leaders employ mental maps—frames—that inform the way leaders think, plan, implement, and review their actions.<sup>68</sup> Frames embody ideas and assumptions to navigate new territory. Different situations require different frames; according to Bolman and Deal, the ability to size up a situation and adopt the frame appropriate to the moment is at the heart of leadership.

Jack Mezirow calls these mental maps “frames of reference,” and defines them as “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 41.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>67</sup> Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 12.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Jack Mezirow, “Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 74 (Summer 1997), 5, doi:10.1002/ace.7401.

According to Mezirow, transformational learning happens when change occurs within the frame of reference.<sup>70</sup> Through honest and rigorous dialogue within community, “points of view are subject to continuing change as we reflect on either the content or process by which we solve problems and identify the need to modify assumptions.”<sup>71</sup>

Consider how a frame of reference operates in a learning community. Say that participants are discussing what it means to be church in the twenty-first century. Each participant adds a definition to a pool of meaning from his or her own experiences and context. As the participants critically reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and definitions of what it means to be the church, their frames of reference can be transformed. This is what collaborative learning looks like as participants reflect on their own thinking and report that thinking, and as others speak in to the frame of reference, thereby facilitating a clearer understanding of how one frames one’s mental model of church.

Heifetz talks about two reasons that people avoid adaptive change.<sup>72</sup> The first is that they don’t feel the problem strongly enough. Another reason leaders do not move past plateaued leadership is that they do not believe they can change. I will focus on the first reason. Jim Herrington, Michael Bonem, and James Furr put it this way: “A congregation that is not committed to following God or that is experiencing serious conflict within the body will find it virtually impossible to follow the difficult path of

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Heifetz and Laurie, “The Work of Leadership.”

transformation.”<sup>73</sup> It is a daunting reality to think that many pastors or church leaders remain on auto pilot for months, even years, in an unproductive holding pattern, failing to realize that they are not stewarding their gifts and call to lead the church. For many of these churches, the pain and loss that comes with change is just too great. In their book, *Immunity to Change*, Robert Keagan and Lisa Laskow Lahey assert that the reason people don’t change is not that they don’t want to change; it’s because they are more committed to something else.<sup>74</sup> Was Pastor Dan more committed to pleasing others than he was to taking risks? What losses would New Life experience as they engaged the necessary changes in the congregation?

### **A Holding Environment for Adaptive Challenge**

Adaptive change happens both in leaders and in congregations, and the two reinforce each other. Whenever a congregation engages adaptive change, part of the work of adaptive leaders is to “construct a holding environment. A holding environment is a psychological space that is both safe and uncomfortable.... [It] is uncomfortable enough that a person cannot avoid the problem, but safe enough that the person can experiment with a new way of being.”<sup>75</sup> For Pastor Dan and New Life Community Church, the purpose of the holding environment is to help them make critical changes that will bring about greater clarity of vision, mission, and goals. Think about Pastor Dan. *I cannot do*

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<sup>73</sup> Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> Scott Cormode, lecture, August 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Scott Cormode, “The Work of Adaptive Change” (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, August 17, 2014).

*this. It's too hard.* The question that stimulates the need for a holding environment is this: “How do you help someone change who desperately needs to change, but desperately does not want to change?”<sup>76</sup> Before New Life Community Church can move off plateau and experience transformation, Pastor Dan will need to discern his own adaptive work that will lead to the necessary changes in how he leads and then enfold those changes into his daily life. He will experience personal transformation, and his changed leadership will facilitate the holding environment that New Life needs in order to move off plateau.

Likewise, if RCA churches are to do the adaptive work of moving off of plateaus and into places of transformation, they will need holding environments—spaces to experiment, explore, confess, pilot, and move into new ways of being. As mentioned earlier, this is not easy work: “Adaptive change is distressing for the people going through it. They need to take on new roles, new relationships, new values, new behaviors, and new approaches to work.”<sup>77</sup> Pastors and leaders are responsible for creating a holding environment in which their congregations can successfully do that distressing work. And, as mentioned before, part of the adaptive change is loss. The ministries that a church held dear for so many years may need to end. The position held by a beloved staff member may no longer serve the church’s vision. According to Heifetz, “A holding environment is a space formed by a network of relationships within which people tackle tough, sometimes divisive questions without flying apart; a place where there is enough

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<sup>76</sup> Cormode, “Multi-Layered Leadership” (lecture).

<sup>77</sup> Heifetz and Laurie, “The Work of Leadership,” 124.

cohesion to offset the centrifugal forces that arise when people do adaptive work.”<sup>78</sup>

Pastors and leaders hold the responsibility to motivate, organize, and focus the attention of their congregation on the adaptive problem the team is seeking to address.

A learning community serves as a holding environment for congregations that want to be transformed. This is the place where creative tension can serve as a catalyst for innovation and risk-taking. And a holding environment is the place where that healthy tension can be sustained over a period of time. In a holding environment, leaders have a safe place in which to be transparent and, at the same time, a challenging space in which to identify and absorb the painful realities of their plateau, where they have not changed—where they are stagnant. Ridder Church Renewal articulates it this way: “The space begins to be created when leaders see that a dominant narrative is at work in the congregation and they introduce another narrative that they believe, if embraced by the congregation, would make the congregation more effective in achieving its mission.”<sup>79</sup> Those narratives are varied. Within the context of transformational learning in a congregation, some examples of narratives are: “My understanding of how things are, and yours; my understanding of how things should be, and yours; the values that undergird my understanding, and those that undergird yours; my set of experiences, and

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<sup>78</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 102–103.

<sup>79</sup> Jim Herrington, “A Journey of Personal and Congregational Transformation” (Holland, MI: Western Theological Seminary, 2012), 47.

yours; my beliefs, and yours; what is so for me, and what is so for you; how I read the Bible through my mental models and how you read it through yours.”<sup>80</sup>

When these narratives differ within the learning process, two things happen: tension surfaces and new learning emerges. The more the narratives differ, the more heat is produced with the holding environment. Writes Jim Herrington, “There are two kinds of heat that arise in a holding environment: the heat of creative tension and the heat of emotional tension (aka ‘anxiety’).”<sup>81</sup> Creative tension encourages learning; emotional tension squelches learning. The goal is to move into creative tension, which means people need to manage their anxiety. In a holding environment, leaders must work to raise the temperature that comes from the creative tension, but they must do that in a contained way that allows people to manage their emotional tension.

### **Coaching**

One of the essential components of transformative learning is coaching. Without coaching, participants in the learning process do not have accountability to ensure that they are executing what they committed to. Without coaching, it is challenging for pastors and leaders to maintain disciplined attention to the learning process amidst the daily pressures and demands of pastoral ministry. This is why coaching is necessary to the success of transformative learning.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 48

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 48.

According to Bob Logan, of Logan Leadership, coaching serves to build an empowering relationship with the leader of a church, helping the leader cultivate discovery.<sup>82</sup> This discovery comes by asking not just good questions but the right questions. Coaching is not offering advice or therapy; rather, it is listening long enough and well enough to ask the right questions in order for the leader to take his or her next faithful step. This active, outcome-focused coaching will help to bring about the necessary adaptive change to help RCA churches move from plateau transformation.<sup>83</sup> The assumption is that the RCA's learning communities attract church teams who want to see deep change within their system, and thus, the coaching needs to serve the participants well by keeping participants focused on strategic thinking and implementation of their goals as coaches provide a space for the Holy Spirit to speak and lead.

Coaching has been a valuable resource in the RCA for years. Coaches provide safe places for pastors to “get to the balcony”<sup>84</sup> in order to reflect upon their own call, the purpose of their ministry and the strategic vision of the church they serve. “In one hour per month, coaches have helped leaders get clarity on an action plan, the courage to implement that plan and a space to reflect on how the plan went.”<sup>85</sup> Because mutual trust

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<sup>82</sup> Robert Logan, (presentation, RCA Michigan Regional Center, Grand Rapids, MI, March 4, 2016).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Heifetz and Laurie, “The Work of Leadership.”

<sup>85</sup> “RCA Coaching Plan” (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church in America).



and mutual respect are essential to successful coaching, it is important to allow coach and coachee to choose one another.

In this chapter we examined the literature that discusses transformation and learning processes. These learning processes are designed to serve, guide, and strengthen churches to develop a process of change that will bring transformation to their context. Certainly it is important to remember that each local context has its own unique set of circumstances, and thus the individual coaching will help to facilitate growth and learning and the move from a plateaued state of ministry.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE THEOLOGY OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Having examined the literature on adult learning and adaptive change, we will now turn to a theological review of transformation, adaptive change, discipleship, and community. We will also consider the theology of a learning community, centered on Hebrews 10:24-25 and Ephesians 4.

#### **Theology of Transformation**

From a theological perspective, what does transformation mean? The starting point may be 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” And Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The biblical understanding of transformation means that humanity is changed because of a relationship to Jesus Christ. The very first words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels are Jesus’ invitation to be transformed. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 4:17). With these words, Jesus is saying that the reign of God has broken

in and the world will never again be the same. The imperative of Jesus—“Repent” — implies a turning around, a turning from one thing (a life of sin) to something else (God’s grace and forgiveness in Jesus). The call of Jesus invites us into a journey, a journey that begins as we acknowledge that our “sins are staring us in the face,” (Isa 59:12, *The Message*) and that through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus we are forgiven and free to live as disciples of the One we follow.

Theologically, transformation is understood as confessions of sin, outward expressions of grace, repentance, forgiveness, and ultimately lives that have been changed. In the RCA, the idea of transformation is also found in the creeds and confessions. Transformation shows up in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. 88 What is involved in genuine repentance or conversion?

A. Two things: the dying-away of the old self, and the rising-to-life of the new.

Q. 89 What is the dying-away of the old self?

A. To be genuinely sorry for sin and more and more to hate and run away from it.

Q. 90 What is the rising-to-life of the new self?

A. Wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a love and delight to live according to the will of God by doing every kind of good work.<sup>86</sup>

In the catechism, we see followers of Jesus live as new creations who have been transformed through the sacrifice of Jesus, and who simultaneously are engaged in bringing transformation to other individuals, communities, and the world as people who have been made new in Christ.

Transformation is a journey. “Come, follow me,” says Jesus (Mt 4:19, NIV). Jesus calls. We walk. We follow. In the original Greek language of the New Testament,

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<sup>86</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, “Lord’s Day 33” (<https://www.rca.org/resources/heidelbergcatechism>).

the word “disciple” is *mathetes*, which means “learner.”<sup>87</sup> What Jesus invites people into is a lifelong journey of learning. If one is not learning from Jesus—if one is not apprenticed to Jesus as the Master—then that person is not a disciple. Nowhere in Scripture is humanity invited to receive Jesus as Savior and then do nothing about it. Writes A.W. Tozer, “a notable heresy has come into being throughout our evangelical Christian circles—the widely accepted concept that we humans can choose to accept Christ only because we need him as Savior and that we have the right to postpone our obedience to Him as Lord as long as we want to!”<sup>88</sup>

To follow Jesus as his disciple means to grow in Christlikeness, in both the character and competency of Jesus. It means to internalize the Word of God as Jesus did. When the young lawyer asks Jesus, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus replies, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mt 22:36-40). Jesus as teacher—not simply giving information but saying that what a person *does* is important—shows that righteousness is a matter of becoming *and* doing. The disciple is one who imitates Jesus in all that he says and does. The disciple is one whose mind is transformed by the Word of God in order to not only hear the Holy Spirit clearly but to follow Jesus in obedience. In the words of Jim Herrington, “Very simply, we believe that the abundant life is a missional life where we have a demonstrated and growing capacity to

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<sup>87</sup> Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>88</sup> A.W. Tozer, *I Call It Heresy* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1974), 5.

love God, neighbor, self, stranger, and the enemy. It is a life where we subversively live in the dark and broken places of our world to become a sacrificial expression of the unconditional love of God. In order to live this life, we must grow in our capacity to lay down our lives for the sake of others. This growth is produced, in part, when we engage the work of spiritual formation.”<sup>89</sup>

Before Jesus ascends into heaven, he leaves his disciples with these words: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). Jesus’ mandate is for his disciples to continue to do the work he started. Jesus promises his presence through the Holy Spirit, who is sent to guide and empower the church. Jesus calls the disciples to obedience to God. Writes Bob Logan in *The Discipleship Difference*, “Our making of disciples flows out of our life with God, to be certain. Yet in some ways, the order needs to be inverted as well: Only as we make disciples are we perfected in the faith. As we reach out, we are shaped and transformed.”<sup>90</sup>

Jesus’ command to make disciples is the RCA’s mandate to help all people grow and deepen their faith as they live it out in everyday life. To “cultivate transformation in Christ” means that the church is actively “developing passionate disciples filled with the Holy Spirit and the truth of the Word who effectively make followers of Jesus who live

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<sup>89</sup> Jim Herrington, Faithwalking material

<sup>90</sup> Robert Logan and Charles Ridley, *The Discipleship Difference: Making Disciples While Growing as Disciples* (Logan Leadership, 2015), 4.

and love like him.”<sup>91</sup> Jesus says, “For each tree is known by its own fruit” (Luke 6:44). Thus, being a disciple of Jesus ought to produce visible behavior expressions such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal 5:22). Jim Herrington invites people to think of discipleship in this way: “What if you lived the life that Jesus would live if Jesus were living your life?”<sup>92</sup> Jesus is the perfect disciple who modeled what it means to reproduce disciples. Jesus loved and embraced all people but especially the marginalized and “have-nots.” Jesus grew in wisdom (Luke 2:42) and also in a deeper love relationship with his heavenly Father. This love relationship was so intimate that in John 15, Jesus declares that he is the true vine and that the Father is the vinegrower. Jesus’ disciples are the branches. The main point of this image is the intimate union between Jesus and the believers. A disciple’s very life depends on this union.

Holding the Great Commandment (Mt 22) and the Great Commission (Mt 28) in relationship is essential if churches are going to grow disciples who make disciples. Our sent-ness as followers of Jesus is rooted in our identity and the call of our daily lives. As Jesus speaks the Great Commission, he sends his disciples out: “Go!” (Mt 28:16). Stanley Hauerwas reminds Christians of their distinctiveness in this world as “resident aliens” who live in the world but are not of the world (Jn 17:16).<sup>93</sup> This distinctiveness is made even more so when Jesus tells his disciples that he sends them “out as lambs among

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<sup>91</sup> “Transformed & Transforming: Radically Following Christ in Mission Together” (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church in America, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> Jim Herrington (presentation, Faithwalking retreat, Dallas, TX, October 2015).

<sup>93</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colonies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

wolves” (Mt 10:16, KJV). Lambs and wolves are very different creatures, an analogy Jesus uses to remind his disciples to live lives different from others. Jesus asks for a radical shift in their lives. Christians have been so acculturated that they are often no longer different from others who do not follow Christ. Jesus wants his disciples to have different values, different goals, and different lifestyles than the world. The church should not be separated from the world, but it should be distinctive.

When we look at the life of Jesus, we see him leading the disciples through adaptive work. Jesus’ method of teaching and leadership development includes both invitation and challenge, thus creating a holding environment for the disciples to learn the ways of the Rabbi. In this way, Jesus helps the disciples to “become true learners who are ready to adapt to whatever comes before [them].”<sup>94</sup> The disciples are constantly with Jesus. They observe, interact, learn, and process their learning as they walk the roads of Galilee, Samaria, and Jerusalem, engaging the classroom of life. Luke 8:1-2 depicts this: “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities.” This incarnational immersion—being with Jesus in order to learn from Jesus and grow more deeply as a Christ follower—represents a core part of the development and adaptive change a leader must undergo in order to move to the next level of leadership. This is Jesus’ one way of leadership development: investing in the lives of others and allowing them to be invested in his life by having access to his life.

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<sup>94</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 27.

Jesus' model for learning is a synergy of teaching, practice, and reflection. Through his teaching, Jesus invites the disciples into an intimate relationship with him. In the language of adaptive change, Jesus is able to get the disciples to maintain disciplined attention, even when it is painful. When Jesus observes behavior that is contrary to God's will or attitudes that are wrong or unhealthy, he directly challenges his disciples. After sending them out to heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and proclaim the good news, Jesus asks them reflective questions such as, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:29). Jesus immerses his students in an environment of invitation and challenge, giving them space to process their learning, along with their doubts, hopes, and fears.

### **Jesus and Mental Models**

Jesus introduced a new mental model of discipleship to his hearers. A mental model, as I outlined in chapter 3, is "a set of beliefs and assumptions about how the world works" that leads a person to take action.<sup>95</sup> Mental models can be both personal and congregational, and they involve the way leaders plan, implement, and review their actions. As a result of underlying mental models, we have a habitual way of being. We call this our "autopilot." Mental models allow us to do things without thinking, which is convenient, except when the mental model is flawed.

In Scripture, how does Jesus use mental models to transform lives? Scott Cormode says that Jesus is constantly turning the disciples' mental model of discipleship

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<sup>95</sup> Scott Cormode, "Adaptive Leadership" (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, August 16, 2012).



upside down, showing them how new models inform how they live in the world.<sup>96</sup> Jesus uses stories to make the gospel accessible to everyone, thus making theology available to everyday people. Through storytelling, Jesus gives his hearers a new framework to make sense of the world. One example of this is in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus repeatedly says, “You have heard it said...” (Mt 5:21), and then follows it with, “But I say...” (Mt 5:22). In doing so, he changes the way people see the world by giving them new ways of thinking and acting.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus reshapes his hearers’ understanding of what a neighbor is and does. It begins when a teacher of the law wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by asking, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The teacher replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Lk 10:26-27). Jesus takes the opportunity to reframe what someone who loves God does and does not do. When Jesus asks the expert in the law how he reads the law, Jesus is asking him what his mental model of a neighbor is. The expert in the law must unlearn the incorrect models of neighbor as defined by the law. Jesus wants to help the expert in the law move from a false, or default, understanding of neighbor—of who cares for whom in this world and how the love of God is dispensed. The expert in the law has his own picture of who is neighbor is, but Jesus turns that mental model upside down.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Through this story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus reframes both how the love of God works in the world and what a neighbor is and does. Those within earshot of this story have to decide if they can follow this Jesus, who is more than a prophet—he is the Messiah who appears to take liberties at creating new mental models, of everything from discipleship to neighboring.

In the same way that Jesus brings transformational learning to his disciples and others with whom he interacts, the RCA’s learning communities serve to foster transformation in the hearts and minds of pastors and leaders. Learning communities blend information (content), practice, and reflection to bring about transformation, which is seen when people change their actions. Transformation is manifest in healthier relationships, increased love for others, sacrificial giving, a commitment to influence the world for the gospel, and advocacy for justice.

### **A Theology of Community**

Scripture offers again and again a picture of humans created to be in relationship with other humans. The first pages of Genesis demonstrate that humanity is created for community: “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner’” (Gen 2:18). Hebrews depicts such a community: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:24-25, NIV). The writer to the Hebrews acknowledges that the purpose of community is to spur one another on. For

Adam and Eve, it is to spur each other to have dominion and multiply; for the early church, it is to be together in one room, to worship and serve and eat and share together.

The word “spur” carries both challenge and invitation. The challenge comes because loving other people and doing good deeds aren’t always easy. But it’s an invitation because doing those things can bring about beautiful relationships and a more just world. In that sense, Jesus certainly spurs his disciples on to love and good deeds. Likewise, a learning community seeks both to challenge churches and to invite them into a new way of being, into an adventure of “looking at our problems differently,” and into opportunities to love and serve Jesus with greater intentionality and purpose.<sup>97</sup>

Jesus makes our belonging to one another possible. When the resurrected Jesus says to the women at the tomb, “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Mt 28:10), he is creating a new mental model of family. In Christ, those who follow him are one. It happens at Pentecost, when believers are gathered together in one place (Acts 2:1). It shows up again in John 17 as Jesus prays that his followers would be one as he and the Father are one. Through Christ, God is restoring the community of believers to God’s original design. Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes that root of that restoration when he writes, “Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.”<sup>98</sup>

Not only is our belonging to one another possible, but it is also necessary. The apostle Paul writes, “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members

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<sup>97</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 34.

<sup>98</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 25.

have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Rom 12:4-5). In the same way that parts of our body belong to one another and need one another (for instance, the eye needs the ear, and the foot needs the big toe), so too do we, as members of Christ’s body, need one another.

The church is the body of Christ: a community of people who learn what it means to care, to challenge, to support, to confide and confess, to forgive and be forgiven, to laugh and to weep, to be accountable to each other, to be “for” one another, and to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. A community is a spiritual family, a place not only of belonging and loving, but a place of resurrection, of new life. It’s a place where we accept one another for who we are—sinful, limited, and broken—and a place of transformation, where we see one another’s gifts and capacity to grow.

In Scripture, there is no such thing as a solitary Christ-follower. Christ-followers are always a part of a community. Creation itself is not complete until there is community; Adam needs Eve in order for humanity to be whole. Jesus himself works with twelve disciples and lives with them in community. And in Acts, the church is formed when the people are all together in one place. God calls God’s people to journey together, to have a common purpose, to share the common path, and to strive toward the common goal—the path, the purpose, and the goal all being God.

In fact, it is actually desirable for our faith to have a social dimension: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (Ps 133:1). When Christians live in community with each other, we live with an ever-renewed expectation for what God will do with this sister or brother and how God will work in their lives. How can one ever be bored in such a community?

Although North American culture glorifies rugged individualism and independence, this is not the vision of the kingdom. In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis envisions hell as a realm in which people are forever moving farther away from one another, like the ultimate, cosmic, suburban sprawl.<sup>99</sup> Lewis's hell is in direct opposition to the Kingdom vision that Jesus models as he revolts against the powers that tried to fragment relationships. In the upper room with his disciples before the cross, Jesus prays:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (Jn 17:20-23)

Jesus is serious about this; earlier that same evening while washing the feet of his friends, he says: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). A community of loving people is God's signature. Within this community, we are called to reflect Christ to one another so that beyond this community, we reflect him in all the places God sends us. We align our hearts, minds, and attitudes to reflect the way of Jesus, loving others as he loves us.

All that we are and do ought to be an extension of the breadth and depth and height of Christ's love for us. Our love for one another is an outgrowth of our first love. It is only because of God's love that we can walk in love. Out of love, we are called to unity, as the apostle Paul writes to the church, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the

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<sup>99</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York, HarperCollins, 1973).

Spirit” (Eph 4:3, NIV). The exercise of faith is an exercise of unity. There is only one gospel, only one Lord, and to believe and live that gospel is to enter into the unity it creates. This is discipleship; every time we bear with one another in love, every time we make every effort to pursue peace, every time we look not to our own interests but allow humility to be our launching pad, every time we take up patient living with one another—every time that happens the oneness of God resounds through us.

### **Learning Communities and the RCA**

Part of what makes a learning community a transformative process is that participants are learning from and with one another. “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov 27:17). When churches come together to share best practices or to share pilot experiences that failed, mutual learning occurs. Mutual learning leads to growth and change. Churches have the opportunity in a safe environment to evaluate their existing ministries for effectiveness. Mutual peer learning occurs through reflective listening, offering constructive feedback, and holding various tensions that serve to bring about healthy change. The learning community becomes a sort of living organism as each participating church seeks to help strengthen the other. As churches journey together in this process, it becomes clear that transformation is both an urgent work and requires slow and deliberate work over time.

Theologically, the work of the Holy Spirit is manifest in a learning community. At Pentecost, the community was “all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). In this community was a unity in Jesus Christ and a mutual purpose for their gathering. Similarly, when churches gather who are unified in Jesus, who share a common purpose,

who covenant together to listen to one another, to speak honestly about the realities in their congregation, and who commit to investing in the entire learning community process, God does a work in each one gathered.

The RCA sees learning communities as the mechanisms through which churches are transformed. Within the RCA, the Transformational Equipping team has prayerfully discerned a fifteen-year vision for its work: “In 15 years, the RCA will be characterized by a culture that fosters transformation in Christ as a foundational value; where every congregation is equipped to provide pathways for all people to experience deep change through the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>100</sup> The three-year objective is “to engage up to 100 congregations to learn together in clusters and to then develop their unique pathways through which all people will be transformed, through the power of the Holy Spirit, into passionate, outwardly focused followers of Jesus that live for the sake of others.”<sup>101</sup> The team is focused on developing learning communities of congregations that learn from and with one another as the congregations create discipleship pathways for the people God entrusts to them. The RCA will partner with congregations to provide pathways for all people to be transformed into passionate disciples that experience deep change through the power of the Holy Spirit for the sake of others.

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<sup>100</sup> “Transformational Engagement Strategic Priority Area” (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church in America, 2014), 2.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 5

### FROM PLATEAU TO TRANSFORMATION

In order for RCA churches to move off plateau and into a place of transformation, they need to engage a learning community process. How does one know that a church has plateaued? It is not difficult to identify; there are few vital signs in such a church. The congregation has lost its vision, its passion for making reproducible disciples has diminished, pockets of dysfunction may exist within the body, and the church has turned its focus from reaching out to maintaining itself within the church walls.

But all is not lost for a plateaued church. Transformation is possible. Throughout the pages of the Bible, transformation—deep life change—shows up again and again: a blind man receives sight, a dead little girl comes back to life, a lame man walks, a bleeding woman is healed, the chains of a prisoner fall off, thousands of believers are added. These people are witnesses who would join the old chorus, “I once was lost but now I’m found; was blind but now I see.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> John Newton, “Amazing Grace,” (1779).



Before a congregation can be a transforming agent in the world, it must first be transformed in Christ. As the transformed church embraces and lives out its call as the body of Christ, the church brings new life—it practices resurrection, as Eugene Peterson puts it<sup>103</sup>—to homes, neighborhoods, cities, and the world. The transformed church lives in response to Christ’s Great Commission, participating with the Holy Spirit to draw people into a relationship with Jesus, developing them as disciples who will embrace and live the missional life through their words and actions of mercy and justice. In order for a congregation to move from plateau to transformation, it must engage in adaptive change, a process that, in the RCA, happens through a learning community. So how do we know if the learning community was successful? What does a transformed congregation actually look like? This chapter will explore eight outcomes of a transformed congregation.

### **Participates in Christ’s Kingdom Mission Locally and Globally**

The first outcome of a congregation that has experienced transformation is that the people will be active participants in Christ’s kingdom mission. When Jesus first taught in the synagogue in Nazareth, he declared, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4:18-19). A transformed church is externally

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<sup>103</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

focused, working toward seeing the kingdom of God fully come “on the earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

A church that is focused on Christ’s mission advocates for justice and mercy, is on the frontlines of serving the poor, and proclaims the gospel faithfully and boldly in both word and deed each week. Such a church claims its identity as a sent people, an identity that is rooted in the call of Abram in Genesis 12. A transformed church has been blessed by God so that it might bless others, serving them holistically in body, mind, and spirit. Every ministry of a transformed church focuses on partnering with God through the Holy Spirit to bring the kingdom of God to the neighborhood.

What does it mean to partner with God through the Holy Spirit to bring the kingdom of God to others? First, it means acknowledging that the transformed church does not rely on its own strength, but on the sovereignty of God and in Christ, in whom “all things hold together” (Col 1:17). Second, it means making space for the leading of the Holy Spirit by regularly asking, “What are we actively doing to create space for God to move in our mission and ministry?” Churches that partner with God in this way take seriously corporate discernment as a staff, consistory, and congregation, seeking God’s will for where to channel their time, their talents, and their financial resources.

Making space means consistent attentiveness to how and where God’s Spirit is moving. One example of that is in the book of Nehemiah. After Nehemiah receives the report of the city of Jerusalem in ruins, he stops and grieves. He prays, asking God to show him his next faithful step. After Nehemiah arrives in the city, he again stops, assesses the situation, and prays for God to show him the next faithful step. A church that

is transformed and transforming finds a healthy pace that includes stopping to seek God and discern the next faithful step.

Third, partnering with God through the Holy Spirit requires prayer. Prayer is a central call of Jesus and necessary to following Christ. In Matthew 9, Jesus says, “The harvest is plentiful; but the laborers are few, therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (9:37-38). A church that is being transformed makes prayer a priority. This prayer actively remembers that the church belongs to God; as Jesus claims, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). This prayer also involves confession and repentance. The church confesses its sin, whether that is being preoccupied with the wrong things; neglecting its neighbors, the poor, and the widows; or lacking compassion for those in need. The transforming church is fully aware of its regular need to repent, to turn around to sustain a humble posture, fixing its eyes on Christ, the head of the church. The prayers of the church also include petitions, praying “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Mt 6:10). Finally, following the example of the first-century church, the transformed church constantly prays with thanksgiving to God for what God is already doing (“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances,” 1 Thess 5:16-18) and with expectation that God will do more than the church can imagine (Eph 3:20-21).

Fourth, a congregation that is partnering with God to bring the kingdom to others is constantly looking for ways to be in relationship with people who are unfamiliar with faith or who have had a negative experience with church. The church has a passion for sharing life with those who are far from God. It consistently invites all people to share

life together, whether through a meal, time together, prayer for one another, or worship of God.

The church that participates in Christ's kingdom mission on earth embodies cultural relevance. This does not mean a watered-down delivery of the gospel; rather, it means the church translates an unchanging gospel, communicating it boldly and properly in an ever-changing world. The church contextualizes the good news of Jesus in ways that people can relate to, inviting people to enter into a story larger than themselves. And not only telling people the story of the Bible, but helping them to see themselves as participants in that story.

### **Loves as God Loves**

The second outcome of a transformed congregation is that members love one another. The Apostle John reminds the church, "We know what love is because Jesus gave his life for us. That's why we must give our lives for each other. If we have all we need and see one of our own people in need, we must have pity on that person, or else we cannot say we love God. Children, you show love for others by truly helping them, and not merely by talking about it" (1 Jn 3:16-18, CEV). A transformed church is a congregation of people with an increasing love for one another who put the love of Jesus into action.

What does the love of Christ look like? First, it is a servant love. The night before the cross, Jesus eats the Passover meal with his disciples. At one point in the meal, Jesus gets up from the table, ties a towel around his waist, and begins washing the feet of his disciples. A transformed church does the same as it extends God's love through serving

felt needs, offering a safe space for healing, and touching and nourishing its neighbors. Second, the love of God is a sacrificial love. A transformed church looks not to its own interests but to the interests of others (Phil 2:4), with a love that overflows outward. The church sacrifices its own comfort to accomplish the task. Ultimately, this sacrificial love is seen in the cross of Christ when out of God's great love for the world God gave his only son (Jn 3:16).

### **Bears Fruit that Lasts**

A third outcome of a transformed church is the visible behavior it produces. Certainly if the church has been transformed, that transformation ought to be observable to a watching world. In what ways will ministry and mission be strengthened in a manner that is noticeable? In his letter to the church in Galatia, the apostle Paul calls this visible behavior the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). This church is rooted in the reality that it is the living body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-27) and that it lives by the Spirit in order to grow and reproduce the fruit of the Spirit.

Here is how that fruit might be displayed: For a church to love means that its members actively love those with whom they disagree, pray for their enemies, and focus on God's love for the church as grounds for loving other people. The transformed church works hard at being a vessel through which God's peace is dispensed; by investing in the lives of all sorts of people, it extends the *shalom* of God through spoken word and deed. A church that bears patiently is "quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger" (Jas 1:19) in dealing with individuals, groups, and even other churches. The transformed church

acts in faith as it makes decisions, stewards the people of God, and takes appropriate risks out of obedience to God. The transformed church acts out kindness as it advocates and speaks up for people who suffer injustice. The church works for the good of others in the world with no expectation of return. At times this means that members of a church must stay engaged in a process in order for all to benefit, maintaining healthy self-control and displaying gentleness with one another in order to serve everyone.

### **Develops Leaders and Mobilizes the Next Generation**

A fourth outcome of a transformed church is that it develops emerging leaders and mobilizes the next generation. The church equips people—especially young people—to live into a way of life that embodies Ephesians 2:10: “For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” A transformed church identifies potential leaders and convenes them in order to equip and mobilize them for ministry inside and outside the church. These people become catalysts for change as they are trained through information, imitation, and immersion.

The transformed church is fully awake to the next generation, intentionally coming alongside in order to invest in young people’s development toward maturity. Empathy is a key piece of engaging young adults. Empathy is to understand young and emerging adults on their terms and not the church seeking to conform emerging adults to how they do church. Youth and young adults are in community with Generation X, Boomers, and Busters who regularly identify and affirm the particular gifts they see in them. Not only are these gifts recognized, but they are also given the opportunity to be exercised as the church invites youth and young adults to lead in a variety of ways. From

leading worship to participating on a discipleship team, and from piloting an outreach project to loving children in the nursery, these emerging leaders are nurtured and encouraged to engage their gifts and talents in ministry and mission. Empathy with young adults also means that they are free to bring their doubts and struggles to the table and that their question will not only be heard but valued and encouraged.

The transformed church links leadership development to evangelism. In the apostle Paul's prayer to the church in Philippi, he remembers the congregation because of their gospel witness to him and to others, and then he prays that God will finish the work God has started in them (Phil 1:5-6). The transformed church takes its cue from the Philippians and facilitates the growth of youth and young adults by being apprenticed to Jesus and by modeling discipling relationships with others who are far from faith.

A church that mobilizes the next generation is attentive to the human need for belonging. One of the questions millennials ask when entering a church is, "Do I belong here?" Belonging is not the same as fitting in, nor is it assimilation. The transformed church is not interested in welcoming people only when they look, talk, and act like the rest of the congregation. Instead, the transformed church believes that belonging means being welcomed as you are. The transformed church creates a culture where young people can experience belonging, explore their purpose, and experiment with and exercise leadership in a safe and affirming place.

The transformed church has moved from multigenerational to intergenerational. Young people are prioritized in all areas of the church. This requires great intentionality and accountability, especially for many RCA churches, which are aging and asking where the young people have gone. As it is transformed, the church consistently and

intentionally gives youth and young adults a voice, a seat at the table, a place to lead, and a passion to nurture so that they are integrated and equipped to serve in life-giving places.

### **Clearly Communicates Its Vision and Mission**

A transformed church has a clear and compelling picture of God's preferred future, of what God wants to do in and through the church. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov 29:18, KJV). Every time a leader talks about what could and should be, he or she is talking about vision. A clear vision helps a church move from ideas to reality. It incites hope in the life of the congregation and serves to catalyze the system for change. The basic vision for the church is the mandate Jesus gave: "Make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). A transformed church remembers that its purpose is to make disciples and all that it does should serve that purpose.

Scott Cormode defines vision as "a shared story of future hope."<sup>104</sup> Vision is designed to change people and to entice them to participate in something larger themselves. Neither plans nor abstract beliefs change people. Instead, people are transformed when they participate in a story—one that sets them on a trajectory. That story helps to answer the question, "What is the problem we're trying to solve?" Often churches have a sense of urgency to solve a problem; maintaining the status quo is not an option. But they are not always sure how to tackle that problem. One way to get at a solution is by telling stories: "Vision comes when stories are weaved together with the

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<sup>104</sup> Scott Cormode, "Making Spiritual Sense" (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, August 15, 2012).



biblical story to create a shared story of future hope.”<sup>105</sup> When people are invited into something larger than themselves, and when that story gets repeated throughout the church often enough, then they are able to own the story and see themselves as participants in it.

A church’s vision (the what) and the mission (the how) ought to be not only clear but also communicable. Every member of the congregation, from young children to senior adults, should be able to articulate why the church exists and what it is called to do: “Vision should establish an identity for the congregation—what we are, what we are not, and what we expect to become.”<sup>106</sup> A church’s vision mobilizes people by giving boundaries for what the church is called—and not called—to do. When the vision gets communicated often and well by pastors, lay leaders, and congregation members, the level of understanding widens because more people grasp the church’s purpose. As the level of understanding grows, so do buy-in and commitment. There is great energy when a body of people gathers around a vision. As people move together in the same direction, that vision becomes a movement.

### **Multiplies**

Another outcome of transformed church is its passion for reproducing leaders. This commitment has its roots in the early church. Throughout the apostle Paul’s missionary journeys, he discipled, invested in, and empowered leaders, church planters,

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 49.

and evangelists. In Acts 19 and 20, Luke records that Paul used the school of Tyrannus as the leadership training center for multiplying leaders throughout Asia. This is a model for multiplication in the church today. The multiplication of leaders, ministries, and churches is in the DNA of the transformed church.

The process for multiplication looks different in each but the basic structure is to raise up, equip, and send out leaders who will reproduce more leaders. This process might begin with offering new leaders safe places to experiment and “try on” leadership. During this time, new leaders are learning and reflecting on that learning with the help of a trained coach or mentor. A second step is launching the leaders, inviting them to execute leadership in ministry and mission with the support of the church. A third step is growing the developing leaders with resources and various forms of feedback. A natural fourth step is for the new leader to find an apprentice whom he or she can mobilize, invest in, support, and launch.

Transformed churches reproduce not only leaders and ministries but also whole churches. One of the vital signs of a transformed church is that it is parenting a new church or churches. The church understands itself as sent and consistently works to help plant new churches to reach more people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Engages in Redemptive Conflict**

Transformed churches take on challenges as they participate in God’s mission and make the changes that obedience requires. Most of the time these changes cause tension in the church system because people disagree with the direction, a decision, or with another person’s behavior. There is conflict—large or small—in every church, including

the transformed church, but what differentiates the transformed church from the rest is that it engages conflict redemptively.

What is redemptive conflict? Redemptive conflict take places when one person says to another, “This disagreement will not undo us. The bond we have in Christ is stronger than this conflict.” In the midst of every conflict, God offers many redemptive moments, opportunities, and truths that can transform both the conflict and the people impacted. When we take conflict personally, we can become blind to these redemptive opportunities. Instead, transformed churches and leaders embrace tension; in fact, they are constantly managing tensions like honoring tradition and embracing the new, asking the right questions that have no easy answers. These tensions are productive and can help teams perform better. Any conflict feels awkward, but what feels dysfunctional may be perfectly effective. Healthy conflict feels no more comfortable for being healthy.

In his book *Management: A Biblical Approach*, Myron Rush offers three positive aspects of disagreement, recognizing that conflict involves hostility but that disagreement can occur without enmity.<sup>107</sup> First, conflict can lead to individual and organizational growth. Often conflict serves as a catalyst for growth and healthy change. It is important to stay in relationship with one another as the conflict is being worked out. Secondly, conflict can reveal the need to change. When disagreement surfaces, individuals, teams, and entire church systems have the opportunity to evaluate their own positions, perspectives, and beliefs. A transformed church seizes this opportunity to learn rather

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<sup>107</sup> Myron Rush, *Management: A Biblical Approach* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1983), 198-199.

than becoming resentful or defensive. Third, conflict can help people become more tolerant of opposing views. A transformed church grows in its capacity to accept constructive criticism without retaliation. The mark of maturity is seeking first to understand rather than to be understood.

The church that engages redemptive conflict consistently evaluates its actions and intentions in order to bring glory to God. As the transformed church acknowledges the log in its own eye (Mt 7:5) and makes the necessary changes to participate in God's work, it does so by seeking restoration in any and all confrontation. The purpose is not to become hostile but to exercise kindness and humility, which lead to restoration and redemption.

### **Takes Risks and Learns from Failure**

The last outcome of a transformed church is to take risks and learn from failure. As Chris Argyris writes, "People who rarely experience failure...end up not knowing how to deal with it effectively."<sup>108</sup> To combat this problem, the RCA staff has committed to the value that failure is not fatal. Only when churches take risks can a culture of innovation and creativity be sustained. Failure offers an opportunity for people to learn, if pastors and leaders can develop the tolerance for feelings that come with failure and have the skills to deal with these feelings. When a church staff, a consistory, a congregation, or a classis reflects and learns from its failure, then it can experience transformation.

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<sup>108</sup> Chris Argyris, *Teaching Smart People How to Learn* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2008), 28.

A transformed church assesses risks prior to taking action and is willing to take calculated risks. Churches that have not learned how to fail and learn from failure often have what Chris Argyris calls “‘brittle’ personalities. When suddenly faced with a situation they cannot immediately handle, they tend to fall apart.”<sup>109</sup> A transformed church maintains humility and adaptability, which allow it to acknowledge its mistakes, learn well from them, and change the course of action.

Here is an example of how River Community Church embraced learning from failure. When the adult discipleship team decided to roll out their new discipleship pathway, they provided a questionnaire for the members of their congregation to identify their individual locations along the pathway—seeker, new believer, disciple, or disciple maker. Two things happened as a result. First, members felt pigeonholed into one category and expressed frustration at being labeled; one congregant even said that he had been in the church all his life but that the questionnaire categorized him as a new Believer. Second, the adult discipleship team discovered that discipleship is messy and that trying to label people does not reach the ultimate goal of helping disciples make disciples in their community. Though it was hard for the team to come to this realization, these key learnings would not have surfaced if they not piloted the discipleship pathway and been willing to learn from its initial “failure.”

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<sup>109</sup> Argyris, *Teaching Smart People*, 31.

## **The Transformed Congregation**

Transformed and transforming congregations are focused on God's mission in the world. They are innovative, confident, restorative, and attentive to their neighbors, their cities, and the world. These congregations make space for God's Spirit to lead, pray and pray often, and actively seek the Holy Spirit for direction and guidance. Transformed and transforming pastors and church leaders are open to dream and willing to risk. As churches are transformed in Christ, they become the transforming agents of change in the world, bringing the truth of the gospel in real and relevant ways. As transformed churches carry out the commission to go and make disciples, they faithfully and boldly share the good news of Jesus Christ, all the while partnering with the Holy Spirit to bring transformation in the lives of people.

PART THREE  
MINISTRY STRATEGY

## CHAPTER 6

### THE FRAMEWORK OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The previous chapter identified characteristics of a transformed congregation, but it is in the process of a learning community that such transformation happens. This chapter will examine the framework of the learning community (including its primary components, core values, and strategic goals) and the commitments necessary for a church to participate in a learning community.

#### **Components of a Learning Community**

How does a learning community operate? According to Ridder Church Renewal, a learning community process executed jointly by the RCA, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and Western Theological Seminary, a learning community's "transformation process is built on commitment (through covenant relationships), time, engaging information, practicing that information, and reflecting on the practice within your context. This process of receiving information, putting it in to practice and then reflecting on what happens leads to deep change not only for an individual but for the



church.”<sup>110</sup> A learning community helps a congregation discern and develop its vision and an action plan to achieve and execute that vision.

### **Community**

The first component of a learning community is community. Churches learn from and with one another as they acquire information. The process is collaborative, which means that all participants are both teacher and learner. Congregations, pastors, and regional and denominational staff bring valuable assets to the process and have much to learn from one another in order to move churches from plateau to transformation. Participants are *for* one another, seeking to strengthen one another through challenging questions, mutual respect, understanding, and vigorous dialogue. The learning community is a community of practice. All involved need the support, challenge, and critique of the others. Participating churches are not present to give answers to one another but to help one another learn to ask the right questions.

A key aspect of the community component is commitment. This commitment is executed on various levels. First, each participating church commits to the learning process. They commit to be present at each gathering, ready to invest in the hard work of adaptive change. The posture of each church must be a desire to discover something new with a drive to win. Churches also commit to keep the goals they set to accomplish between sessions. Second, within a church team, each member of the team must commit to the others. Because teams will spend significant time with their own ministry team—

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<sup>110</sup> “Ridder Church Renewal Coaching Guide” (Holland, MI: Western Theological Seminary), 1.

asking questions, reflecting, casting vision, solving problems, and setting goals—they must be able to work together with a foundation of healthy relationships, mutual respect, and mutual trust. Third, each church commits to the other churches by offering mutual support, reflective listening, and committing to pray for one another. Part of the success of the learning community is that not only are individual churches transformed, but also that groups of churches that are geographically close have the opportunity to bring transformation to the greater region.

### Content

The second component of a learning community is content: each learning community is typically focused around a theme that serves to bring transformation to participating churches. The agenda of the learning community should be clear and synergize thinking around key content. Themes include, but are not limited to, leadership development, discipleship, local missional engagement, cultural competency, and ministry with people with disabilities. Content is delivered through live teaching, video conferencing, hands-on learning, open sharing, feedback, and silent reflection. Participants engage the content with the whole group as well as within individual teams.

The content of a learning community is driven by what the participating churches care strongly about. In order to discern a primary content focus for a learning community, the RCA holds connection events (which will be discussed further in chapter 7). At these events, churches share their greatest challenges, strengths, expectations, and opportunities. Over the course of an event, the focus for a subsequent learning community becomes clear. This way of discerning a focus is important because the

content of a learning community should meet the specific needs and address the questions of the participating churches.

The goal of the content is to help participating churches learn what they need to know in order to do what they need to do. The content serves the theme of the learning community and should assist each church in meeting its goals and executing its strategic plan. The content provides churches with a greater understanding, which helps them develop greater ownership of the process.

Part of the content of the learning community is to examine successful models in a particular ministry area (for instance, discipleship, leadership development, or local missional engagement). Examining various models serves as a catalyst to help churches think creatively and innovate thoughtfully. A learning community is a safe environment to think outside the box, to question the status quo, disagree with conventional wisdom, and ask hard questions. Churches do well to remember the advice of Tom McGehee, however: “No model is perfect; some are useful.”<sup>111</sup>

### Spiritual Dynamic

A third component of a learning community is the spiritual dynamic. God is constantly at work transforming lives, bringing change, renewal, restoration and hope. In Acts 2, we see the power of God at work. As believers gathered together in one place, praying and seeking the Lord, the Holy Spirit came upon them and “added to their

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<sup>111</sup> Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 29.

number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Thus the learning community is set within a missional context—a vision of the church as a covenant community in mission, loving God and loving neighbor as Jesus taught and modeled.

As churches gather in the name of Jesus, unified by the desire to grow, change, and see transformation happen in their context, the Holy Spirit is dynamically at work. Prayer provides the essential foundation for the learning community. Prayer is central throughout the entire process, both in the acknowledgement that Christ is the head of the church, and that in Christ, “all things hold together” (Col 1:17). Whether it be thanksgiving or petition, adoration or supplication, prayer releases the power of the Holy Spirit that is necessary for transformation. Each participating church is encouraged to develop an intercession team to serve for the duration of the learning community.

Another part of the spiritual dynamic of a learning community is dwelling in the Word. Because the learning process is framed by the truth of gospel, being in the Word together helps strengthen community and serves to develop a shared mind. This practice also help set the tone of the gathering, helping participants to center on the work ahead and on God, who is present in their midst. Because the work is challenging and the process long, the process and the participants must center on the Word of God.

### Accountability

The fourth component of the learning community is accountability in the form of a coach. With the months that pass between one learning community session and the next, it could be easy to be distracted by everyday ministry and life challenges and neglect the work of the learning community. A coach is needed to spark or accelerate

progress toward greater outcomes. Christian ministry and mission have always been executed within the context of a supportive community. Jesus himself sent the disciples out in pairs, and Scripture depicts other supportive relationships in disciples like Paul, Silas, Barnabas, and Timothy. Paul could not have done what he did without the support and encouragement of Silas and Barnabas.

Coaching has been a valuable resource in the RCA for years. Coaches create safe environments for leaders to reflect on call, purpose, and strategy. In one hour per month, coaches have helped leaders clarify an action plan, find the courage to implement that plan, and reflect on it. Regular contact with a coach can help a leader take the next faithful step in realizing goals and make course corrections in order to overcome obstacles. “Coaches,” writes Bob Logan, “walk alongside people throughout the whole process: clarifying goals, brainstorming plans, trying them out, revising them, trying again, and celebrating success.”<sup>112</sup> In a learning community, coaching is crucial for participating churches to see fruit and measurable outcomes.

A good coach allows the participant to drive the process. The coach does not exist to provide answers, but to ask the right questions. A coach might ask, “How are things going in the learning community? Where are you or your team stuck? What do you want to work on today?” The coach listens reflectively, offering feedback and asking further questions that unearth new learnings, destructive patterns, gaps in understanding, or obstacles to the participant’s progress. It is important to note that the overarching goals of

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<sup>112</sup> Robert Logan and Sherilyn Carlton, *Coaching 101: Discover the Power of Coaching* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2003), 23.

the coaching relationship are the goals of the participant engaged in the learning process. As long as the coaching serves the participant's goals, there is freedom in the relationship.

A coach partners with God's Spirit to help participants succeed in their goals. As the coach listens to the participant, the coach also listens to the Spirit of God. The coach and the participant trust that God's Spirit is always at work, and they believe that essential to transformation is discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit and following God's Spirit in obedience. The coach cooperates with the Holy Spirit to help the participant take action, even in the face of resistance. Coaching requires the ability to provide encouragement and support. The coach must notice and celebrate the church's wins and affirm their work and investment.

In the learning community context, there are two kinds of coaching. The first is individual coaching. This is direct, focused coaching that happens monthly, usually by phone or video call. Individual coaching builds relational trust over time and provides a safe, affirming context in which the leader can wrestle with struggles, try new things, and receive helpful and honest feedback.

The second kind of coaching is group coaching, in which a coach meets with the entire participating church team. In group coaching, the coach is less the teacher and more the facilitator of questions and understanding. The people being coached learn from one another as they wrestle with content, goals, and outcomes, and as ideas begin to coalesce within the group. This method of coaching can be successful when teams are working together on a goal with each member responsible for one part.

## Strategic Goals

The fifth component of a learning community is strategic goals. The learning community process helps churches think, design, build, and analyze the strategic goals that serve the vision and mission of their contexts. The process involves setting both overarching goals and smaller goals to accomplish between sessions.

A learning community provides space for churches to step away from the daily pressures and rhythms of life and ministry in order to hear and discern God's Spirit. Through the process, churches are able to develop their vision in the focus area of the learning community; identify and generate new discipleship, leadership development, or local missional engagement pathways appropriate to their context; and consult with other leaders to solve problems, exchange best practices, and hone leadership skills.

In a learning community, the end is in the beginning—the process begins with clearly stating a desired outcome. For each participating church, naming a desired outcome from the start gives direction to and helps shape the process by providing a basis for measuring progress. Being able to visualize the end helps the church team stay accountable to the commitment they made to their congregation, to one another, and to the process. It is important to determine in advance what a congregation will observe and measure, both during the learning community sessions and at the end of the learning community which helps confirm the clarity of the desired outcome.

As churches move through the process, they experiment and pilot new things that serve their desired outcome; nimbleness and flexibility are important for this to happen. Churches must remember that failure is not viewed negatively but is an opportunity to

learn. The coach can help participants critically reflect on their experiences and learning and remind them that continuous improvement—transformation—is the goal. With the end in mind, churches can report their progress honestly, including the effective and accurate measurement of the outcomes, and learn from that honest assessment.

### **The Who of the Learning Community**

Who is involved in a learning community? There are three main roles within the learning community: the facilitator, the participants, and the coaches. It goes without saying that the Holy Spirit is an active participant empowering and bringing transformation throughout the process.

#### **The Facilitator**

The facilitator conducts the learning community sessions. He or she cultivates a safe and supportive environment for churches to do their work, fully embracing the vision of learning communities as processes that bring transformation to churches. A good facilitator is respected by other pastors and church leaders and demonstrates capacity to understand and apply learning community principles. He or she makes sure that the learning community thinks creatively about how to draw others from their congregations into the process. A facilitator also assists pastors in evaluating their current needs and possible learning goals as well the needs of their congregation.

Facilitators listen actively and ask good questions in both individual and group settings. They use a variety of small and large group activities to facilitate learning. Facilitators are skilled at reading the room and the participants and can adjust the pace



and focus of activities accordingly. They find ways to involve people who are hanging back. Facilitators also assign the outside resources, which provide content and skill training information briefly and clearly. Good facilitators have a vision for multiplication and thus apprentice future facilitators through modeling, observation, and feedback.

Facilitators typically choose the coaches for the learning community. They pair coaches and participating churches for success and growth. Facilitators provide positive accountability and motivation for coaches without competition or intimidation, assist coaches with difficult or crisis situations, and handle conflict redemptively and effectively. Facilitators ensure that quality coaching happens between sessions.

### The Participants

Each learning community is composed of teams of four to five people from seven to ten churches. These participants are key congregational leaders that represent the diversity of the church in terms of experience, gender, age, and race or ethnicity. It is important for churches to assess and select qualified participants.

It is also important for a church to discern whether it is ready to participate in a learning community. Is the church in a healthy place to engage and sustain adaptive work? Does the church feel the sense of urgency—the pinch of reality—that comes from spiritual or numerical plateau, and is it motivated by this dissatisfaction? Have church leaders gotten the congregation's support for involvement in the learning community? Is the church willing to risk, to fail, and to learn? Does it have a sufficient pool of leaders who will invest fully in the process and see it through to completion?

There are certain attitudes of participating churches that serve the learning community well. Here a few questions that serve to pinpoint whether a church is ready to engage the learning community process: Does the church recognize that it is playing a winnable game? Does the church believe that having a kingdom vision is important to its desired outcomes? Do the leaders display a posture of humility, an eagerness to learn from and with other churches, and a commitment to be present? Do they have an attitude of discovery, openness to new ideas, discontent with the status quo, and energy to get after the hard work?

### Coaches

Whatever the format of coaching, one of the benefits of a learning community is the opportunity to work with trained and skilled coaches who have ability, availability, and passion. Much of the role of coaches has already been discussed above; additionally, coaches know how to ask powerful questions and are equipped with a covenant structure to maximize the effectiveness of the relationship. Coaches themselves generally have a mentor to help them stay focused as they invest in the process.

### **The When of a Learning Community**

When does a learning community meet? Because a learning community is a process that should not be rushed, it is preferable that participants meet regularly face to face for at least six months but no more than twenty-four months. Typically, participants gather quarterly, which allows time between sessions for participating churches to execute their goals and strategic outcomes. With the help of the facilitator, participating

churches determine together how frequently they will meet and how long the learning community will last, based on the needs of the group.

Regular meetings are essential for effectiveness. Whenever geography permits, learning communities meet every six to eight weeks for three hours. When that is not possible, a learning community may schedule longer sessions, perhaps even overnight. The learning community may meet in a neutral location or rotate among participating churches.

Having examined the framework of a learning community, we will now turn to the execution and implementation of the learning community.

## CHAPTER 7

### IMPLEMENTING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

In this chapter we will discuss the implementation of the learning community. In order to successfully execute a learning community the following steps need to be taken.

#### **Discerning Interest**

The goal of the learning community is to come alongside congregations that desire transformation in their contexts. This means that RCA denominational staff will connect relationally to pastors and churches for the purpose of listening, encouraging, and guiding them as they take steps toward transformation and the future God desires for them. But before any of that can take place, the pastors and churches must have interest in the process. That interest is discerned as denominational staff members, regional staff members, pastors, and members of local congregations develop relationships with one another where trust is strong and congregations are able to share their hopes, struggles, dreams, and call within a safe environment. Because pastor networks and regional church meetings are a natural place for denominational staff to build relationships with church leaders, much of the discernment happens in one-on-one conversations. In those places,

denominational staff can ask questions to discern a congregation's readiness or desire for growth and change.

Part of what happens in this period of discernment is *unlearning*. As RCA staff members talk with pastors and churches, the focus of the conversation is not on having the right answers but on asking the right questions. In the past, the role of denominational staff was to dispense information—to give churches programs, downloadable agendas with bullet-point lists, or workshops with material in a binder. Even today, church leaders sometimes ask questions that betray this mental framework: “What books will be used?” “How much for the conference?” or “Who is the speaker?” However, the days when pastors attended a conference and were expected to lead deep change in the congregation is long gone. Instead, a church that wants to move off plateau and into a place of transformation must engage adaptive change. That means that churches and denominational staff must abandon the old roles and ways of learning and instead acknowledge where “here” is, identify where “there” is, and begin the process of moving. Thus, the unlearning happens on multiple levels: churches unlearn their understanding of what learning is, what the role of denominational staff is, and the unhelpful mental models of church that no longer serve their current contexts.

One of the messages that denominational staff members ought to convey is that they care deeply about every RCA church and its leadership. Because the denominational staff wants every congregation to be healthy and thriving, every pastor ought to receive care, encouragement, direction, and advocacy. Denominational staff must practice active listening and be able to answer these questions: What time is it for this congregation? Is this a season in which God is preparing the soil for change? Is the congregation dormant?

Have the leaders lost their passion for the kingdom of God? What might a next faithful step for this church be?

As denominational staff members interact with churches, they will begin to see a group of churches that are asking related questions and raising similar themes. These questions and emerging themes might include frenzied overly programmed ministry, apathy, burned-out leaders, anxiety about declining membership, infighting, poor pastoral transitions, lack of any discipleship pathway, and little engagement in local or global mission. The next step is to gather this group of pastors and church leaders together.

### **The Connection Event**

The connection event is the next step in the process. It is a “taste-and-see” opportunity for churches interested in exploring a learning community. It typically happens over a meal and lasts two to three hours. The ideal number of churches for a connection event is twenty to twenty-five. Participants usually include the pastor or pastors of a church and one or two key church leaders. Churches, restaurants with private rooms, or hotel conference rooms are the best spaces to facilitate connection events.

The focus of the connection event is to create a healthy sense of urgency for each church that will move it toward participating in a learning community. This happens through relationship building, listening, and ultimately inviting people into a story larger than themselves. The denominational staff needs to build relationships and trust before churches and pastors are willing to work with the staff. Establishing this trust leads to a covenant or ownership of the process.

At the connection event, pastors should be encouraged to reflect upon and share their church's strengths, opportunities, and challenges. Part of the collaborative work of the eventual learning community comes when churches learn from and with one another, a process that starts at the connection event. Two key questions facilitate this conversation, and the RCA staff person should respond to them first in order to set the tone: What are you currently celebrating in your context? What do you currently find challenging in your context? These two questions get at churches' "here" and "there." It is only after pastors and church leaders share their contexts in a safe environment that they are able to explore options that lead to next steps.

The connection event is also the opportunity to frame the learning community theologically. The denominational staff person offers a devotion rooted in Scripture that would further frame the church's identity and call to be transformed and transforming. The staff person paints a picture of the current reality in order to create a healthy sense of urgency. She might talk about churches in decline, churches aging, the reality of post-secular humanism, or the cultural moment of frenzied busyness. Then she would paint an alternative picture: a real story of a church that has been through the learning community process, has engaged the hard work of adaptive change, and is experiencing transformation. That transformation might be people of all ages coming to know Jesus Christ for the first time, young people stepping up to lead, a new openness and passion to engage the neighborhood, or partnering with other local churches in the community to launch a community-wide food pantry.

At the connection event, participants are given an overview of the learning community process and an understanding of how learning communities fit into the

RCA's fifteen-year vision of Transformed & Transforming. An overview of the Learning Community process is given. As staff explain expectations and anticipated outcomes, they will likely encounter resistance, due not so much to church leaders' fear of change but their fear of loss.<sup>113</sup> Learning communities disrupt congregations. The work is hard, but the work is satisfying.

In order for the transformation to be sustainable and to bear fruit, pastors and leaders have to be "all in." To get to that point, they need space and time to process both internally and externally. Pastors need a safe place to ask, "Do we want to do this learning community or not?" The denominational staff, as the host of the connection event, creates a "parking lot" for pastors to ask questions, identify concerns, and explore wonderings about what involvement would mean for their church. The staff person can help the pastors begin to visualize what their involvement might look like and what the journey is about.

The denominational staff person also manages the tension in the connection event. At any given moment, the participants are experiencing an array of thoughts, questions, and emotions—any of which can halt the exploration. The staff person should keep the conversation in motion by giving pastors freedom to share and by helping them consider what God is asking of them and their congregations. As this happens, pastors and church leaders get to "test drive" the learning community, a process that also invites exploration and requires participants to hold their varied emotions in tension. This experience helps

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<sup>113</sup> Scott Cormode, "Advancing Leadership" (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, August 14, 2012).



participants gain a new mental model of learning that includes the interplay of information, reflection, and action.

At the event, participants also learn the logistics of the learning community in order for churches to understand to what they would be committing. Again, participants must be fully invested, so they must learn the expectations in advance. They learn that a learning community typically spans eighteen to twenty-four months, and churches meet four to six times. They also learn the location of those in-person meetings and the ballpark cost. The denominational staff explains that participants will have regular engagement with a trained coach and will be held accountable for the goals they individually set with their church teams.

Two overarching questions frame the connection event: What season is your church in? What is the next faithful step God is calling you to take? At the conclusion of the event, the staff person asks each pastor and church leader to return home to their staff team, consistory, and administrative board and to process the connection event experience in order to discern the next step.

After the event, the staff person should also follow up soon after with each pastor via email, thank him or her for coming, invite further questions, and set up a phone call two to four weeks after the pastor has had an opportunity to bring the learning community invitation to their governing board for discernment and prayer.

#### Sample Connection Event Agenda

- 7:30 a.m. RCA staff arrive to set up
- 8:30 a.m. Participants arrive, sign in, put on name tag, help themselves to coffee

- 8:40 a.m. Staff person offers opening welcome and prayer
- 8:45 a.m. Participants enjoy breakfast and informal conversation
- 9:00 a.m. Participants reflect and respond to two questions in small groups: What are you celebrating in your church? What is a current challenge in your context?
- 9:30 a.m. Staff person shares the vision for the learning community; presents an overview of the process; invites participants into a story larger than themselves; and provides logistics, expectations, and anticipated outcomes
- 9:45 a.m. Participants ask questions and participate in the “parking lot”
- 10:00 a.m. Staff person extends an invitation to take the next step and closes in prayer
- 10:05 a.m. Staff person talks with participants as they leave

### **After the Connection Event**

Following the connection event, the lead pastor or the discipleship pastor will bring the invitation to join a learning community back to the church leadership and discern together whether the opportunity is right for their church. If the church decides to join the learning community, the consistory or administrative board appoints a team to participate, including a team leader, and empowers the team to lead the process in the congregation. The consistory should appoint a team that has good gender balance, draws particularly on the experience and insights of the emerging next generation, and reflects the ethnic diversity of the community in which the church serves.

The denominational staff person follows up, typically by phone, with each pastor who attended the connection event, to help churches discern and finalize their

commitment. In this conversation, the pastor has an opportunity to ask further questions and explore the implications of involvement in the learning community. The process of following up with each church can take three to five months. Once eight to ten congregations have committed, the dates for the learning community are set, and coaching relationships are established.

### **Before the First Learning Community Session**

Planning for the first session begins at least six months beforehand. The RCA staff person establishes a design team, made up of a facilitator (who may be the staff person or a colleague), a knowledge capture leader, and an administrator. The members of this team set the general session design and are the key decision makers in the process. (The specific roles will be explained shortly.)

### **Learning Community End Goals**

The learning community should be designed with the end goal in mind. In the RCA, learning communities generally fall under one of three overarching themes—discipleship, leadership, and mission. So the corresponding end goal might be for participating churches to create a discipleship process that leads to reproducible disciples, to create a leadership development process that mobilizes emerging leaders for ministry, or to create clear on-ramps for members to serve their community a certain number of times each year. Every learning community session should work to achieve that end goal, which is ultimately to move out of plateau and into a place of transformation.

The design team also considers the individual goal of each session and structures each session with a balance of skill training, time for reflection and discussion for each participating church, large group report-out and discussion, time for prayer, and large and small group activities. The following questions inform the design of the meeting: What is the focus of the session and what needs will be addressed? How will churches engage with one another and with their individual teams? What skill do the churches need to develop? What information can be briefly shared to focus the skill? What activities will allow participants to better understand and practice the skill? The design team also considers the time for individual participating church teams to work together toward processing their goals and developing an action plan. How will the session help the participants apply this skill in their ministry setting? What activities in this session will encourage relationships between participants? When and how will participants be engaged in meaningful prayer? What opportunities will the trained coaches have for meaningful interaction with the participating churches?

The session content, which is incorporated into the entire learning community session, is driven by the needs of the churches and their end goal. Thus large and small group discussion, prayer, and centering devotions focus on what a transformed person in Christ looks like, on what neighborhoods has God entrusted to the participating churches and what it means to be sent, or on how God has gifted the body of believers, the implications of those gifts, and where the gaps are. Other helpful questions that drive session content include: Why does this (discipleship, mission, or leadership) matter to God and to us, and how does it connect to our congregation's mission, vision, and

values? Where have we seen Christ transforming people in our life together? What is happening in the lives of members and others God entrusts to us when we are at our best?

### Design Team

The learning community design team consists of the facilitator, the knowledge capture leader, and the administrator. As discussed in the previous chapter, the facilitator sets the agenda for and facilitates each session. This person demonstrates an increasing capacity to understand and apply adaptive change principles and demonstrates excellent relational gifts. The facilitator may or may not be the denominational staff person, but he or she must embrace the vision of Transformed & Transforming and have the respect of other pastors and church leaders. (For the purposes of this paper, I will consider the facilitator and the denominational staff person to be the same. If they were two different people, the staff person would serve to support the rest of the design team.)

The knowledge capture leader does just that: captures what arises out of each session so participants can return to it. The knowledge capture leader takes photos and records video of the sessions, including of the teams and their work. He or she also creates, maintains, and posts photos and videos to the group Facebook page, which facilitates connection and learning between sessions. In addition to these roles, the knowledge capture leader assists the facilitator with transitions so that each session flows seamlessly. When transitions occur throughout the session, the knowledge capture leader typically provides “transition music,” which cues each participating church team to move from one activity to the next.

The administrator is responsible for the majority of the details that make for a high quality learning community, from food and room reservations to registration, payment, and cost logistics. This person also ensures that churches have all the necessary materials.

### Sample Learning Community Session Design

8:00 a.m. Participants arrive and share a light breakfast together at round tables

8:30 a.m. Facilitator reads Scripture and leads prayer

8:45 a.m. Large group introductions and overview

- Introductions
  - Facilitator, knowledge capture leader, and administrator introduce themselves.
  - Then each person introduces her or himself to the group: name; congregation; one gift, idea, or insight you or your church may have to share with the learning community; one thing you hope to gain from this learning community experience.
- Broad overview of the learning community session
  - Only you know your people and your context. Only you can make the choices that will work for you, your team, and your church. The role of the facilitator and any other staff is to learn from and with you and to provide process options for you.

- We are on a journey together: You will learn from and with one another, we will learn from and with you, and the whole RCA will benefit,
- Core theological convictions:
  - Transformation is the work of our Triune God.
  - God creates, loves, and cares for us.
  - God saves, reconciles, and call us through Jesus.
  - God dwells within us, empowers us, and transforms us through the Holy Spirit.
- Congregations can create pathways, and individuals can engage in practices and enter into experiences that open disciples up to the transforming work God wants to do.
- God entrusts specific people—and neighborhoods or communities—to specific congregations. Your role is to discern what God is doing and to know the people God is entrusting to you. From this knowledge (which includes relational knowledge, not just facts and demographics), you will design and implement a pathway that cultivates transformation in the people God is entrusting to you.
- Establish group norms
  - Facilitator suggests norms and values to guide the learning community. A few examples:
    - Mutuality means learning from and with one another.

- Relationships matter, so we will trust, respect, and listen.
  - Failure is an opportunity for learning, so we will take risks.
- Group adds additional norms and agrees on them, and the facilitator records them.

- 9:15 a.m. Team time in small groups
- Churches answer the “Where are we?” question and identify their greatest challenge, greatest accomplishment, biggest question, and biggest obstacle (similar to a SWOT analysis: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). Teams respond in pictures rather than writing.
- 9:45 a.m. Teams share responses with the large group and answer any questions
- 10:15 a.m. Break
- 10:30 a.m. Large group learning: theme and content depend upon the end goal of the session
- 11:30 a.m. Lunch
- Facilitator or staff person checks in with teams.
  - Knowledge capture leader takes photos of each church team.
- 12:20 p.m. Large group learning: theme and content depend upon the end goal of the session
- 1:00 p.m. Team time in small groups
- 2:00 p.m. Large group sharing and feedback
- 3:00 p.m. Teams draft three to five strategic goals, asking themselves:



- What have you gained from this first session?
- What do you plan to do? What options has God led you to embrace?
- When do you expect to complete these steps?
- Who else in your church needs to know what you experienced and what next steps you plan to take?

3:45 p.m. Teams share their goals and next steps and receive feedback from the large group

4:45 p.m. Conclusion

- End with prayer; teams pray for one another
- Facilitator reminds teams that coaches will contact them and that participants should check in regularly on group Facebook page to continue the conversation, answer questions, offer resources, and share what's working (and what's not!).
- Facilitator provides an evaluation with simple questions such as: What was helpful to you? What was not helpful? What suggestions do you have for our next gathering?

### **After Each Learning Community Session**

For a learning community to succeed, two things are key: accountability and evaluation.

## Accountability

Each church is responsible for accomplishing its strategic plan for transformation in its context, but without accountability, goals can get pushed to the back burner.

Accountability produces results: even teams that are procrastinators in the early sessions get busy when they see engagement and results, and they become eager to share their own results with the rest of the group.

This accountability happens in two ways. The first is through coaching. Each church receives a one-hour monthly call with a trained coach, who encourages the team, asks questions, and helps the pastor and team move forward with the adaptive change process. The coach continues to give the responsibility of the work back to the team while also supporting them in their wins and failures. The second way accountability happens is through the Facebook group, which serves as an online community of practice. Facebook provides a platform for churches, coaches, and the facilitator to stay connected and support one another in the process. The facilitator posts articles, videos, and other content to help churches stay focused and in the process together. Other churches can comment, ask questions, and seek further understanding, all of which helps to sustain the work, strengthen the process, and increase communication between sessions.

## Evaluation

Evaluation happens at several points. The first is immediately after a learning community session, when the design team meets for as few as ten minutes. The purpose

of this meeting is to capture immediate evaluation from the design team's perspective. The facilitator takes notes in order to inform the planning of the next session. Within a few days, the administrator compiles a spreadsheet with the data from the evaluations that the churches filled out at the end of the session and shares it with the design team.

In order to increase effectiveness, the design team meets again two weeks after the learning community session to execute a deeper evaluation that includes the data from the participating churches evaluations. This self-evaluation includes questions such as: Were any presentations brief and effective? Were the group activities helpful? How much time was given to worship and prayer? How much to community building? Did anyone encounter any particular difficulties? What improvements will we as the design team make? What priorities do we need to address in the next six to twelve months?

After this deeper evaluation, the facilitator begins planning the content for the next session. This may include recruiting an outside resource person to provide some of the content. The content is determined one month after one session and thus three to four months before the next. The design team meets again one month before the next session for the purpose of walking through the design and ensuring that all the components are in place and that the logistics and details are complete.

When all sessions of the learning community are complete, a final evaluation occurs happens in two parts. The first is an analysis of all the evaluation data collected over the course of the learning community. The administrator compiles the data into a spreadsheet, which is then analyzed by the design team and a larger RCA body, the guiding coalition. Together they discuss the strengths and weakness of the learning community and how to improve the process. The facilitator seeks testimonies or quotes,

either written or videotaped, from two or three of the participating churches. This information assists in recruiting participants for the next learning community. (Each participating church is also asked to refer or personally recruit one or two churches for the next learning community.

The second part of the final evaluation comes as the facilitator connects with each participating church six to eight months after the final session. If possible, meeting face to face is best, but a phone or video call is typical. The facilitator asks about the outcomes of the learning community and what difference the process made in the participating church. The pastor shares stories of what outcomes he or she is observing as a result of the learning community process. The facilitator then provides further questions to help the pastor think through next steps. The call ends with the facilitator and pastor praying together. Typically this concludes the official relationship between the facilitator and the pastor.

### **What Next?**

Now the learning community is complete. In one sense, the work of transformation is just beginning. Participating churches return to their contexts and continue the adaptive challenge of shifting culture by, for example, piloting new leadership, mission, or discipleship initiatives, repurposing staff roles, or hiring new staff. The peer learning, the coaching, the resourcing, and the individual action plans serve the vision for transformation.

Transformation is the result of the church moving from “here” to “there.” The outcomes are numerous and varied. Staff teams become healthy and vibrant places for

dreaming and innovating, congregations shift from institution centered to mission centered, risk-averse churches become risk-taking churches, and internally focused, program-driven churches live into their externally focused, kingdom-driven witness. Participating churches continue to enjoy connectivity and a place to share best practices on Facebook and are encouraged to stay in relationship with their trained coach.

Transformation is ongoing. It is a continual process that God calls the church to do in the world. Learning communities are not over when certain skills or competencies are mastered. Churches may covenant to travel together while pursuing new strategic goals, or they may move to another learning community to continue their development. Participating churches are in the best position to recruit new churches into a learning community because everyday, participating churches can share stories about God's kingdom breaking into people's lives, about reconciliation and renewal, about growing disciples who make disciples, or about churches partnering across ecumenical lines for the purposes of providing water, caring for refugees, feeding the hungry, and serving the poor. This is the heart of the gospel to which God calls and continues to call us to. It is as churches participate in this gospel that they are transformed.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Now it is 8:30 a.m. on Sunday, June 13, 2012. Pastor Dan opens the shades in his church office. He makes his way through the worship center and every classroom turning on lights. Across the church parking lot, Dan notices several twenty-somethings clad in beach wear leaving the coffee shop. Carrying what seems like eight to-go cups, they climb into an SUV thumping with music. *Why aren't they here?* Dan sighs, and then returns to his office, where he watches the Smith family make coffee and set out cookies.

### The Wrong Question

What Dan does not realize is that he is asking the wrong question. It is the question of many churches—a question that reflects a different era in the life of the church. But that era is no longer here. Now the better question is, “Why isn’t River Community Church over there, across the parking lot?” What might it mean for the church to go and show up at places like coffee shops and the beach? How does the church begin to ask the right questions about leadership, discipleship, mission, and the future of the church?

Despite asking the wrong questions—in fact, *because* Dan is asking the wrong questions—River Community Church makes an excellent candidate for a learning community. Dan and his congregation are working with a dated mental model of church, and unless they do something to change it, ministry will continue to be frustrating. River’s approach to ministry is to believe that curious seekers will come to the church and stay. But they do not. Pastor Dan and his congregation believe that a “one size fits all” process of discipleship makes reproducible disciples. But it does not. The quick fixes driven by anxiety do not work. Pastors and staff have to manage tensions that they did not have to manage a decade ago. Seminary did not prepare Dan for this. There are no easy fixes; rather, if River Community wants to see transformation in its context, the congregation must be willing to engage adaptive change.

River Community Church is not alone in its outdated mental models or in its stagnation. Throughout the RCA, many congregations have plateaued. The church is not prepared to thrive, much less survive in the postmodern, secularized world it inhabits. This reality presents a serious problem for the church. The way church used to work is no longer the way it works today. In order to be transformed, congregations need a new mental model for what church is and does. The pastor no longer holds the power to bring about the deep change needed. Nor does the congregation any longer ascribe that power to the pastor. The church today cannot simply have the “right answers”; no, ministry in the twenty-first century is about asking the right questions and allowing the hard work of deep change to be in the hands of the body of Christ—the church. The congregation must face adaptive challenges and submit to adaptive change. This is an arduous process, but it is necessary for churches to move to a place of transformation.

Transformation is the future we long for. Transformation is what God has called us to do. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). This new thing has come and is coming through the work of adaptive change. Transformed leaders are needed to lead congregations on a new path, one that moves off plateau and through a process of revitalization. Transformed leaders will bring about a renewed commitment to discipleship, leadership, and mission that produces transformed people who participate in Christ’s kingdom in new, fresh, and creative ways.

### The Right Process

The adaptive work necessary to bring about deep change and transformation occurs in the learning community. Because the right answers are not what the church needs, the learning community process serves the local church by having denominational and regional RCA staff come alongside the church rather than direct it. The learning community acts as a holding environment to assist local churches in discerning what God is calling them to do and be and in setting their strategic goals. It also provides resources to support their learning and holds them accountable through trained coaches.

Learning communities move churches from here to there by asking, session after session: What is? What could be? What will be?<sup>114</sup> Through the process, laid out by Heifetz and Laurie and adapted here for the church, the basic elements of adaptive

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<sup>114</sup> This set of questions is part of the Results-based Conversations methodology, created by the Christian consulting firm WildWorks.



change weave together to bring about transformation: churches get “on the balcony,” where they can get a 5,000 foot view of their current reality. Churches acknowledge where “here” is as they begin to feel the heat of what is “so” in their context. The work of change happens when church teams roll up their sleeves and do the heavy lifting instead of having the pastor do all the work. The peer learning provides churches with an opportunity to speak into one another’s vision and mission, acknowledging that new mental models must be discovered and not imposed. Through the process, churches must protect the voices “from below,” voices that offer an alternative view, and participants must maintain disciplined attention by staying accountable and asking the right questions.<sup>115</sup>

Before a church is willing to participate in a learning community, it must believe that the support that the denominational staff provides is different than simply passing along information. For some churches, this new way of thinking is challenging. Denominational staff members can pave the way in this new learning paradigm by helping churches see the denomination as a helpful guide along the way. A key way to live into this new way of deep change is through relationships—both the strengthening of current relationships and the investment of time into new relationships— which will help create a foundation of trust so more churches open themselves to the learning community process. Once churches have joined a learning community, the denominational staff, including the design team, seeks to help churches discover the dynamic relationship between their vision, values, and mission. In doing so, the church is able to develop a

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<sup>115</sup> Heifetz and Laurie, “The Work of Leadership.”

specific pathway that will empower leaders, launch them into ministry, and help them grow reproducible disciples. Through people, content, and process, the hope for the learning community is to bring about lasting change to set RCA churches on a kingdom trajectory for the twenty-first century.

### A Renewed Future

Fast-forward two years. Pastor Dan and River Community Church have completed a learning community. Tonight is Halloween, and Dan is sitting in his office with Rob, the pastor of Elevation, the church plant down the road. They are praying just before the start of the event their churches are co-hosting: in the parking lot at River Community, more than fifty volunteers are ready to greet families with hot cider and cookies as an alternative to trick-or-treating. A fire licks up from a pit set up in the center of the parking lot, and picnic tables and chairs are scattered nearby for families in the neighborhood to connect with each other. Over the past several months, River Community and Elevation have begun to partner to serve their community in various ways. Dan and Rob meet regularly to pray and encourage one another.

Pastor Dan has led the consistory through Tod Bolsinger's book *Canoeing the Mountains*, and they are working out the strategy they developed through the learning community process. River Community recently partnered with the local hospital to launch a drug and alcohol recovery support group. The congregation is about to vote on hiring a bilingual director for the launch of a mentoring program in which River Community will serve the local schools. One does not have to look far to see and experience the transformation that has taken place in the life of River Community

Church. Both Pastor Dan's personal transformation and then the whole church's transformation are works of God's Spirit through the process of the learning community.

Since its beginnings in the first century, the church's work has been "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). This equipping happens through the learning community process, as a body of women and men aspire to see their churches move off plateau and into transformation, as churches that no longer lease the latest and greatest marketing strategy every three years but instead resist easy answers and engage the right questions.

Imagine if each of the RCA's eight regions had multiple learning communities of eight to ten churches gathering in a space of mutual respect and trust, listening to one another, praying for one another, pushing one another, and developing strategies to serve their neighbors, train emerging leaders for mission, grow reproducible disciples, and explore partnerships with one another. Imagine if each one of the participating churches became a base of operation for future learning communities. Imagine if each one became a learning space for churches to dream about their futures, ultimately becoming hubs of transformation throughout North America where learning communities were ongoing and the stories of transformation were plentiful.

This is a picture of greater kingdom impact. As churches get clear about what it means to follow Jesus Christ in mission in their particular context, the Holy Spirit will transform not only the people but the place. The discipleship and leadership pathways uniquely created by congregations will foster transformation in both hearts and minds, exhibited in changed actions in the lives of equipped and empowered disciples. These growing disciples will make contributions as leaders, teachers, and people of influence

within their congregations. As a result of transformed churches, neighborhoods and communities will be transformed. Missional movements will be created as a result of learning communities where new wineskins burst forth as the church begins to engage and fulfill her call to live into the kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

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