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DEVELOPING ADAPTIVE LEADERS:  
AN INITIAL INTERVENTION FOR  
TRANSFORMING A CHURCH CULTURE

By

MOLLY SCHROEDER

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Appreciative Inquiry
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
GT	Guiding Team
RSLs	Reveal Spiritual Life Survey

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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## CHAPTER 1

### AN INTRODUCTION

The decline of our churches, what some have named the "the great unraveling," is a topic that receives much attention.<sup>1</sup> Many of what are often referred to as mainline churches have been able to avoid closing during this unraveling due in large part to the financial support of a generation that supports tradition and duty. Their support has allowed the churches to continue with their standard operating practices with the presupposition that they still hold a position of influence in our society. Their standard operating relied on strategies that worked at one time and place, with a stress on human agency instead of the work of the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, this has resulted in a disconnect with the communities of people the churches are a part of as the world around them changed exponentially and they continued doing things as they always have, not adapting to the massive societal shifts taking place. Douglas John Hall discusses this unprecedented challenge Christianity faces in the majority of the Western World in his book *Waiting for Gospel*.<sup>3</sup> A bit harshly, he argues that despite their weak Biblical and theological foundations established churches in the past have been able to continue due to sociopolitical conventions that once maintained the churches that are no longer present.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan J Roxburgh, *Joining God in Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom And the Future of Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant "Establishment"* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012).

The typical responses of congregations to this decline are different only in particularities than those tried in the context of this research. Fear drives the creation of new programs, technology, staff, and an increased focus on gathering new consumers, all as attempts to preserve their established structures. Something Hall comments is “little more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.”<sup>4</sup> Hall argues that the absence of attention to the Spirit and the life-giving gospel that has the power to transform the world has left churches stalled and sinking in the water. Many churches found in this place experience conflict, turmoil, and perhaps are wounded, weary, and fearful, as their efforts are ineffective and the institutions they have built continue to decline, stalled in ineffective, reactive practices.

### **Wounded and Weary**

Grace Lutheran<sup>5</sup> is an ELCA congregation that recently celebrated 125 years in its community. This congregation, like most, has experienced both times of struggle and uncertainty, and times of stability and abundance. However, like many congregations, it is now experiencing identity confusion, disaffection, and struggling to adapt to a culture in which church has been pushed to the margins of our culture from a position of prominence.<sup>6</sup> While this congregation is not alone in this struggle, periods of stability have been rare since the retirement of a long-serving pastor twenty-three years ago. Disruption and conflict have been widespread among members, volunteers, staff, and Church Council, and their financial situation has been unstable. This congregation is

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>5</sup> The name of the church and all individuals in this work are pseudonyms to protect privacy.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (St. Paul: Church Innovations Institute, 2006), 24.

a wounded and weary congregation that has come to rely on human agency rather than trust in the work of the Spirit.

### **Recent History**

In 1967, Pastor Roberts<sup>7</sup> was called to Grace Lutheran. During his long tenure, there was steady growth in the community as well as the congregation, growth that required additional building space and staff, adding their first Associate Pastor, Douglas in 1988.<sup>8</sup> At Pastor Roberts' retirement in 1995, after twenty-eight years of service, the congregation had grown enough that three services were needed. Since his retirement, periods of stability have been rare, turmoil and conflict have been common, and despite the county becoming one of the fastest growing counties in the state of Minnesota, the congregation did not experience the type of growth expected as the surrounding community's population increased 67.5% between 2000 and 2010.<sup>9</sup> During this period, the church was served by five Interim Pastors, two Associate Pastors, three Senior Pastors, and three lay ministry staff.

In 1997, Pastor Williams<sup>10</sup> was called to the congregation to serve with Associate Pastor Douglas until his departure in the fall of 1998. After Pastor Douglas' departure, Grace Lutheran experienced a long call process and was served by two Interim Associate

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<sup>8</sup> Pastor Douglas served this congregation from 1989 until 1998. "Grace History," Grace Lutheran Church, accessed July 1, 2018, <https://Grace.org/Grace-history/>.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, United States Census Bureau Fact Finder [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml) (date accessed June 1, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Pastor Williams served in this congregation from January 1997 to April 2002.

Pastors until the calling of Associate Pastor Beckstrom in July of 2000.<sup>11</sup> Conflict was widespread during this time. One disagreement between Pastor Williams and Pastor Beckstrom became quite public, playing out on the pulpit and resulting in nearly 300 members leaving in 2001.<sup>12</sup> A Church Council member during this time recalls that Associate Pastor Beckstrom left in 2001 because “she felt that it was emotionally unsafe for her to remain with this congregation,” serving less than a year.<sup>13</sup> Those involved in committee leadership positions at the time expressed that it felt more like a dictatorship during Pastor Williams’ tenure.<sup>14</sup> They did not feel supported or encouraged in their faith life or leadership positions and felt more like his grunts or puppets than a partner in ministry.<sup>15</sup>

Church Council minutes from this period also seem to reflect turmoil as well.

Referencing a survey they had just completed, they stated:

the council fully supports Pastor Williams in his ministry. We will, however, be working with him in the following areas: fitting better with our Midwestern ways, reducing controlling behavior (real and perceived), and reducing the emphasis on financial stewardship.<sup>16</sup>

Pastor Williams took early retirement in 2002 “when he was asked to resign, or things would get ugly.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pastor Beckstrom served from July 2000-June 2001.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A for Grace Lutheran Church membership numbers.

<sup>13</sup> Chad Williams (Past member of Church Council), in discussion with the author, June 21, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Alice Good (Past member of multiple volunteer committees, and Church Council), in discussion with the author, June 10, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Grace Lutheran Church, "Special Council Meeting Minutes" (Grace Lutheran Church Archives, Big Lake, MN, January 31, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

The interim Associate Pastor, John,<sup>18</sup> who began serving this congregation after Associate Pastor Beckstrom left in 2001 described the climate of the culture he walked into as hostile and self-serving and that they instead preferred to remain divided and accomplish their agendas. After two and a half years as first an Interim Associate Pastor, then after Pastor Williams' early retirement, an Interim Senior Pastor, the call committee tasked with finding a new Pastor decided that they wanted Pastor John to stay with the congregation as their Senior Pastor, and an Associate Pastor has not been called to this congregation again. Not surprisingly, there still seemed to be little interest in reconciling and moving forward as a unified group, a division that escalated when Pastor John was on his sabbatical in 2006, a sabbatical that angered many.<sup>19</sup> Pastor John described the time of his sabbatical as one in which he felt ambushed.<sup>20</sup> During this time, a group within the congregation made significant changes that Pastor John was opposed to. In addition, with the hope of receiving more applications after a long search for a new staff position, a Youth Director, changes were made reducing qualifications for the position during his absence.<sup>21</sup> With this change, an application was received, and the candidate was hired during his sabbatical.<sup>22</sup> The newly hired Youth Director left suddenly after less

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<sup>18</sup> Pastor John served this congregation from June 2001 through April 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Chad Williams, in discussion with the author, June 21, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Pastor John, in discussion with the author May 24, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Grace Lutheran Church, "Congregational Council Meeting Minutes" (Grace Lutheran Archives, Big Lake, MN, August 8, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> The Youth Director was noted as a new hire in September and October of 2006 Congregational Council Minutes, then abruptly accepting her resignation in the November 2006 minutes. Grace Lutheran Church, "Congregational Council Meeting Minutes" (Grace Lutheran Archives, Big Lake, MN, September 12, 2006, October 10, 2006 and November 8, 2006).

than two months, with no verifiable reason why.<sup>23</sup> The search for a Youth Director resumed until the spring of 2007 when a new candidate emerged. While Pastor John was not opposed to additional staff, he did see the Youth Director candidate they wanted to hire as a problem. Knowing some troubling history of the individual, as well as the discovery that his resume was misleading, he presented the information to the hiring committee. They stated that they were aware of much of what he presented and did not "care, we want him because of what he says he can do, it will make us look good."<sup>24</sup> Pastor John announced his intent to retire in November of 2007 and retired in April of 2008.

The last Interim, Pastor Vold,<sup>25</sup> served this congregation beginning in 2008. After a short period, he also expressed concerns about the Youth Director and discovered some unethical behavior.<sup>26</sup> However, when he reported this to the Church Council, he was met with resistance and was blocked from taking any action on the issue because several key positions were held by the Youth Director's following, giving him a layer of protection. The environment then became so hostile that Pastor Vold resigned in the fall of 2009 before they had called a new Pastor.

In December of 2009, Pastor Smith<sup>27</sup> was called to the congregation. At the time of Pastor Smith's hire, Pastor Vold offered to fill him in on things about this congregation

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<sup>23</sup> Grace Lutheran Church, "Congregational Council Meeting Minutes" (Grace Lutheran Archives, Big Lake, MN, November 8, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Pastor John, in discussion with the author, May 24, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Pastor Vold served this congregation from May 2008-September 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Chad Williams, in discussion with the author, June 21, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Pastor Smith still serves this congregation.

despite the fact he had not served the congregation for months. Pastor Smith declined this offer at that time, desiring to go into his new position without a bias.<sup>28</sup> Years later, Pastor Smith also discovered some concerning behavior of the Youth Director and had come to recognize the protection of not only the people he had surrounded himself with in key leadership positions but also in the congregation that were drawn into his circle of people. Pastor Smith also commented that the way the Youth Director presented and promoted his ministry gave the general congregation and public the illusion of a thriving, healthy ministry, adding yet another layer of protection.

Despite hearing about a lot of bickering and undercurrents within this congregation after he accepted the call, he recalls genuinely believing that he could help them reconcile and begin healing.<sup>29</sup> He recalls many personal grudges, and in one case, the friction escalated to the point of one committee member orchestrating up situations to try and prove the negligence of others. He has found that any attempts to bring about spiritual growth and to jump-start change have been, and are, met with blank stares or puzzled looks, and are nearly impossible to bring about.

Like many congregations, financial giving has not increased as much as the budgetary needs and attempts have been made to increase giving by members through stewardship talks, testimonials, and educational materials. Church staff and Church Council have tried to implement various changes, or “magic bullets” that they hoped would result in the growth of members and increased giving. These strategies and plans did not have the results hoped for, but due to a few members that stepped in at the end of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

each year to make up any budget deficit, leadership continued to move forward with the knowledge of that safety net. In recent years, those members have had changes in life circumstances that have made their gifts to close the budget gap no longer available.

In late 2014, a new musician was needed for the traditional Sunday service and Anthony joined the staff in October. At the time he was hired, it was known to staff and the Church Council that he was transgender, but he had planned always to come to work in what he called his “born identity.”<sup>30</sup> In the spring of 2015, Anthony took a second position at a different church as a deaconess. Feeling conflicted about being true to herself, Anthony requested to begin coming to work as a female.<sup>31</sup> This was a change that on the surface appeared to be received with only a little tension, anger, and discomfort. However, beneath the surface many were outraged. Several members left the congregation quietly, but nearly immediately, and many that remained objected privately to staff and stated that they would no longer give financially to the church until Anthony was removed from staff.<sup>32</sup>

In 2014, Church Council began a new visioning process. It was a slow process that left some members of the Church Council feeling hopeless as they struggled to let go of comparisons to other churches and business growth strategies. As the financial situation of the church remained unstable, and cash reserves continued to be depleted, additional funds were transferred and utilized from designated funds raised by the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ministry Staff Meeting Notes, (Senior Pastor, Youth Director and Children’s Ministry Director) in discussion with the author, May 5, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Pastor Smith, in discussion with the author, June 19, 2018.



congregation for special projects to meet bare bones expenses each passing year.<sup>33</sup> These funds have not been replenished, adding to the tension in this congregation's culture, resulting in many wounded, fearful, and weary souls, further serving to deepen existing divisions, create further divides, and stir up more conflict. In 2016, the transfer and utilization of funds could no longer close the financial gaps and a staff member was terminated, the Youth Director. This decision immediately caused an avalanche of anger and more members leaving the congregation.<sup>34</sup>

### **Additional Assessments**

Discovering the history and discerning the more recent culture of this congregation is essential; however, it was not the only work that was needed. It was also important to gauge the current Church Council and the congregation's openness to change. Some exploratory work prior to this research was engaged in during the spring of 2017.<sup>35</sup>

For this exploratory work, the Church Council members engaged in several rounds of experiments, as well as spiritual exercises and coaching. In addition, some reading on the current state of our churches was given as an assignment when it appeared as though they were not interested in doing this work.<sup>36</sup> This was done in the hopes they

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<sup>33</sup> Grace Lutheran Church, "2014 Annual Report of the Congregation" (Grace Lutheran Archives, Big Lake, MN, February 1, 2015). Grace Lutheran Church, "2015 Annual Report of the Congregation" (Grace Lutheran Archives, Big Lake, MN, February 7, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> See Appendix A for Grace Lutheran Church membership numbers.

<sup>35</sup> Molly Schroeder, "Creating Opportunities for the Spirit by Cultivating Cultures of Openness" (term paper for Dr. David Hahn, Evangelism in Contemporary Contexts, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, 2017).

<sup>36</sup> An excerpt from Alan Roxburgh's book, *Joining God in Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*.

would not only gain some understanding of the complex situation we face but perhaps that they too could recognize that Grace was neither alone nor forsaken. In the end, many Church Council members also admitted that they were stretched too thin, or did not feel their gifts were a good match for this type of work and supported a proposal to develop a new leadership team for this work. With their support of a new leadership team, the Guiding Team was formed in the fall of 2017.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Challenge**

We do not need more sociologists or statisticians to tell us our churches as we have known them are declining and dying; it is clear that we cannot stop the continued decline.<sup>38</sup> It seems that the tension and dissatisfaction with churches that are out of touch with the world around them, and the superficial practices used to preserve the institutions they built can no longer be countered with strategies that have allowed them to limp along for decades. Most congregations, including Grace, have spent decades in what one theologian names adaptive denial, blaming others for their problems rather than the disestablishment it is, or may have slipped into attractional ministry.<sup>39</sup> In either case, the result is generally the same, the core narratives and life-giving, sustaining practices of the congregation changed or disappeared.<sup>40</sup> While the natural reaction is to fix what is broken

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<sup>37</sup> Grace Lutheran Church, “Congregational Council Meeting Minutes” (Grace Lutheran Archives, Big Lake, MN, May 9, 2017. Molly Schroeder, “Creating Opportunities for the Spirit by Cultivating Cultures of Openness” (term paper for Dr. David Hahn, Evangelism in Contemporary Contexts, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, xi.

<sup>39</sup> Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, [41](#).

<sup>40</sup> Craig Van Gelder, and Dwight Zscheile, *Participating in God’s Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 11.

there is no fixing this system; it is beyond repair, leaving many congregations finding themselves in a world they are utterly unprepared for. This is a world in which churches are being called out by the exodus of generation after generation<sup>41</sup> that have not stopped seeking a meaningful life, but rather, are not finding it in our churches that have strayed from their theological roots. The narratives of our culture peddle the notion that individuals can make their own meaning, they do not need God, or church for that matter to prevail. However, these notions are like a mirage in the desert, offering false hope and never truly satisfying. While there are numerous and massive societal shifts that we have no control over taking place, we do have choices. We can just let it happen to us and hang on to the very end before giving up, or we can choose to listen and follow the Spirit and be a part of the journey to this new life, transforming and pulling forward the life-giving forces from our past.<sup>42</sup> Rather than a call to fix the church, this is an incredible, hope-filled opportunity to transform our churches and bring God back to the center through transformative practices, practices that listen for—and to—the Spirit and ask the questions “Why are we here,” “What is God calling us to do, here in this place,” and “What will this new life look like,” not deciding what *we* want to be, instead discerning how we are called to participate in God’s mission. There are no shortcuts to take in this work; it is a long journey filled with transformational practices, and it is only through Spiritual discernment that we will discover the place we are being called to.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Roxburgh, *Joining God in Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, 39.

<sup>43</sup> Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 64.

While this congregation is not alone in its struggle to adapt to the societal shifts that have taken place, it is a congregation that has been divided and has lacked stability for at least a couple decades, resulting in many wounded and weary souls from years of conflict and uncertainty, a congregation that at times seems to be more concerned about its image in the public sphere than spiritual guidance. Furthermore, they have experienced a rapid population increase in their once-small community that challenges their system that functioned to serve their own needs for decades, circumstances that collided and resulted in a complex situation.

Living in a culture that measures success by “bigger is better” standards, in which declining numbers and downsizing are seen as a failure when membership numbers drop and giving decreases, many congregations react with fear. They then find themselves consumed by fear and search for ways to maintain their structure, keeping things going like they have always been done, resulting in congregations turning deeper inward and losing sight of God’s mission and the presence of Spirit in our lives and the world around us.

Theoretically, this system like all systems functions like a living organism. Like living organisms that are made up of many interrelated parts that all need to be looked at to accomplish change, the church and our congregations are no different. Many parts we will only briefly look at now, but explore more in the following chapters.

Developing adaptive leadership postures and transforming the culture of this congregation to reduce reliance on human strategies and models that emphasize numbers, to one in which a strong commitment to listening to both the Spirit and those they are

called into relationship with is essential.<sup>44</sup> We need adaptive leaders that are able to approach challenges from multiple perspectives and not only uncover alternative solutions, but identify all parts of the underlying complexity of the challenges.<sup>45</sup> The past strategies and plans implemented by leaders in this context were problematic as they saw themselves as the acting agent and the failure of the congregation to act as the reason for failure. These plans lacked a transformative, open mindset of how the Spirit works in us, through us, our neighbors, and communities to transform us and engage us in God's mission. They essentially left out our relationship with—and the work of—the Spirit. As the body of Christ everything we do should be in response to the Spirit's activity as we bear witness to the hope we find in God's promise. Approaching this work with a mindset of anticipation of discovery and trust in the Spirit is a critical posture to cultivate. Practices that listen deeply to the Spirit and how it is working in, among, through us, and our neighbors in our community are an essential piece of this work, practices that are responsive and adaptable, genuinely focusing on the needs of our neighbors we are called into relationship with, not the projects or ministries, which are chosen or deemed necessary for our benefit or comfort. Adopting a posture that puts God back in the center and reminds us that all ministry is God's ministry that we are merely continuing with the guidance of the Spirit.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> David Bornstein, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 205.

<sup>45</sup> David S. Weiss, and Claude Legrand, *Innovative Intelligence: The Art of Leading Sustainable Innovation for Your Organization* (Mississauga: J. Wiley & Sons Canada, 2011), 23.

<sup>46</sup> Ray S. Anderson, *Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God's People* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 17.

However, the challenge to change should not be misunderstood as a need to learn how to fix, better deal with, or cope with challenges, which involve learning new technical skills or resources, but a call to develop mental complexity and human capabilities that are adaptable. We now live in a time of adaptive challenges, where changes are so rapid that it is nearly impossible to keep up due to a much larger dynamic cultural shift taking place in our world, not just our churches. Changes in postures in which leaders reshape their thinking and approach to challenges, both those identified and not yet discerned, are also crucial. This system is fearful, and at times has a sense of anguish after repeated failed attempts to fix adaptive challenges with technical solutions. Their technical solutions may have worked for a time when the problem was clearly identifiable or encountered before, but we are in a vastly different place. In this time of adaptive challenges, and in this time and place, technical solutions function only as Band-Aids on a large, deep wound.<sup>47</sup> When these Band-Aids are not effective, they find themselves returning to patterns of responses, responses that often point the finger at others and only serve to raise anxiety levels and hurt people, with resulting actions of anger or a paralyzing fear of further criticism or failure. When these technical solutions continue to fail, it creates a disparaging cycle, a cycle that must be broken and replaced with models and processes that focus on deep listening and cycles of action and reflection, carrying forward what works, and adapting so that there can be continued forward movement. Learning to identify the problems correctly, and the underlying fears in the system that create invisible barriers or hidden dynamics both individually and

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<sup>47</sup> Gilbert R. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregations: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 60.

collectively, is vital. These barriers hinder individuals from developing themselves, others, and teams.

Several practicing theologians have identified sets of transformative practices that can help a congregation that is stuck to adapt and find their footing to move through, and beyond, the disruption that these societal shifts we are experiencing have created.<sup>48</sup> The sets of practices these authors arrive at all have similar elements, and are just practiced in a different order and use different language. It should be no surprise that listening to the Spirit communally, privately, through scripture, and listening to our neighbors we are called into relationship with is one common element in these practices—all practices which promote discovery of what the Spirit is already up to amid the communities, and the lives of those we are called into relationship with.

Work to assess the openness of leadership, as well as informal conversations in this congregation, identified a considerable amount of negativity and dwelling on the disappointments and conflicts. This included both current and unresolved past conflicts that serve as a continual source of fuel for the present culture, and in a sense, seem to have built a sense of community around negatives, and continue to deepen divisions and mistrust, acting like vortices that suck up the energies of those around.<sup>49</sup> These same troubles were confirmed by the recent Reveal Spiritual Life Survey (RSLs).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh's book, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, Patrick Keifert's book *We Are Here Now*, Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes' work *Starting Missional Churches*, and Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens and Dwight J. Friesen's book *The New Parish* are just four in the growing body of literature on the subject.

<sup>49</sup> Martin E. Marty, "How to Build Cultures of Trust Relating Science, Religion, and Public Life," in *Building Cultures of Trust* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 161.

<sup>50</sup> Reveal for Church, "Reveal Survey Comprehensive Report, Grace Lutheran," May 28, 2018, <https://reports.revealforchurch.comreport/comprehensive/6054>.

This congregation has experienced many challenges. They seem to be not only wandering in the wilderness, grieving and hoping for things to return to what they were at one time and their perception of the position they held in the community, but also consumed by their own fear, personal desires for the church and the divisions and conflict within. Wounded, weary, and exhausted, can a leadership team be developed that can let go, trusting and anticipating the Spirit's lead and begin to move forward grounded in spiritual practices with a new posture of adaptability? As we enter the risky work of discernment of the Spirit's voice and the adaptive work, will we learn to hear the Spirit's voice, trust and recognize the Spirit's activity, and proclaim the gospel in this world that so desperately needs it? Without this adaptive work it will be challenging, if not impossible for this congregation to move forward.

### **Moving Forward**

This intervention will function as the initial phase of a more extensive intervention and address the question: *How can a leadership team grounded in spiritual practices and engaged in innovative processes of listening, discerning, reflective learning, and experimenting help to transform a congregational culture that is wounded and weary from struggle due to societal shifts and its reliance on human agency, rather than the Spirit's agency?*

This research will seek to evaluate if a new leadership team can adopt an adaptive leadership posture through using the results of a recent RSLs as a starting point to define and refine the challenges of their congregation, engage in identity forming work, and the discernment of their call to participate in God's mission through cycles of action and



reflection, practices that become embodied and part of the culture of the church as they expand the leadership circle.

The scope of this intervention is limited to this particular context with formal research conducted from May of 2018 through February of 2019. This leadership team will also seek to discern what further formal and informal processes are needed to define challenges that are not limited to either quantitative or qualitative research methods. While they are not constrained, they will be subject to the Independent Review Board approval if needed. This team will also be seeking to take new initiatives based on their findings as they seek to respond to the challenges before them. The process of development of new initiatives will engage processes that allow for innovation, and engagement of action-reflection cycles.

#### Intervention Process

It is crucial that this leadership team begin to implement practices in the work they do if they hope to infuse it throughout the culture of this congregation and begin to transform the culture to one in which trust and reliance on the Spirit, rather than human agency alone, is cultivated. Spiritual practices, as well as the questions of where we feel and see the Spirit at work, will be an essential piece of every part of this research, including the things that fall short, becoming a part of the rhythm of the action-reflection cycles engaged in. Through the work of further defining the challenges this congregation faces, this team will use an action-reflection cycle with which they hope to infuse the congregational culture and expand the leadership team. As the leadership team expands, the initial team will take an active mentoring role to introduce and coach the new leaders in the practices. This leadership team will be responsible for communicating to the

congregation what the Spirit is up to in, through, and around the congregation, building energizing, life-giving anticipation for the future.

### Practices to Introduce to Cultivate Posture

Spiritual practices such as dwelling in the word will be a part of all meetings and processes engaged in, as well as part of the work participants are encouraged to do in their private time and then communally reflect on together. A leadership posture of openness and using gifts, rather than bodies to complete a task, must be demonstrated. Establishing a framework of defining the challenge, planning, acting, and reflective evaluation to guide practices will be constructed for this work. In addition, a set of reflective questions that are to be a part of each reflective evaluation cycle will be a critical component if we hope to begin to transform this culture and adopt an adaptive leadership posture.

### Evaluation

Evaluation of this intervention will not seek to formally reevaluate the spiritual life of the congregation with the RSLs after this initial intervention. Instead, observation of leadership postures, capabilities, and engagement in practices that further define the challenges this congregation faces will be the primary subject of evaluation. These practices reflect greater trust in the Spirit's guidance rather than human agency alone to generate and surface life-giving narratives that allow for movement into the future. Their capabilities and skills analyzing data to identifying emerging themes and patterns, the testing of their theories and propositions with the action-reflection cycle, as well as their ability to build capacities within the initial leadership team and any expanded leadership team they build will also be evaluated.

## The Journey before Us

This chapter introduced a congregation facing an uncertain future, a congregation consumed not only by the same challenges many congregations are facing, but a congregation with recent wounds that continue to tear open, festering and never truly healing, forgiving or granting grace. Further, relevant social science theories, processes, and theology were introduced. In chapter two, we will work through literature pertaining to social theories about church culture, change, and leadership. This will include design thinking, innovation, Appreciative Inquiry and postures and processes that block growth and change. In this chapter, we will also examine what should be happening in this context in light of God's activity through the Spirit within us, through us, and in our world for God's mission in which we are called to participate. Chapter three will focus on narrating the research experience chronologically, as well as in terms of the methodology and processes engaged in. The final chapter, four, will include reflections on the experience, the themes, and patterns that were discovered, and evaluation in regards to the research questions.

## CHAPTER 2

### ATTENDING TO THE SPIRIT'S LEADERSHIP

While God chooses to work through humanity, the world that surrounds us can at times rob us of the still, small voice of the Spirit that leads us. We must form people that know how to listen, trust, and anticipate the work of the Spirit to reveal to them where He is at work, and where they are being called to participate in God's mission and become a community that knows Whose they are and Whom they are following. To transform a community into a transformative, restorative, Spirit-led community listening to the Spirit needs to be the primary way we discern our call. This attentive, deep listening must permeate all aspects of this intervention. As such, we will begin with our focus fixed on this facility. Listening is essential, not only to what the Spirit whispers in our hearts through scripture, but within relationships with our neighbors, and our community as well, looking for and anticipating how the Spirit is at work in our lives.

In this chapter, we will first look at the work of the Spirit in the Old Testament which reminds us that the work of the Spirit is not just an experience inside of us or a charismatic expression of God's great power. Instead, the Spirit's work is to bring about new perspectives which can bring about change, and nurture a holistic experience of human community to bring about God's mission.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 28-29.

We will then move on to the New Testament in which we not only see the work of the Spirit in Jesus' life and resurrection, but that the same Spirit also lives within and around us continuing the work to fulfill God's mission, while also continuing to create things anew.<sup>2</sup> Further, we will look at the dynamics between trust in human agency and trust in the work and leadership of the Spirit in our congregations and our communities, work that reveals that the Spirit is still involved in the lives of all people for the well-being of all of creation. Finally, we will dig deeper into practices and leadership postures that will help this congregation shape their identity and discern their call to participate in God's mission through attentive listening, practices that engage, anticipate, and recognize the work of the Spirit in the congregation and the community.

### **The Spirit's Activity in the Old Testament**

The Spirit's activity pervades the Old Testament, birthing order out of chaos during creation and bringing life into existence. Working through Moses and the prophets to bring about redemption to humanity, God shared a new future with the power of the Spirit to the people of Israel and provided insight to God's will at critical times to restore communities.<sup>3</sup> These prophets reframed their experiences according to God's activity among them with the primary goal to move the soul, grab their attention by creating bold and striking images, and speak to the imaginations and passions of the people.<sup>4</sup> Prophets called the people back to the mission of God when they strayed and no longer responded

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm, *The Holy Spirit*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 332.

to others in just, merciful ways, leading them toward a new future and fulfillment of God's mission of reconciliation with both new capacities and behaviors. As an essential backdrop for the New Testament, the Old Testament not only presents God's promise for Israel, but also prophecies of hope and the coming of the Messiah who "will usher in a new age when God's Spirit will be poured out not only on all people but also on the entire natural world, empowering all creatures to live in the peace and harmony of God's reign that imbues all of life."<sup>5</sup>

However, we also witness the Spirit's activity in the Old Testament through individuals chosen by God. In Exodus, we find "Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God" (Exodus 31:2-3). Among the pages of the Old Testament we find Joshua, who was chosen and filled with the Spirit of wisdom to enable him to lead the people into the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 34:9). In Numbers, not only do we find the Spirit placed upon others, but we see more direct evidence of the Spirit, both forming community and promoting shared leadership.

Speaking to Moses God states:

I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone (Numbers 11:17).

We also see the Spirit both empowering and leading the Judges of Israel when they faced their enemies in battle (Judges 3:10; 4; 6:34; 11: 29; 13:25; 15:15).

The outpouring of the Spirit was also for the kings of the people of Israel, such as Saul (1 Samuel 10:10) and David (1 Samuel 16:13), two kings which provide witness to

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm, *The Holy Spirit*, 12.

another aspect of the Spirit's activity in the Old Testament. Unlike what we will see later in the New Testament, the indwelling of the Spirit in the Old Testament was selective and temporary. It was not a permanent gift and presence like we see with the new covenant. We see the Spirit that was poured upon Saul, later left him (I Samuel 10:10; 16:14), and in Psalm 51 David pleads, "do not cast me away from your presence, do not take your holy spirit from me" (verse 11). The Spirit that empowered Samson (Judges 13:25) later left him as well: "Then she called, 'Samson, the Philistines are upon you!' He awoke from his sleep and thought, 'I'll go out as before and shake myself free,' but he did not know that the Lord had left him" (Judges 16:20).

### **Spirit's Activity in the New Testament**

The New Testament brings forth a new promise and future in which the Spirit moves even closer to us through the incarnation, and closer yet by the indwelling of the Spirit in us and among us. Throughout the New Testament we see how the Spirit worked in Jesus' ministry as well as through his instruction of the Apostles that occurred between the resurrection and his ascension, continuing to actively demonstrate and ensure the gospel would be taken to everyone and everywhere, adapting to the context without compromising the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 1:8).<sup>6</sup>

Through the Word becoming flesh, Jesus was indeed the fulfillment of God's promise, a promise received through the Spirit that disrupted established formal and informal structures of the world. Theologian Ray Anderson argues it is not Jesus' birth, but rather, his baptism that is of theological significance, for just "as the burning bush

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<sup>6</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 40.

commissioned Moses to initiate the redemption of his people, so in the baptism by John, Jesus was anointed with the power of the Spirit to fulfill God's messianic promise," and further God's mission.<sup>7</sup> Following his baptism and temptation in the desert, Jesus began his ministry "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:14) fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament and solidifying it by quoting Isaiah 61:1-21 in the synagogue. Filled with the Spirit Jesus' ministry took him from town to town, where he forgave sins and healed the sick and those tormented by demons, proclaiming to the world "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).<sup>8</sup> Jesus indeed ushered in a new kingdom in which repentance, grace, restoration, and unity were embodied.

What Jesus proclaimed and what he did, his very life and ministry, embodied the kingdom of God and disrupted established social, religious, economic, and political structures of this world. His ministry was person-centered, not focused on traditions, new practices or what culture demanded, but rather, on the needs of the people.<sup>9</sup> The Spirit-empowered disruption Jesus brought forth provided a way for people to imagine a new way of life, the in-breaking of a new future in which the reign of God brings forth a whole and transformative community that is counter to the ways of this world.

At the heart of the ministry of Jesus and the Spirit was, and is, to overcome any differences that become barriers and get in the way of communion; and to draw together and reconcile those that are divided, restoring and even transforming individuals and

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry*, 69, 71.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm, *Holy Spirit*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



communities in light of the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup> The physical healings Jesus performed through his ministry were no different, always involving complete restoration in social, political, and religious realms as well. We find many examples of this restorative work in the book of Luke. In Luke 5:12-15, as Jesus heals the Leper, he is not only healing a man of his physical ailment, but Jesus deliberately crossed all sorts of biblical, legal, medical, and social barriers of the time that had made the effect of this disease far more than physical. Leprosy was viewed as a sign of sin, detestable, deforming, and unclean, resulting in isolation and heartrending social problems. In this encounter, Jesus sought to heal more than the physical aspect of this man's dreadful disease; he sought wholeness in all realms of this man's life. Had he not sent the man to show himself to the priest in the temple and present an offering, he would not have been declared by the priest "cleansed and fit to be reintegrated into the community" (Luke 5:14).<sup>11</sup> The healing of the hemorrhaging woman was also about more than physical healing of ailments. With the large crowds pressing up against him, Jesus could have gone on and walked away without acknowledging her touch or healing. However, his public confirmation of her healing not only declared her as "clean," but restored her place in the community and socially redeemed her (Luke 8:43-48).<sup>12</sup> Jesus also sought to subvert the ways of the world that were counter to what the kingdom of God ushers into the world. Through Jesus' healing of both the Centurion's slave and Jairus's daughter, we are provided with

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<sup>10</sup> Amos Yong, *Who Is the Holy Spirit: A Walk with the Apostles* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2011), 43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

just two examples of this subversion of the normal relationships that existed between religious leaders, military elite, and their clients.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus' ministry created new life, transformed, and then ushered in God's kingdom, an in-breaking that did not stop with Jesus' death on the cross, but rather, the Spirit moving even closer to us and continuing to work in this world, calling forth a community of equals, leveling hierarchies, and emphasizing the collective, shared salvific work. However, without the Spirit resurrecting Jesus, death would not have been defeated, and there would be no new future; Jesus would just be a historical figure. The cross is the ultimate act of love, healing, and restoration that has a common reality for all of creation. God used the cross, an instrument of death and brutality, to transform the darkness of our world, sin, hate, death, and violence into love, healing, and unity.<sup>14</sup>

### The Spirit Moves In

The New Testament also reveals to us that the Spirit is no longer just for chosen people, prophets, and Jesus, but the link that brings forth the new future and empowers us to participate in God's mission. We find depictions of the sending of the Spirit in both the book of John and Acts, each giving attention to different aspects of how the Spirit is at work in the world. In the book of John, we see the Spirit given when Jesus first appears to the disciples after the resurrection and he "breathed on them and said to them, 'receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22). In John's account of the Spirit's work in communities, he was attentive to and emphasized what happens when the Spirit arrives. He also gave care

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>14</sup> Dwight Zscheile, "God's Mission of Transformation" (lecture, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN, February 16, 2017).

and attention to how "the Spirit is Jesus' living presence among us, a living presence who leads us into a deeper relationship with the one Jesus calls Father."<sup>15</sup> John also gives importance to the Spirit as our advocate, comforter, helper, guide, and teacher in a very intimate and personal way. The Spirit is also described as the one who guides us into living an abundant life through a living presence among us. However, it is not just an external guiding role the Spirit plays in our lives, but also in us as we abide in each other.

In Acts, the apostles also experienced the disruption brought by the Spirit's activity succeeding the resurrection. Through the outpouring of the Spirit after Jesus' ascension, we see the apostles, the early church, and a new community emerge that provided an alternative way of life that exposed the principalities and powers of this world that were in opposition to God's mission.<sup>16</sup> The Spirit was poured out to continue God's mission of restoring communion not only between God and individuals, but to restore communion and bring unity between all God's people and salvation for the whole world. These Spirit-formed communities are an essential element of God's continued mission, a mission now carried out through God's people. First as a gathered, then sent community, the apostles traveled bearing witness to this new community and people, preaching, encouraging, and gathering new communities, restructuring life not by being detached, but being involved and responding to the needs of the people.<sup>17</sup> These were communities that gave and loved out of the abundance of God, a way of life that today would call into question the greed, consumerism, materialism, and selfishness that are so

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<sup>15</sup> Malcolm, *Holy Spirit*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Yong, *Who Is the Holy Spirit?*, 30; Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Yong, *Who Is the Holy Spirit?*, 36.

much a part of our culture, a way of life and community that erased lines and division between people.<sup>18</sup> These communities not only gave them new life, but reformed their identities while sharing all things in common and working together for the common good, joining God in God's ongoing mission as the Spirit transforms their commitments, identity, dispositions, and behaviors.

The book of Acts, as well as Paul's writings, also act as a witness for us of the activity of the Spirit working not only through the Apostles, but their communities to both empower them, and to extend mercy and justice to the oppressed for the sake of the world (Romans 12:5). Peter healed many (3:7-11, 5:15-16, 9:33-34, 38-41), received an answer from God in a miraculous earthquake (4:31), and had prison doors opened for him (5:19). Stephen and Philip also performed great wonders and signs through their ministry (6:8, 8:6-7, 13). In Paul's conversion, Jesus appeared to Paul, but he was not saved until he responded to Spirit-led Ananias, who then healed Paul's blindness (9:3-18). The Spirit then worked through Paul, to perform miracles and healings (14:3, 14:8-10, 16:18, 9:11-12, 20:9-12, 28:4-6, 28:8-9). These signs and wonders made the message the apostles preached, credible and added to the followers. Like Jesus' ministry, the Apostles' work always pointed to something much bigger, the reconciling and unifying of God's people for the common good.

Perhaps one of the most powerful examples of the transforming, reconciling, and unifying power of the Spirit is captured in Acts 10. Here we learn of two men brought together by the Spirit. Each man, Cornelius and Peter, receive two very different visions from the Spirit that drew them together. Cornelius received an angelic message to "send

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter” (10:5). The next day Peter also received a vision in which he is told, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (10:15). Peter certainly would have no doubt found this perplexing as it abolished the Jewish law he had practiced his whole life, so radical to Peter it had to be repeated several times and still left him wondering:

Suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon’s house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.” So Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?” They answered, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging (10:17-23).

This interaction not only drew the men together but their communities as well (10:23-24), a meeting for which barriers and laws had existed to keep them divided (10:28). Rather than declaring what the vision for a community was, the Spirit set in motion a series of interactions that unified, created community, developed relationships, spread the good news, and brought a deeper understanding of the work and bestowal of gifts from the Spirit (10:45-46).

Throughout his writings, Paul emphasizes the presence of the Spirit, the giver of gifts for the building up of the community, as central to the functioning of the community as the Body of Christ. However, Paul was not only looking to maintain harmony in the church, but in the communities they were a part of as well. Paul returns again and again to the topic of harmony and the building up each other in a community. Writing to the Corinthians, he emphasized the Spirit-given gifts that build community (1 Corinthians 12: 7, 12-13, 25; Romans 12:6-8, 16), and to the Galatians he wrote about the destruction of

individuals and communities caused by focusing on one's self as opposed to life in the Spirit (Galatians 5:13-26, Colossians 3:11-15). Paul often stressed the unity of the church not as a defensive, self-preservative feature, but as necessary for participation in God's mission. Further, Paul emphasized that the body of Christ must look outward towards the other, just as Jesus did, who came to proclaim not himself or be served, but the kingdom of God which overflows with abundant grace, love, mercy, and works toward the common good.

### Spirit's Activity in the Great Unraveling

The great love God has for us has brought God closer to us throughout time, first in the Old Testament, where God guided and taught God's people how to be a community. Then, despite knowing the suffering he would endure, and with unfathomable love, God came to dwell among us in God's son Jesus. Finally, after the resurrection, closer yet to dwell in us through the Spirit. Yet, living in a culture that often uses the evil and hatred we witness and experience to question God's existence, love, and involvement in our lives and the world, this seems to be forgotten. However, God has not forgotten us, even in this unraveling, in fact, if we do not believe this, it seems to ignore the history of God's involvement not only in the world but human history, calling into question our Christian beliefs. Just as Jesus did not meet the assumed criteria that the Messiah would be someone to overthrow Roman rule, are we waiting for the Spirit to so visibly move that we miss the work of the Spirit, and our role in God's mission in our lives, communities and world?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7-11.

When we recognize God's continued involvement in our world, there should be no doubt that the Spirit continues to work to restore communities so we can flourish, even in the unraveling of the institutions that have been built. Rather than something to be feared, I believe this presents an exciting opportunity to follow the Spirit's lead and lose the shackles that have bound our churches which have placed trust solely in human agency and become communities that are led by the Spirit.

Working primarily through the Spirit, God is still at work in this world so that life can flourish, so as Christians we are the Spirit-filled and Spirit-led agents in this world, living within that truth means that we must continually discern the Spirit's activity and trust in, expect, and anticipate the Spirit's movement. With good intentions, some have interpreted and modeled their ministry after specific acts in Jesus' ministry, substituting moralizing for the work of discernment, sadly overlooking his immersion and involvement in the lives and communities of people.<sup>20</sup> It is this involvement and responsive nature that we should be looking to rather than specific acts. Just as God entered our world as Christ for us in our need, it is through entering communion with our neighbors and communities that new life will be found.<sup>21</sup> However, care must be taken in this so that the relationships are not one-sided in which we assume we are the subjects and the neighbor is reduced to an object to serve. Instead, it is through cultivating a listening community, and the relationships we build that we will discover the Spirit's activity and discern our call to participate in God's mission.

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Warren, *At This Time in This Place: The Spirit Embodied in the Local Assembly* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 69.

<sup>21</sup> Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 9.

As numerous cultural threads of influence shape people's identities, perspectives, and ways of life, so too are our churches.<sup>22</sup> In this time and place, this is not a call to figure out how to present ourselves to attract more people with the hope that our congregations may flourish financially, for that usually only results in superficial practices. Instead, it is a call to join with our neighbors in attempting to make sense of the world around us and how the unchanging gospel makes sense in this time and place. This is not a call to transform our identities as Christians, but a call to adapt to the world around us and share the gospel through our witness to the trust and hope we have found in Jesus, so that we may expand the body of Christ as a community that is led by the Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

Although the changes in the world are immense, our world with the large numbers of those often labeled as “unchurched” is much like the world the early Christians faced in which Jesus was not known.<sup>24</sup> In their work *Starting Missional Churches: Life in the Neighborhood*, Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes describe our current culture as one that for many people the Christian story is only known through media fragments and fading memories.<sup>25</sup> Although the name Jesus and Christianity are recognizable, today we face a world in which the Christian institutions have been pushed to the margins of our communities. Today Christians and the institutions they represent are often viewed as

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<sup>22</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 127-128.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>24</sup> Yong, *Who Is the Holy Spirit?*, 72-73.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Lau Branson, and Nicholas Warnes, eds., *Starting Missional Churches: Life with God in the Neighborhood* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 28-29.



being full of hypocrisy, similar to how the Pharisees and their institutions were viewed at the time of Jesus. Many Christians and the institutions they represent appear to, and in some cases have lost touch with God's mission and our role in it by focusing on preserving cultural traditions and practices, replacing trust in the Spirit and the call to participate in God's mission with confidence in strategic planning, programs, and marketing. Though this is a fearful and troubled community, we should not fear this time but embrace it, for we know through scripture that the Spirit's approach is primarily one of showing up in specific contexts, never abandoning us, but rather, meeting us in our troubles, moments of displacement, brokenness, and messy, disruptive situations.<sup>26</sup>

Placing trust in management theories and practices only serve to shift focus to leaders and their responsibilities and abilities to predict, and control circumstances rather than the Spirit.<sup>27</sup> The challenge we are facing requires something much different; it is not to provide the answers, but rather, it is building attentive, adaptive, insightful, and innovative capacities within the leaders and congregation. It requires a considerable shift in mental complexity, a topic that we will touch on later in this chapter. Marked by individualism and modern consumer capitalism, we are living in a culture that tends to package and market everything. All these factors interact with a culture that has both a vast amount of views about religion, politics, and the world, leaving them with very little time to reflect on anything and establish or internalize their views, making this a very

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<sup>26</sup> Van Gelder, *Ministry of a Missional Church*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Warren, *At This Time in This Place*, 210.

complex challenge.<sup>28</sup> But as a church, a Spirit-led community we can offer a very different narrative to the ways of this world.

### What Could Be Done

While focus groups do not usually reveal anything new or surprising, they are helpful to confirm what we already think we know to be true, something the Guiding Team (GT) needs to see confirmed themselves.<sup>29</sup> The formation of focus groups was something members of the GT felt was needed to help further refine and define the challenges in this congregation and was heavily lobbied for by team members that have worked with focus groups before. History, personal experiences, and the RSLs indicated that there was still a substantial amount of dwelling in the negative. Since what we focus on often becomes the reality, and for this congregation it seems to have stalled them in the water, paralyzed by fear with no confidence in the journey, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) would be a beneficial process to engage in. As a process that assumes all organizations have generative forces found in their stories and imaginations, AI can shape ways to move forward towards a new future based on their strengths while developing new habits and capacities together.<sup>30</sup> The benefits of this process could influence multiple faucets within this intervention. AI would not only draw attention away from the negatives by bringing to the surface successes, positive memories from the history of the congregation, but also surface common values, meanings, motivations within those stories, and the abundant gifts of God. This process would come alongside them to help them rediscover

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 299.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, *Change by Design*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change*, Second Edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 24.

the abundant gifts of God and shift their focus to make decisions based on the abundance of gifts rather than a perspective of scarcity. In addition, AI would actively involve a more significant number of the congregants, fostering collaboration and developing leaders with invested and engaged participation. All of this could not only dislodge the negativity so forward progress could be made, but also inform current work. By bringing the church's "own narratives into conversation with the biblical and historic narratives of our faith," it helps to connect their stories to God's story, recognizing God's mission and His Spirit as the primary actor, all important for congregations that are stuck, or are over-dependent on frameworks that have a logical sequence and produce measurable results.<sup>31</sup>

Several models of leadership and change have the potential to be particularly beneficial for this congregation and leadership to engage in to dislodge old habits—models which focus on deep listening and cycles of action and reflection, carrying forward what works and adapting so that there could be continued forward movement. For the elected leadership, behaviors that were contradictory to each other and resulted in invisible barriers to change were observed in the pre-work period.<sup>32</sup> Removing these invisible barriers that are making it difficult to adapt, meet the challenges, and promote progress must be addressed. Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey offer a process in *Immunity to Change* to engage in that cannot only help to discern the invisible barriers and fears further, or as named by the authors the immune system, but also transform the mindset of individuals, groups, or systems they are a part of.<sup>33</sup> This process identifies

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>32</sup> Schroeder, "Creating Opportunities for the Spirit by Cultivating Cultures of Openness."

<sup>33</sup> Robert Kegan, and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 31.

and maps either as individuals or groups, a commitment or goal and three interrelated behaviors or mindsets, *doing/not doing*, *hidden and competing commitments*, and *significant assumptions*. *Doing/not doing* refers to behaviors of the individual or group that run contrary to the desired goal. These are not necessarily looked at as behaviors that need to be eliminated, but as factors that can provide valuable insight into issues and a more accurate picture of the barrier.<sup>34</sup> The *hidden and competing commitments* are the mindsets behind the *doing/not doing* behaviors and why they persist<sup>35</sup> that function a lot like having one foot on the gas and one on the brake. *Big assumptions* are another layer of the mindset that prevents the desired change from taking place. The assumptions may or may not be true, but they are believed to be true by the individual or group, such as the belief that unless you can do most things independently, self-respect will be lost.<sup>36</sup> Those behaviors and mindsets do not promote unity, but rather, they are self-protective and work against the very change or goal desired. The process is not an easy or a comfortable one to work through, but necessary. In fact, the authors suggest that if it is not difficult emotionally, you have not correctly identified all the parts and dug deep enough. The goal is not to obliterate these, but that through the process of identifying the limits of the current way of thinking, optimal conflict is created, which is not only needed for a healthy system, but it also supports and encourages greater mental complexity.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 54.

### What This Mean for Leaders

To understand and recognize the Spirit's call to participate means that we must make attending to our context part of the rhythm of everything we do. Leaders must cultivate a new leadership posture that assists and comes alongside our people to help them identify not only what is happening in our communities, but also discerns the Spirit's activity and leadership, trusting the Spirit's agency with priorities rooted in God's mission more than their own. As leaders, this is how we will serve God: by forming others we are drawn together by the Spirit to participate and lead in God's mission. Letting go of linear hierarchical strategies and cultivating a posture of openness is critical in this time. The practice of waiting for a strategic plan to be in place before making decisions is over, the type of leadership needed has shifted, and organizations and leaders themselves must be more agile than ever in a networked and rapidly changing world.<sup>38</sup>

However, before congregations stuck in a fear-driven mindset and dependent on human agency can effectively move out into their communities in Spirit-led authentic ways, they need to transform their lives, hearts, and practices first. We alone cannot create a strategy or plan to bring about the gospel being heard in others; that is the work of the Spirit. Cultivating a new community through communal practices that create a posture of openness to the Spirit's work is essential for this intervention. An environment in which the congregation is not driven by an agenda with specific outcomes in mind but drawn out by the Spirit instead. This means that leaders must be attentive listeners engaging in the lives of our neighbors to discover how people are experiencing the world so that they can adapt and engage in meaning-making practices. These practices help

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<sup>38</sup> Hayim Herring and Terri Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World: Platforms, People, and Purpose* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 66.

people to deepen their relationship with the living God, with a posture that recognizes that spiritual formation is the work of the Spirit that takes place over time, is unique for each person, and is not restricted to only individual growth and the love of God, but also love of our neighbors.<sup>39</sup> Scripture makes it clear that the pouring out of the Spirit not only introduces new perspectives, but also that all persons involved will be transformed as they engage deeply in the world around them and develop new relationships. It is through the Spirit working between us in this web of relationships that we are continually formed by the Spirit and grow both inside our gathered community and out.<sup>40</sup> If we profess to believe the Spirit is active in, among, and through others, then if we are not engaged, attentive, and listening, we are also no longer listening to God.

The continued use of old strategies or business models, only changing them in minor ways serve to further block learning and growth, and continuing to engage in patterns of things “the way they have always been done” will only inhibit innovative and creative leadership skills that are needed.<sup>41</sup> Environments or cultures that enhance discovery, encourage the interplay of ideas, are fluid, and have minimal structure are essential for leaders to cultivate.

Frank J. Barrett is just one of several that describes environments such as this in his work *Yes to the Mess*.<sup>42</sup> Offering a fascinating view into the world of jazz musicians’

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<sup>39</sup> Dwight J. Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-27.

<sup>41</sup> Frank J. Barrett, *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>42</sup> In *Innovative Intelligence* David S. Weiss and Claude Legrand, and *Change by Design* by Tim Brown, each author lays out a process that follows the same basic principle of innovation by creating frameworks, refining challenges, generating ideas and implementing and testing ideas.

improvisation, Barrett uses the mindset of jazz musicians to offer a way in which organizations can reshape their thinking on leadership in ways that allow them to both be creative and move forward without a clear plan or predictable outcome. This is not a leadership perspective held with much respect in our culture, and we see it reflected in the culture of this context. Reoccurring failures, followed by the expected criticism from voices within the congregation have led to relationships filled with animosity, poor communication, inaction, and paralyzing fear. Conversations concerning forward movement are often filled with copious amount of attention to how they can control, or the lack control they have over the perceived variables, and the criticism they fear they will face, all focusing on the negative, none of which promotes fruitful conversation.

Barrett proposes a mindset which is innovative, approaches challenges from different angles, asks more positive, searching questions, and fosters conversation, a mindset in which they do not focus on the obstacles, but look for the "groove," or where the energy is.<sup>43</sup> Barrett argues that organizations need to create an environment that experiments can take place in and allows failure, reshaping thinking of failures as a negative to something that is learned from in which the best pieces are pulled forward, and another experience can build upon.<sup>44</sup> In the previous work and research in this congregation, it was evident people were not always comfortable sharing an idea, concern, or opinion within the group due to the negative, closed posture that is present among the leaders. When questions were asked, or new ideas proposed they were often met with a "been there done that" demeanor that shut down the conversation, yet another

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 53.

indicator of the lack of trust in the Spirit, possibly blinding them from seeing opportunities the Spirit may be showing them.

An environment needs to be cultivated that is highly creative, where people feel comfortable talking and sharing ideas and experiments are encouraged, which is highly collaborative, and where there is attention to each other. This does not mean that a framework for approaching challenges should not be created, but instead, a framework that is minimally structured and has innovative potential.<sup>45</sup> This structure must make it clear what the boundaries are, yet give freedom, much like a chosen chord in a musician's improvisational jam session.<sup>46</sup> As the music builds and the chords progress, adjustments are made while continually receiving new information and staying true to the boundaries. For a church, this means an environment where experiments are encouraged and built upon but remain true to the mission and identity of the church. In this way, experiments act as small disruptions to the routine, are reflected upon, and the new information leads to an adjustment and encourages adaptive participation.

In recent research conducted by Hayim Herring and Terri Elton, they examine how groups are navigating societal shifts. Studying both congregations and nonprofits from two traditions, Lutheran and Jewish, they looked at the impact of these shifts on organizational structure and identified leadership traits and practices of those who have demonstrated a capacity for leading their communities through times of shifting paradigms.<sup>47</sup> In their work, they examined two primary types of structures operating in

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>47</sup> Herring and Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World*.



these organizations, hierarchies and socially networked. Network structures by their very nature are relational, open structures that can adapt and expand because they are driven by shared values and goals that allow them to experiment with innovation without fear of their existence being threatened.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the networked approach creates fear and raises anxiety levels in hierarchical structures that are driven by ordered, linear procedures that produce measurable results.

An essential element to examine alongside these structures is social capital, as it is an essential piece of organizations and refers to the degree of connectivity based on social relationships.<sup>49</sup> In his work *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam found social capital to have beneficial effects on both individuals and communities that impacted the collective ability to solve common issues. Further, within social capital there are two distinctions to be made: bridging, and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital refers to strong bonds that hold people together, acting like glue and is rather narrow, specific, and supports exclusive identities. Bonding social capital has a strong presence in organizations that focus inward and is dominant in hierarchical structures.<sup>50</sup> They also tend to be present in structures that have strong generational relationships and histories in organizations. Conversely, bridging social capital is a characteristic of networked organizations that have broader connections and identities that draw on others intelligence and diffuse information. These bridging relationships are generally ones in

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>49</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

which people enter and exit on their terms.<sup>51</sup> While bridging social capital is the hardest to create, it is essential for communities to work toward the common good; and although it is complex, bridging and bonding social capital are both needed for greater community cohesion. Herring and Elton's findings support Putnam's work as they found that organizations they studied from those that were centuries old to brand new start-ups, had elements of both hierarchies and networked organizations present, the key was finding the balance, which requires experiments.<sup>52</sup>

As a result of their work, the authors put forth four foci for leaders in this time and place we find ourselves in. First, as Barrett described, leading in disruptive times requires less reliance on structures for decision-making and guidance. Instead, decisions must be made based on an organization's mission and identity.<sup>53</sup> This makes knowing their mission and identity not only foundational but central to all other areas of focus for leaders. Communities that have experienced success adapting and reforming in this world are those that have been mindful of their mission and identity. It is critical that people be engaged in meaningful ways around the mission and identity of the organization. In all the busyness of our society, a church must do more than compete for attention; they must engage in helping people make meaning of their life and offer an alternative way of life, an abundant life in Christ. Grounded in mission and identity allows for more personal and organizational freedom, which makes adapting easier. However, when this piece is

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>52</sup> Herring and Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

lacking, it can be frightening for leaders to let go of control and trust, and that can be disastrous for the organization as fear takes over and paralyzes.

Second, leaders need to be able to cultivate community by listening and attending to relationships both internal (bonding social capital) and external (bridging social capital) to their organization. This means leaders must think more intentionally where they choose to be present. In highly networked and connected societies information flows through relationships and it is both how what is happening around them, what challenges people are facing, and how the Spirit's movement is discerned.<sup>54</sup> As previously mentioned, tending relationships also means engaging in meaning making and cultivating identity. This means that leaders must also be attentive listeners to discover how people are experiencing the world so that they can adapt and engage in meaning-making practices that help people to deepen their relationship with the living God. Living in a networked society provides plenty of opportunities to create bridging relationships, but makes it difficult for cultivating bonding relationships.<sup>55</sup> Leaders must rethink traditional limited power models and instead move to a more open, participatory, shared leadership model. Keeping boundaries porous to allow for more connections to be made, expanding networks, gathering information, and then sharing collectively are also crucial in this time of change.

Third, leaders must be able to draw people in and generate momentum that remains focused on vision, mission, and the process rather than a plan. This does not mean that strategic planning needs to be abandoned; instead, a shift in mindset needs to

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<sup>54</sup> Herring and Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World*, 55.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

take place to one of strategic thinking in which a plan remains open or looks for the groove, reordering as new information surfaces from networks in a participatory culture, an approach an action-reflection model supports.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, leaders need to cultivate a learning community, a community that takes risks with intentional experimenting and where innovation is seen as necessary to help navigate the adaptive work. These learning communities must also support multiple groups that are encouraged to get out and try things and then come together to share and reflect on what they discovered.<sup>57</sup> In this way, a voice is given to multitudes, and it promotes the discovery of both the hunger and life within the community, as well as what works, what does not, and what can be carried forward. The environment should also be such that failure is acceptable and is viewed as a learning opportunity that is built upon in the continuous cycle of action-reflection processes as previously discussed.

Congregations and governing boards today also need to adapt or change their mindset of the type of leaders they are looking for. Many are still looking for individuals that embody the leadership qualities prevalent during Christendom with hierarchal structures that were meant to serve a stable, habitual social structure. Leaders operating in these models focus on the needs of the individuals and families within their congregation, are often charismatic, and are looked at to provide a precise guided vision to execute. The model for effective leadership in the past generally promoted those who could solve problems based on experience by breaking them down, using logic, and using “best

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>57</sup> In *Innovative Intelligence: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation in Your Organization*, David S. Weiss and Claude Legrand discuss the landscape leaders in this time and place are in and what effective leaders need to embody. They discuss the need for design thinking, curating cultures that support that type of thinking, and removing obstacles to design thinking.

practices” to solve them.<sup>58</sup> These characteristics are not particularly helpful today and may even be counterproductive, or an immunity to change.<sup>59</sup> In these situations, the congregation can become overly dependent on their leaders. When the leaders they are dependent upon leave, the results are usually detrimental as the congregation is lost, floundering, and returning to old ways of doing things. Shared leadership that gives away power must be cultivated so that functioning is not dependent on one leader, making navigating staff changes and periods of transition more manageable, because leading in times of change is not something even the most gifted leader can do alone.

As previously noted, there needs to be a considerable shift in mental complexity, which for most leaders trained in traditional models of leadership requires building new capacities. The mindset needed to address this complex challenge is often referred to as a self-transforming mind. This is a mindset in which leaders can step outside of their own frameworks or ideologies and observe the limits and defects of them.<sup>60</sup> Importantly, however, leaders need to be able to do more than observe their limitations, they need to be able to overwrite their limitations, adapting them and holding them tentatively, while remaining open so that they do not become rigid.<sup>61</sup> Leaders need to be able to deal with complex issues that are not predictable, are unique and usually not repeated, have

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<sup>58</sup> Weiss and Legrand, *Innovative Intelligence*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> Kegan and Laskow-Lahey, *Immunity to Change*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

ambiguous components, require design thinking, and finally, involve aligning multiple stakeholders around the issue.<sup>62</sup>

The pastoral care qualities which traditionally trained leaders were taught are still important, but the type of leader needed for our constant and rapidly changing world is different from past leadership models. While there are multiple leadership styles, at their core must be the ability to mobilize congregations to engage in its most pressing problems and deepest challenge. Leaders must balance seeking to understand the challenges in the congregation, without feeling as though they need to fix it all and make everyone happy, all while still allowing room for healthy conflict. This is a difficult, yet essential task for a congregation if they are to be an intentional and purposeful incarnational community that puts God at the center and embodies its purpose. A culture within the congregation must be cultivated and nurtured in which relationships with each other, our neighbors, neighborhoods, and God take priority over consumer wants, and cultural and institutional biases.<sup>63</sup> A culture with multiple platforms in which sharing and expanding on ideas is curated, and in which listening, gathering together, and responsive actions are encouraged, places that help people discover things about themselves, God, and the community they are submerged in.

Leaders need to be able to look at all parts of the system, correctly identify what the challenges are, and help them reframe them, nurture their gifts and provide opportunities for them to stretch and grow. Essential skills for today's leaders are ones of facilitation and discernment, skills that allow the work and energy to come from the

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<sup>62</sup> Weiss and Legrand, *Innovative Intelligence*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Lau Branson and Warnes, eds., *Starting Missional Churches*, 31.

people, and an ear for listening and discerning what is emerging, where their facilitation and nurturing might be needed, and their place in the journey. They also need the ability to keep their feet in multiple worlds by gaining a balcony view.<sup>64</sup> The leader's role in this time and place is not one of commanding the flock, but one of creating a space in which they flourish, spilling out into the world around them following the Spirit's lead and being drawn out into the community and world.<sup>65</sup>

### A Listening Community

In *Life Together*, Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores Christian community and describes a community such as this. Bonhoeffer identifies and describes what he names as the ministry of listening, helpfulness, and bearing.<sup>66</sup> Bonhoeffer states that just as love of God begins with listening to God's Word, love for our neighbors requires first learning to listen to them. Bonhoeffer notes that it is human nature to evaluate, or judge others and their status in relation to ours almost immediately,<sup>67</sup> which if true, means we are listening to our neighbors with presuppositions that may inhibit our ability to truly listen, as we are already expecting certain answers and waiting with our response. Without listening to hear the stories, hopes, and dreams of those we are called into relationship with, how can we hear what the Spirit is up to in our neighbors' lives and communities? These relationships are truly transformational as we encounter the

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<sup>64</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Danger of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 51-74.

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, *Soul of Ministry*, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper One, 2009).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

Spirit in each other, as well as within those relationships. It is within these relationships that the Spirit is active, which means if we cannot genuinely listen to others, we cannot hear what God whispers to our hearts.

What Bonhoeffer refers to as “the ministry of bearing” is part of the freedom we have as Christians. Through Jesus' death on the cross, God bore the burdens of all of mankind, and we no longer must earn our salvation through good works or charity. Instead, we have been freed to lovingly serve our neighbors and form relationships in which their burdens also become our burdens, making our neighbor more than a mere object we serve as we enter genuine communion with them, relationships in which we not only endure the hard times together but also share in the joys.

The final ministry that Bonhoeffer refers to is the ministry of helpfulness. Many congregations still stuck in the mindset of Christendom have known very little other practice of mission than a service or deed for our neighbors. When mission is practiced like this, the assumption tends to be that they are bringing Christ and salvation to them rather than trusting and recognizing the Spirit's work that is already present. However, when helpfulness is lacking, the relational aspects of listening and bearing, as many of the traditional missional practices of the past (which included necessary good deeds) have, it does not promote or bring us into the fullness of a relationship with our neighbor, they in a sense remain an object. Alternately, we should have a posture of openness and allow our days and schedules to be interrupted and arranged by the Spirit rather than our human agendas.<sup>68</sup> When mission is reduced to acts of service that we can perform, or pray over or possibly leave a Bible or devotional book and check it off our list, we are not

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 99.



participating in God's mission, nor is it a mutual or reciprocal relationship like the triune God. To join God in God's mission, we need to cultivate an environment in which the Spirit opens us to discover our mission as we enter genuine relationships in which we take the time to listen to our neighbors and form relationships. In these relationships, the Spirit is the acting agent, and we can discover how the Spirit is already working in our communities, discerning what the Spirit is calling us to do in this particular time and place. Without these three ministries of listening, bearing, and helpfulness present together, we cannot effectively discern our call to participate in God's mission, sharing the good news with those we are called into relationship with. It becomes mere talk and deeds, void of relationships, and we only serve to continue the behavior that has driven many away from the church.<sup>69</sup>

#### Role of Scripture in Transforming Culture

Listening to what the Spirit is revealing to us and calling us to do not only means dwelling in the community and encountering the Spirit in our relationships with our neighbors, it also means encountering the Spirit as we read the scripture. If scripture is approached as just textual knowledge to obtain, it can result in prescriptive strategies that favor strategic procedures and plans that imitate behaviors over transformative processes that are led by the Spirit. Conversely, if we approach scripture with a posture of openness, we are invited and led on a journey of discovery in which the Spirit works through scriptures to form and shape both individuals and communities while being woven together with God's very being and purpose. With this posture, we expect and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 104.

anticipate the Spirit to reveal something to us, instead of a book we go to for a divine license to support behaviors or attitudes that are self-directed, and at times not even Biblical.<sup>70</sup>

Reflecting on Psalm 119, Martin Luther discusses a similar posture with interconnected elements that are in dynamic motion as the Spirit works in and through scripture.<sup>71</sup> First, prayers, to invite the Spirit to reveal, enlighten and guide them. Second, meditating on scripture by continually reading, speaking, and hearing it, and careful attention and prolonged thinking to attune yourself to what the Spirit is revealing to you. Finally, Luther adds trial, to not only understand but also experience as part of the dynamic motion of our interaction with the Spirit through scripture. It is through these trials that we not only increase our wisdom and faith in the Spirit, but we will be compelled to share the gospel.

Yet, there is a danger to be aware of which highlights why a posture of openness and expectation when approaching scripture is so important. Since words carry multiple meanings, are culturally embedded, and our default as humans it is typical to assume meanings we are familiar with communal practices around scripture are of great importance to cultivate. Not only do we hear the Word, but we also hear other voices and what the Spirit stirs in and reveals to them through the same scripture. With scripture

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<sup>70</sup> Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 77.

<sup>71</sup> Oswald Bayer, Oswald, Jeffrey G Silcock, and Mark C Mattes. *Theology the Lutheran Way*. English ed. Lutheran Quarterly Books, *Grand Rapids*: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007.

, “The Three “Rules” for the Study of Theology” in *The Lutheran Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 64.

-serving as a witness to God’s work, we are drawn into the ongoing narrative of God's work in the world and humanity.<sup>72</sup> When we spend time in scripture, whether privately or communally in practices such as dwelling in the word, not only are we joined with the Spirit, but something is revealed to us and others by the Spirit that shapes our imaginations and cultivates a community shaped by the Word through the Spirit, not the human strategies and personal agendas of this world.

### Conclusion

How “church” looks moving forward may be radically different than what we are familiar with, but it is not new; our wineskin is merely breaking apart (Mark 2:21-22). We need to attend to how God is pouring the wine, the mission given to us, and where fresh wineskins are being created. By attending to our communities and listening to the Spirit in, though, and among ourselves and neighbors, we will see ourselves also being formed by God. This is not a process we face alone, for the Spirit has worked throughout history forming and leading communities that bear witness to and expand God’s kingdom and proclaim the gospel. Joining God in God’s ongoing mission as the Spirit transforms our commitments, identity, dispositions, and behaviors.

We need a community in which trust in the Spirit is put back in the center and remembers that all ministry is God’s ministry that we are merely continuing with the guidance of the Spirit.<sup>73</sup> It is up to the Spirit-gathered and led communities to discover how it is received and articulated in the particularities of their time and place, adapting without compromising the gospel. This means an active spiritual life that is cultivated

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<sup>72</sup> Green, *Seized by Truth*, 19.

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, *Soul of Ministry*, 17.

through communal and private practices of prayer, ongoing study, and reflection on scripture, theology, and our experiences.

However, this also means breaking away from the hierarchal structures that churches have relied on and served to maintain the status quo of the church for decades. These structures can be helpful, but they do not bear burdens and share the joys through a relationship of mutual trust in which we are invited into each other's lives and come alongside each other, as people called and gathered by the Spirit.

The Spirit does not cease working and is always reordering life and working towards the restoration of relationships with both God and each other that have been fragmented by sin. Incessantly, the Spirit points us in the direction of the new future and the kingdom of God, gathering, creating things anew, and inviting us to join in and participate in God's mission for the common good, but do we perceive it (Isaiah 43:19)?

## CHAPTER 3

### THE JOURNEY

Today's church leaders face a daunting journey that they have not been prepared for, yet they cannot wait; they must begin the journey. This is a journey that twenty-first-century church leaders must take to shift the trust we have placed in human agendas and plans to trust in the Spirit as our guide, or our journey will certainly end here while we wait for a "proven successful" path to follow. This adaptive work requires a team of people that are not only building their capacities, but learning about themselves and others while journeying together, and grounded in spiritual practices and attentive to the Spirit's work. When forming the Guiding Team (GT) for this intervention, we sought to not only have a diverse age group that represented the congregation and community, but also those that were relatively new to the congregation and engaged in some way, and those that have established patterns of involvement. We held the hope that by choosing this group we could not only test the receptivity of this work with a representative demographic of our community, but also how and if their experiences with the church and its culture might affect this work.

#### **The Guiding Team**

Along with the Senior Pastor, we began with a six-member team, each of which was personally invited by either the pastor or this researcher sharing the desire and reason for the team. Of the members, two of the females, Jan and Annie, each had children in

elementary school and were involved in small group studies, volunteered regularly and had been involved with the church for about four years. Jan was also on the Church Council and Annie on a church committee. Both women were known to be very reflective and had a healthy spiritual life, spending time with God each day. The third member was also a female named Laura. She also had children in elementary school and had been involved with the church for less than two years, joining the congregation after attending a community event for families. The fourth member was a male, Steve, with two children (one in Middle School and one in High School), who had been a member of the church for nearly twenty years and had been a member of several committees, Church Council, praise band, and small groups, and who was very articulate about what his faith means to him. Most of Steve's experiences in past leadership roles had copious amounts of conflict, and a few even caused him to leave the congregation for periods of time, but he always returned. Our fifth member was also a female, Abby, who also had two children, one in Middle School and one nearing graduation from High School. Like Steve, Abby had also been involved in the congregation and sat on various committees for over twenty years, participated in small groups, the praise band, and was also known for being very reflective and having a healthy spiritual life. Our fifth member was a middle-aged female named Sue, married with no children, and very driven. Of all the members of the team, Sue was the newest to the congregation but had already participated in numerous ministries. She was known to be someone who gets things done. Growing in faith was a priority for her, and she had expressed interest in developing leadership after attending a recent leadership conference with other leaders from the congregation as a member of the Adult Ministry committee. We were unable to find older

individuals that would represent empty nesters or retired individuals to join our team. At the time of the intervention the Senior Pastor had been with the congregation for eight years, and this researcher four years.

### **Previous Work with the Guiding Team**

Prior to this intervention, the GT gathered about every two weeks so we could establish a starting point for later observation and reflections. Each meeting included discussion and sharing of the reality of the unprecedented challenge many churches are finding themselves in while being mindful not to let the past personal history of this congregation creep in and weigh down the discussion. We also spent time together in prayer and reflecting on scripture we each had dwelled on between meetings that in some way connected to the content in chapter two to lead us into a discussion. We engaged in a few different spiritual practices and design thinking. The first several times we used design thinking, we used it for more practical and less personal challenges such as how guests are greeted. They needed a few reminders of the steps in the process, and prompts to move on when they were spending too much time dwelling in the details. Having a visual by writing on a whiteboard, rather than each keeping notes, was beneficial to keeping the focus of the challenge in mind and particularly for moving from divergent to convergent thinking. They also were observed giving themselves (and sometimes others) verbal reminders to keep it human-centered. They found creating prototypes for nonphysical things a little trickier, but once they passed that hurdle, they did well with prototyping. As we got closer to the intervention starting, they needed very few cues. The majority of our work as a team was engagement in listening experiments both as a team and in the community, along with engaging in some social activity together.

During this time the goals of the GT were developed and presented to the congregation: to discover where people are in their faith life, and guide the congregational leaders in the ongoing development of practices that encourage growth in our relationship with God, each other, and the community.

Overall, this work went very well and helped to establish a baseline for team members prior to this intervention. Laura was still new to expressing her faith and involvement within a Christian community and was a bit uncomfortable engaging in conversations and reflecting on scripture; she remarked numerous times that she had not opened her Bible since she was in Middle School. As time progressed, she seemed to get more comfortable engaging in reflections and discussions. As an experienced regional project coordinator for a large nonprofit, she was always willing to give input and engage in processes in a very enthusiastic manner and was the GT's and Grace's biggest cheerleader. Jan was also excited for this journey and was engaging in scripture daily and began to stretch her wings and deliberately step out of her comfort zone as she felt the Spirit was leading her to do. She also would regularly report to the Church Council about GT activities, insights, and the work ahead. Likewise, Annie also continued to engage in personal spiritual practices daily and push herself beyond her comfort zone as the Spirit guided her as well. She was very insightful and brought a strong community-orientated focus on the larger community of Grace and the community outside of the building, often bringing to our attention those that are marginalized, alone or isolated. Steve was also excited for this work remarking that this was all very new for this congregation and unlike anything they have done before. Steve was enjoying the spiritual work despite lacking a clearly defined road map to where we are headed and at times calling it the



"best Bible study he has ever been in."<sup>1</sup> As someone with a history in the church that had often left him with a bitter taste in his mouth and a hesitancy to get involved, he seemed to have a fire in his soul again. Abby was also one on fire with the Spirit and excited for this work. Unfortunately, she had to break away from the group just as we began the intervention, as her cancer was no longer in remission and had returned more aggressive than ever, spreading throughout her body, and she passed away before this intervention was complete. That loss was hard for the team, but her strength, passion, and love for the Lord despite her circumstances continued to inspire the team. Sue remained a determined force to be reckoned with and did spend time daily in scripture and engaged in small groups at the church. However, it was hard to read Sue's reactions as her spoken words and body language sent mixed messages. Sue struggled with reflecting on scripture as a group and confessed that for her scripture did not need to be interpreted and she found reflecting with others of little value because for her it was to be taken at face value.

#### Headed into Listening and Discernment

While the excitement for this work filled the team, the source of excitement was different for each person. Annie and Jan were excited to be looking at discovering things about the congregation and to be engaged in deep spiritual work. Their love of God and spending time with God daily, having others to reflect and share perspectives with, and learning from others was a tremendous source of life for them. Steve appreciated the spiritual work and had really taken it to heart and was genuinely reflecting on his own life, and his spirituality. Laura and her contagious excitement seemed to be just thrilled to

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<sup>1</sup> Guiding Team meeting notes, Big Lake, MN, December 2, 2017.

be a part of this work, looking at her own life differently, and re-centering on God and viewing things from God's perspective rather than the earthly perspective. Sue was thrilled to be digging into something she knew well, analyzing, and project management. She described herself as spiritual but also acknowledged she was rigid at times, identifying it as a by-product of a very rigid home and religious upbringing. Further, she acknowledged that her uncompromising posture was not a fruitful way to approach many things in life, but it was who she was.<sup>2</sup> While excitement was high, we also discussed that change is hard because with excitement for something new and its energy, there is also a loss of something in change that others love, and that does not come without grieving and anxiety. Leading change in a congregation is no different and is challenging work that will naturally have a cycle of emotions from excitement-anger-depression. While this can be discussed and known by leaders and may help some, it does not mean that leaders will become less sensitive to criticism and not taking it personally.<sup>3</sup>

### Establishing a Baseline of the Congregation

To establish a baseline for the congregation, the team turned to a design thinking process for imagining approaches for deep listening within the congregation. Individual conversations, traditional paper surveys, group events, and digital platforms were all considered, but a traditional survey to establish a baseline of the congregation in regards to their faith and beliefs was settled upon. As we moved through the process and started

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregations*, 112.

thinking of categories and language for questions that would help us establish a location of their spiritual health, we examined a sample of RSLs results. Sue has experience with this type of work within the business world and is talented at analyzing results which could have been an asset; however, in this case it took us too deep in the wrong direction when we got sidetracked with Sue trying to explain to us how the RSLs analysis was done. While it was recognized that this was not an exact fit from a Lutheran perspective, it seemed to provide a good starting point that we could later further refine and define the results to identify the challenges in the congregation rather than starting from scratch. The team decided to pray about it and see whom God places in their path that we could invite into the process of interpreting and identifying the challenges this congregation faced after the survey. To achieve a significant sample size and receive a better snapshot of this congregation, we also needed to think about how this would be communicated to the congregation in a way that would encourage greater participation than was typical for this congregation.

After quickly identifying logistical questions people may have and noting that we should address them in all communication about the survey, we moved on and addressed what might get in the way of participating for some, and potential ways to help overcome them. With the goal of greater participation and buy-in, it was felt to be essential to communicate the reasoning and intentions of the GT for the survey so we engaged in a design thinking process for how to do this. Overall, the team did well through this process and only needed a few prompts to keep things moving. They tried to look at it from many perspectives and get a feel of the way certain groups might respond to taking a survey. Several perspectives were considered, which included those that are tired of the

surveys and texts that flood their email every time they make a purchase, those with past experiences that make them consider them a waste of time, and even those who may be interested in helping by giving their input but who do not have access to, or have trouble navigating, technology. Laura and Sue had experienced trouble navigating surveys in the past and suggested taking the survey before it is launched. They would note if there were any navigating issues so that we were prepared to assist others, or use their findings to write up directions and steps for the congregation and then they offered to be the ones that take on that task. The team also realized that the length of the survey and the language used could seem intimidating and foreign to many, so as part of the promotion they would acknowledge that and try to encourage people not to get stuck on the language or overthink the question, and that this was meant to be first reactions. They also recognized the importance of asking for help from the big influencers in our congregation to help gain greater participation. What they came up with was a series of skits and marketing ideas to help the congregation understand that we are asking them to take the survey so that we can better understand, teach, and offer opportunities that are a better fit for them. The theme they were using was *Vital Signs*, marketing it as a check-up on the faith life of the congregation to see how we are doing.

### Launching the RSLs

The skits performed by Steve and another volunteer were both done well and received well. The GT set up computers to offer assistance for people in a visible room off the narthex and near the sanctuary, providing coffee and caramel rolls for participants, as their aroma filled the church. Even with this sweet enticement and offer to help, no more than five people used the set up over the three Sundays it was available. The big

influencers had no effect as they stated that they felt the survey was of little importance for them at this stage in their life. They stated they were fine where they were in their faith life and felt the results of the survey would have no impact on them.<sup>4</sup> The number of survey participants that the developer would expect for our congregation based on our average weekly attendance was 105, and to receive a good sample to generate results that were a representative sample, a minimum of 84 were needed; we had 86 take the survey. Pastor and I were not surprised. In fact, we had worried about getting the 84 needed, but that number indeed appeared to weigh on the team and robbed them of some of their excitement.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting One**

Continuing to meet about every two weeks, we opened our first meeting of the research period, spending time in scripture and prayer. Reflecting on Acts 16:1-15, team members were struck by the Spirit's activity in this scripture, which reinforced to them the need to listen for and respond to the Spirit. They expected that they would encounter barriers or blocks, but we must trust where we are being guided to and whom we are guided by. The team members all were engaged in this conversation, sharing their thoughts and responding to others' perspectives. Though they were engaged in the conversation, there was a definite heaviness to this conversation likely due to the team's review of the survey results. There was a discernable disappointment not only concerning the low participation, but the snapshot of the spiritual life of those that participated. Steve, in particular, was very troubled and shocked, remarking he expected it to be bad,

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<sup>4</sup> Guiding Team meeting notes, Big Lake, MN, February 8, 2018.

but this was worse than he had expected. The remainder of this meeting was focused on reflecting on the RSLs results and our next steps.

### RSLs Reflections

Reflections on the results of the RSLs were categorized four ways by the team: *what did the survey reveal, what needed more digging into and discovery, what was missing, and what can be acted on immediately.*<sup>5</sup>

First, regarding what the survey revealed, weighing heavily on the team was the lack of daily personal spiritual practices of the survey participants, especially in light of the fact that the majority of them were considered to be growing in Christ and a lack of personal spiritual practices seemed contradictory to what growing would indicate.<sup>6</sup> They also did not like that the church was classified as troubled and complacent by the survey analysis.<sup>7</sup> Further, they also noted that the congregation's ratings reflected that they think the congregation does well in pastoring, serving, giving to the community, and provided

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<sup>5</sup> For a full Comprehensive report visit <https://reports.revealforchurch.com/report/comprehensive/6054>. For a full Executive report visit <https://reports.revealforchurch.com/report/executive/6054>.

<sup>6</sup> The Executive Summary of the Reveal Spiritual Health Survey revealed that the participants were either below average or well below average in personal spiritual practices of daily reflection on scripture (15%), prayer to seek guidance (35%), and tithing (12%), page 12. In addition, the Comprehensive Report showed that 60% of the participants categorized their selves as growing in Christ and only 5% considered their lives to be Christ-Centered, <https://reports.revealforchurch.com/report/executive/6054>, page 9 .

<sup>7</sup> The Reveal Spiritual Health Survey, Executive Summary categorized Grace Lutheran as a troubled, complacent church, receiving an overall Spiritual Vitality Index of 49, a number well below average. Characteristics of a troubled and complacent church are a lack of personal spiritual practices such as praying and reading the Bible outside of church services <https://reports.revealforchurch.com/report/executive/6054> (pages 6-8).

ample opportunities to engage in service projects.<sup>8</sup> The demographics of those taking the survey indicated they were the wealthier members of the congregation and did not represent the financial demographic of the community.<sup>9</sup> They also noted that the majority of those that completed the survey had also been with the congregation for more than ten years.<sup>10</sup> There were also indications that there needed to be work to foster building relationships, and that worship services need work.<sup>11</sup> They felt that the results indicated that those that took the survey were interested, invested people that wanted to connect, but were dissatisfied with the church's role in spiritual growth.<sup>12</sup>

Addressing the question of what needed more digging into and discovery, they wanted to know more about individuals' personal spiritual practices, particularly in regards to reading the Bible. They also wanted to dig more into what others are seeking in worship services, creating a community within the church, and relational accountability inside the church as those segments of the survey were a bit vague as well. They were perplexed that 49% of the respondents reported being satisfied with small groups because from their perspective there is so little engagement in the three existing

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<sup>8</sup> The Executive Summary also highlighted that this congregation is average to above average when it comes to creating a strong culture of serving, providing opportunities to serve and is known in the community for their serving.

<sup>9</sup> 66% of the participants of the RSLs indicated that they earn more than 75K a year, while the city of Big Lake has an average per capita income of \$28,821.  
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/biglakecityminnesota/INC910217#INC910217>.

<sup>10</sup> Reveal Spiritual Life Survey, Comprehensive Report, page 5.

<sup>11</sup> Team members made this assumption when considering that 37% of survey participants were extremely or very satisfied with weekend services and a 2.39 rating on a scale of 1 (disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree) (Executive Summary, pg. 12, 20).

<sup>12</sup> The Reveal Spiritual Health Survey, Executive Summary reported Grace Lutheran had an above average amount of the participants that were dissatisfied with the church's role in Spiritual growth (pages 8, 18).

small groups and wondered if participants were considering committees and other gatherings and events as small groups.<sup>13</sup>

As they reflected upon what was missing, they were extremely concerned with the fact that an entire generation (the 19- to 29-year age group) were not well represented in the survey respondents and wanted more details, including what people are dissatisfied with and what they are craving and seeking.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the category of what can be acted on immediately seemed to be difficult for the team. It felt like a collective sigh and shoulder drop, that the work ahead seemed overwhelming, with some even verbalizing that they had expected it not to be good, but the results painted a far worse picture than they would have expected. After acknowledging the disappointment and how they felt about that they were able to turn it around by returning to the scripture we had dwelled in trusting the Spirit as our guide. The team moved on and listed several areas and ideas to pursue then divided them up as action items, something that Sue latched on to immediately and categorized. Sue and Steve took on designing focus groups to dig deeper into questions that lingered, Steve as a natural conversationalist and Sue in her wheelhouse. I took on a coaching role with them as I believed that was too big of a task for two people and I wanted to make sure they felt supported in their work. As someone with a passion for scripture, Jan took on looking at personal spiritual practices and approaches to jumpstart and nurture them

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<sup>13</sup> Team members again referenced the survey findings of a low satisfaction with worship services, the small group satisfaction, the well below average rating of the church helping them develop relationships, creating ownership so that the church becomes an important part of who they are, and ability of leadership to maintain harmony, and avert or resolve problems (pages 16, 18, 20).

<sup>14</sup> Reveal Spiritual Life Survey Comprehensive report, <https://reports.revealforchurch.com/report/comprehensive/6054> page 4.



within the congregation, which encompassed multiple platforms. Jan also felt nudged to look at how the different ministry committees and council could conduct their meetings to pull more of a spiritual influence into those that currently exist. Annie and Laura were interested in creative out-of-the-box ways to engage more people across all demographics to nurture spiritual practices by combining them with interests to also build relationships. This was a good fit for Laura, someone who is very active and social, and for Annie, a creative soul, a courageous step out of her comfort zone as a self-proclaimed extreme introvert. We all agreed that continued prayer and reflection about the work we are doing was essential. Equally important to the team was nurturing an atmosphere that is open and receptive to new things and willing to experiment within all the groups we encounter, which needs to be kept in the forefront of our minds. We sought to continue and even enhance programs and practices that are already done well and try to shift the perspective of scarcity the congregation seemed to operate from to one of God's abundant gifts. They hoped to look at ways to intentionally connect our story with God's, look at foundational beliefs, and a possible church-wide curriculum, and AI was also a priority that still needed to be addressed soon. Having processed the results and refocused, the team moved forward with determination.

### Focus Groups

Steve, Sue, and I met a couple of weeks later to develop a framework for moving forward and refining the results of the survey. Anxiousness was stirring in Sue to get to the work at hand, but allowing time for prayer and reflection needed attention first. While we were able to spend a good amount of time in our spiritual practice, Sue made a few statements and continued to seem anxious to move on. After prayer and reflection on

scripture, we began discussing who we felt they needed to hear from and what they would like to dig into more. It was decided that they would hold focus groups based on life stage demographics, those retired or in golden years, empty nest families, families with tweens and teens, and young families with children in the fifth grade and under.

Further, though they were looking for similar information from those not represented in the survey and digging deeper into some of the results, they wanted to make sure that it was different enough that if they did take the RSLs they did not feel they were being asked the same questions. Basic qualitative research question building information and guidelines as well as examples were shared to review.<sup>15</sup> Steve felt strongly that they needed to highlight and bring attention to recognizing the Spirit's activity in this work to stir in the hearts that the Spirit's activity is our focus.

It was discussed that they did not want to focus on attractional things and invite fix-it lists into the conversation, but instead focus on relationships with Christ and the congregation's call to participate in God's mission. While Sue agreed, for the most part, she did struggle with this a little bit because she wanted to know what was wrong, how they can fix it, and then make changes so the congregation could grow and offerings would increase. A reaction that was not all that surprising as financial giving was fresh in the minds of the congregation as they had just voted to withdraw funds from the endowment to pay off the mortgage to lower budget needs. We also agreed that those that appeared to be complacent would not be ignored, but they would not be the focus of the

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed) (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), 154.

focus groups at this time, and that we would continue to pray that the complacent get excited about what is happening around them and get swept up in it. We ended the meeting with action steps of creating a shared document with our focus group categories that the entire GT could interact with, and Sue would email Steve with general question categories she had in mind. Steve, equipped with the research question guidelines, would then create the prototype of questions, and we would all give input and refine them. Both were confident with their tasks and happy to take them as Sue expressed that she did not want to add anything to my plate, if anything she wanted to take things off my plate, subsequently offering to help with matching adult mentors with students for the Lenten Journey Partners ministry.<sup>16</sup>

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Two**

The next time we met as the full GT, we spent time in spiritual practices returning to the Luke 10 text we had dwelled on in the past and then heard from each group about what they had been working on before moving on to other GT work. The Spirit had clearly stirred in the hearts of most of us, revealing new, helpful insights to have in our hearts. Sue continued to take a simple and straight forward view, believing that we should be the conduit for God's word and leave our thoughts and opinions out of it, adding that she did not see the point of looking at this scripture again. She then also stated that she has never spent time between meetings with the selected scripture, that she only looks at it in the meetings and added that she does look at scripture daily though.

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<sup>16</sup> Lenten Journey Partners ministry is a seasonal Lent ministry that connects youth with adult mentors they have a meal with and attend an interactive worship together each week.

## Personal Spiritual Practices

Jan's face lit up when she began sharing what she had been researching since our last meeting that included several ideas for experiments. To begin, she first shared with us an umbrella she saw all we were doing as a GT under concerning Christians and their spiritual practices. These included reading and obeying God's word, having an active prayer life, setting personal spiritual goals, cultivating the talents of others, taking responsibility for souls, serving others and remaining focused on the kingdom. Jan seemed to be in her element and full of life when sharing the experiments she had come up with. One of these experiments was to launch a summer challenge that could nurture personal spiritual practice habits and help keep people connected with the Grace community even though summers typically pull them away. She suggested reading all the Gospels, recording videos, or forming platforms that many people can interact on. These ideas excited the GT members and they naturally moved into a design thinking mindset. While all agreed that some of the grander ideas such as reading all the Gospels over the summer would be great, we needed to keep in mind the reality of the lives of people within our congregation and community, and that seemed to be too big of a goal to start with. Jan agreed but appeared disappointed, but was able to move on and came up with a solid prototype, and one in which we could test by signing up for a similar challenge Laura had seen a presentation for that was put out by a local organization to promote cultivating habits of generosity and positivity called *Three Good Things*.<sup>17</sup> We were all

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<sup>17</sup> *Three Good Things* is a part of the *Bounce Back Project* which is a collaborative of physicians, nurses, hospital leaders, and staff that take a holistic approach to health by promoting health through happiness. This project sent text messages to participants each evening reminding them to text and share three good things that were part of their day. While this project utilized an electronic platform, there was not a corresponding way for responses to be shared publicly or privately that participants could reflect on. <http://www.bouncebackproject.org>.

to participate in this project, share our experiences at the next meeting and adapt it as needed to work in our particular context.

### Focus Groups

Steve and Sue updated everyone on our meeting as written about above, and we looked over the lists of potential people to invite to the focus groups. At this time a goal was stated of intentionally widening our leadership circle by taking people under our wings and mentoring them through the first round of focus groups so they could then facilitate future focus groups. They also shared that they were still reflecting and wondering if and how they could take a survey regarding worship experiences and desires or if they would include that in the focus group inquiry. A change was seen in Steve this time. While he still spoke with excitement about this work, he also seemed anxious to get a checklist of items they could "fix" immediately to attract more people and improve worship. Could this be a remnant of what he had experienced in the past in leadership at Grace, or perhaps fear based on his concern over the finances of the church and the question if there was a future for Grace?

### Create and Connect

Laura and Annie had also been working on experiment ideas around their task to nurture spiritual practices by combining them with interests and also build relationships. After conversations with others and their own experiences with dual-purpose activities as mentioned earlier, they landed on creative Bible Art Journaling workshops for those that love art and doodling. They seemed to have had a good time imagining and working through the design thinking and had a prototype ready to go. All that was needed was some time to promote it and a few low-cost materials. They shared that they felt the

design thinking process went rather smoothly, and they had fun imagining opportunities, reporting that the most challenging part of this process was finding a date that worked with their busy family's schedules before school got out once they arrived at a decision. However, they also remarked that it helped to remind them it is not just their lives that are busy, and that shaped how they wanted to promote this workshop.

### Leadership Postures and Frameworks

At this point, we moved on to imagine what a new posture for leadership could look like as we addressed the goal of widening leadership circles that provided a framework for practices and encouraged a reflective and adaptive leadership posture. Defining a challenge as adaptive or technical was briefly revisited before it was decided that a visual for leaders and groups would be helpful to begin nurturing this type of reflective work. This visual needed to encourage a posture in which the goal or mission was central, allowed for "failures" framing them as learning experiences, as well as showed gradual forward movement, including some ups and downs towards our calling to follow the Spirit and participate in God's mission. The plan was to have it eventually be included in the practices that all groups needed to include in the rhythm of their meetings as well. After sketching out a prototype,<sup>18</sup> each subgroup was to use this in their work as the GT as well as other groups they may be involved with. To further nurture relationships within the church it was decided that as leaders we needed to be models for others in leadership by making ourselves more visible by intentionally reaching out and interacting with those that rush in and out before and after worship services. Jan and

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix B for the illustration.

Annie were observed doing this and talked about it at a later date. Sharing it was hard and easy for them at the same time, but they planned on continuing to put themselves out there. Sue and Steve shared they had not as they did not attempt this as they are often the ones trying to avoid the crowd and get out as quickly as possible, or were busy with other duties at that time of the morning. This admission seemed to confirm the need for control from Sue as she shared that she was a germaphobe and there was just too much germ exposure in mingling, adding that is why she does not participate in the sharing of the peace either. Steve surprised me though and caught me a little off guard because he is such an easy person to talk to. Laura shared she tried, but often had her hands full keeping track of her kids.

### Focus Groups

Steve, Sue and I met again to go over what they had for the question categories, spiritual, worship, engagement, and families, and the possible questions for each category. We discussed what our goals were, what we were still curious about, as well as what we did not want: questions that invite criticism and continue to perpetuate the idea in this congregations' culture that all they have to do is bring their list of complaints and what they wanted to be changed would happen. While changing the minds of the complacent seemed to weigh on both of their minds and was tempting to chase this line of thinking. After redirecting to focus on the Spirit's leadership and giving assurance that there are better platforms to transform mindsets by surfacing life-giving pieces of the past, they were able to move on. Moving past this we believed it would be good to start the groups with the spiritual category to set the tone for the session. However, the second and third categories and their corresponding preliminary questions I gently flagged the

wording as language that may invite a checklist and would more than likely generate responses based on programs with an attractional mindset rather than a response based on values and life-giving experiences. While the fourth category was better and was created with the expectation of getting input from families, it could also be reworked to get more value-based responses than programmatic. Finally, there was a lack of questions that steered participants towards discipleship, and it was suggested that maybe we need to add that fifth category or weave that into the existing categories. After discussion and noting these things, Sue and Steve stated they were confident they could do this and told me that they had this handled and would continue to meet or communicate by email and once they felt they have final questions ready would submit them to me. At the time I wondered whether this was genuine attempt to ease my load, or whether they were essentially dismissing me so that I did not, in their eyes, question their competency.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Three**

For the fourth meeting, all were in attendance except Sue, and this time we chose to engage in a different spiritual practice, Bible blackout, before we reflected on the scripture, Acts 17. All team members engaged in this energizing conversation and what followed that was Spirit-filled, with the sharing of perspectives, receiving others and appreciating the other's perspective. It was amazing to see the Spirit at work in and through the others. In this meeting, we briefly checked in on existing subgroups' progress with their projects, which were all still in the adaptive and testing stage so we could dive into the topic of a church-wide curriculum.



## Church-Wide Curriculum

The team had found the RSLs results troubling, and as we interacted with scripture, it seemed clear to us that we needed to engage in some intentional work on foundational Christian beliefs. For this, the Believe church-wide curriculum was chosen and would be used throughout the church within worship, faith formation programming, and small group studies starting in the fall. However, it was felt that we needed to do some more listening first so that we did not make assumptions and were truly engaging the congregation on their level, not ours. Engaging in some design thinking around that it flowed very naturally and smoothly as the team decided on diverse demographic groups to be part of a group we would call the Believe Group. This team would be flexible and it would have porous boundaries and allow people to come when they were able. We imagined this group interacting with the believe topics and key faith statement and responding to them as far as what they were drawn to in it, what is confusing, and where they struggle with it in their lives. With the insights gained from this group, a plan for the year ahead would be roughed out using their input to mold and shape what we do. A list of names of those we would like to invite into this process was then generated. To get a better picture, we were careful to pick individuals or families that were not only familiar to us, but those we know are on the margins, those we rarely hear from, or those whose involvement is perhaps limited to dropping kids off for faith formation programming. We also agreed to create a shared document to come up with wording for invitations to be a part of the Believe Group and what we would like to communicate.

## Communication

Moving on, we discussed how communications with the congregation did not seem to be sufficient, as feedback Sue was receiving has been limited to only negative responses that nothing is being done and that nobody knows the outcome of the survey. This feedback had the potential to deflate and anger the team, as they had worked hard on communicating not only the results of the RSLs and made them available in every way we could imagine. After a conversation in which frustration was expressed, we agreed that while these negative comments were important to hear, that we must remember that it is common only to hear the negative, and the emotions we were experiencing as a reaction to the feedback was not from God. It was decided to continue communicating as we have, but increase the frequency as well as make things more direct using language such as "as a direct result of the RSLs" and when complaints are shared ask about what they were looking for. This conversation seemed to particularly agitate Steve, perhaps based on his past experiences and the hard work he put into this.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Four**

We began our fourth meeting with prayer and reflection on scripture, wrapping it up with talking about what God is stirring in team members at the time through this work they were presently engaged in. Annie and Jan had very similar stirrings about encouraging people to dive into their Bibles as well as additional ideas for experiments. Steve continued to be upset with the seemingly complacent faith we are often confronted with and was examining his possible complacency, recognizing that even he has noticed that many things are on autopilot in his spiritual life and many things that he has memorized have just become rote. Pastor and I were aware of all the people and our

conversations with them that the Spirit had placed in our paths recently that seem to affirm feelings that there is still much listening that needs to be done and that people seem to be hungry for someone to ask them. Sue and Laura were not able to attend this meeting.

### Focus Groups

Steve shared that he and Sue were nearly done formulating their questions for the focus groups and requested to practice them on the team in an upcoming meeting. Questions were presented to us in general terms, and at this point, Steve shared that they did not want a script to work off because they felt it seemed too rigid and would not help make people comfortable and open up. The team agreed the direction, in general, was good and that I would work with them more specifically on wording and training other facilitators. Steve and Sue were going to look at dates for the focus groups that worked well for them, and as a team, we would settle on the wording for the invitation. Steve reported that both he and Sue were excited about the groups.

### Personal Spiritual Practices

As team members shared and reflected on their experience with the *Three Good Things* program, they did great thinking of ways to adapt it for our purposes rather than dismiss the concept. They had been considering the busy lifestyles of the families in our community over the summer, regardless of what demographic or life stage they were in so they added social platforms to make it something easily accessed on the run, but also interactive with a visual element to it that would also personally serve as a tangible reminder. They named the experiment *Count Your Blessings*. It was decided to mail each family a pack of custom post-it notes in a bright and cheery envelope. We were hopeful,

yet knew that even if families were not able to do this daily, there would be a tangible reminder they come across in a drawer or on the counter at other times to focus on the gifts God has given them. Action items were assigned to pull the materials based on the prototype together and begin this experiment.

### Believe Group

Next, invitation wording for the Believe Group was finalized, and we engaged in some design thinking about how to achieve our goal of making this group an easy commitment to make for participants so that we could get a good sample. Again, this seemed to flow naturally for the team members without getting stuck in one spot. Settling out was a prototype that was respectful of people's time and busy lifestyles, again regardless of demographic category or life stage. However, this design was chosen with the understanding that we would reflect on it frequently and see if it needed to be adapted while still in progress. This experiment was a group the team was excited to see come together and was likely to inform other areas of our work as the GT.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Five**

As we opened with spiritual practice and reflection, most team members continued to share openly their thoughts and what the Spirit had revealed and stirred in them. Sue continued to remain mostly silent, and Laura was quiet but would comment and tell others how much she appreciated their thoughts, that it has helped her to start looking at things differently.<sup>19</sup> At this meeting, Sue shared more feedback she was receiving about the GT in general, and it seemed as though she had become the lightning

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<sup>19</sup> Guiding Team meeting notes, Big Lake, MN, April 26, 2018.

rod for everyone to complain to, which, as I know from personal experience, is hard on an individual's emotional state. When you are continually being bombarded with complaints you can easily slip into feeling like nothing you are doing is making a difference and begin to question why you are even bothering with anything. Most of the team were able to take this feedback, acknowledge the emotions we were feeling and recognize again, that this does not come from God and move forward. Despite this, groups had continued to talk and meet as needed in between our full GT meetings, so updates were shared that indicated they were engaging processes well before we moved onto the mock focus group run-through.

### Focus Groups

Steve and Sue started with a bang with an introduction about why they would value hearing their thoughts and how valuable they would be, sharing that the focus groups were an extension of the GT and the RSLs results. Their approach was welcoming and relaxed, setting the tone for a conversation. They decided that Steve was good at conversations and seeing the need for follow up questions within responses and body language so he would handle the actual conversation, and Sue would take notes. But then, they took an unexpected turn away from the direction they had discussed previously. They shared that they had changed their mind about mentoring other leaders and decided that it would be easier for them to handle all the groups rather than pulling other leaders into the process. They slipped back into a posture in which they could and would control the process and get it done as efficiently as possible instead of interacting with new potential leaders and mentoring them through the process.

Working through their plan, they had questions that now were grouped into three categories (worship, engagement, and families), sharing that they eliminated the spiritual category and were working that into other categories. At this point, rather than ask us the actual questions, they talked about what they were hoping to get from them categorically and how they would deal with any barriers or deviations from the questions, a departure from their original plan and request of the team. For worship, they expected to hear some negatives remarks as the RSLs had indicated, but intended to keep on track by acknowledging whatever concerns that were voiced and that there would be time later that they could perhaps discuss that at that point. Recognizing that words have different meanings for different people they planned to use an expansive vocabulary to continue to set the tone that they were looking for life-giving, spiritual experiences, such as passionate, excites, and inspires. A discussion was also had about wording and questions that have church specific vocabulary should be avoided. They also saw Steve's follow-up to responses as an opportunity to ease these words into the conversation and plant a seed and start to transform the mindset. They hoped to dig deeper and ask participants to expand on their responses. Wrapping it up, the team provided a lot of affirming, encouraging, and validating responses for their framework and was looking forward to seeing their questions. They planned on getting the exact questions to me in the next week so that we could look them over and adapt as needed and get them to the review board.

#### Create and Connect

Having completed the Bible Art Journaling workshop, the group reflected on the experience and what we learned from it. There was a great response to the workshop,

with many inquiring wanting to know if we had additional times scheduled because the particular time did not work well. We still had a good size group attend, and those attending said that they found it relaxing to meet new people slow down and take time to breathe and lose themselves in the scripture. Annie did a great job facilitating, which was well beyond her comfort zone and keeping the focus on scripture, not just the art. A diverse demographic was in attendance, ranging from preteen to those in their 70's, a grandmother who came with her teen grandchild. Reflecting on the experience immediately after the conclusion of the workshop, Laura and Annie were filled with energy. Based on feedback and interest, Annie thought maybe we could make a group on social media and meet quarterly, offer different times and days, or even have different levels of workshops from beginner and up, or specific workshops that utilize different mediums. It was also thought that taking the workshop out to places like the senior living complex would be a good experiment. Laura suggested having child care available or having a movie for kids to watch for those that do not have a childcare option. While the whole GT was not in attendance, Annie and Laura did well using the action-reflection cycle and corresponding questions. They also decided that adding other creative people to also facilitate and put their stamp on workshops they offer would be good. However, as we were headed into summer, they decided to wait until the fall to hold more workshops.

### Believe Group

Invitations were sent out with a come-as-you-can vibe, stressing what this was and was not, reading:

This coming September, all Grace ministries (e.g., youth, children's, worship, etc.) will begin a journey to join everyone at Grace together in learning the basics of what we believe. We are gathering a team of fun and resourceful people to help us develop and deliver meaningful messages, forecast obstacles, prepare, support,

etc., and your input would be so valuable, this is not a mass mailing, you have been specifically chosen! Would you please give this prayerful consideration? We will be contacting you sometime the week of xxxx to follow up with you.<sup>20</sup>

These invitations were followed up with personal conversations that again emphasized that this was a come as you can group.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Six**

As both the program and school years came to an end, the GT focused on completing their current tasks and meetings became harder to schedule as summer mode kicked in for most of the team with kids out of school, vacations, and just busy summer life in a state that has so few very warm months. It felt as though we were in a perilous position with the plug on our well of energy and excitement about to be pulled out. This was more than disappointing as I feared momentum would be lost and things would stall out or be forgotten about. We still prayed with and for each other and reflected on scripture, but the conversation was not nearly as robust as it had been. After giving updates on the current work being done, there was not much more conversation. There were so many factors that could play into this: family's lives, health, the criticism heard, our feelings of ineffectiveness, and overwhelming summer schedules. It was a complex situation with many moving parts, making discernment difficult. Setting a date for our next meeting seemed impossible, and we decided to look at our calendars more critically and see if we could figure out a time to meet next while we continued to give necessary updates and other information through email.

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<sup>20</sup> Guiding Team meeting notes, Big Lake, MN, May 31, 2018.



## Focus Groups

Steve and Sue were still plugging away on the focus group work and sent me a draft of the questions for my review. When I offered feedback it was not received well. I had praised their work and offered that perhaps they wanted to reword a few things that invited negative responses, and again suggested that we perhaps should weave discipleship questions into their categories.<sup>21</sup> They were not open to any feedback and wanted to submit them as-is and see what the board said. When feedback arrived, Steve and Sue were not pleased; they were angry and ready to throw in the towel altogether. Trying to calm the waters, any coaching was rejected, and they finally said that they wanted to change what they needed to for the board, but would ask their questions if they were changed anyway. Additionally, and despite knowing in the beginning that there would need to be consent forms from participants, just as they needed to sign one, they did not like the fact they had to use them. This seemed to be a crusher for Steve and Sue, as they felt people would not want to participate and take it seriously and the anticipation of gaining more insight from the focus groups soured. Focus groups were conducted, but they had made another change of their plans and eliminated their groupings of participants, deciding to invite them all to choose one of four dates to attend, mixing all the groups they had started with. Participation was weak and consisted mainly of the same demographic group that took the RSLs. Steve and Sue canceled the remaining dates and times thinking no one else was going to show up for the remaining dates. Their demeanor had drastically changed and was concerning as they began to distance themselves from the team. Was this due to a low turn-out causing feelings of failure on

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix C.

their part, or was it due to not having total control of the process? I was interested to see how they reflected on the experience and their report in a couple of weeks.

### Summer Challenge

Reflecting on the summer challenge that was still in progress, the group did well and engaged the action-reflection cycle and questions. Importantly, they recognized that part of the shortfalls of the experiment were a result of actions of the GT, such as the timing and planning aspects, which did fall on the GT, because as summer was approaching and the energy and excitement for the work was seeping out we were in a rush to deploy the experiment to boost morale and some things were not explained well. Platforms were tricky to locate and utilize, and ultimately it did not reach homes until after the program year was over and the summer schedules kicked in. However, they did not dwell on it and moved on to what else we have learned from this experiment so far. In addition to these shortfalls, we also shared that there had been some positive feedback and a small amount of activity across the social platforms, despite the difficulty in locating and utilizing them. Then, keeping the Spirit's movement in this experiment as an essential part of our work, we noted the Spirit as active and revealing bright spots that pointed to future experiments. Noting these, we then decided to revisit this experiment and reflect further in a future meeting after the challenge is complete.

### Believe Group

Over the summer months, the Believe Group gathered a couple of times and seemed to be a place where the GT members involved in this experiment were drawing some energy and life. These meetings were very enlightening and functioned to serve multiple purposes by shaping some of the team members' listening and facilitating skills,

and agility by adapting while still face-to-face with others involved in the experiment. Importantly, these meetings served to discern where members of the congregation were in their spiritual practices, understandings of and struggles with these matters of Christian identity, and foundational beliefs. Each meeting had a different mix of participants, which was not only great for building relationships, but robust discussions centered around foundational beliefs as well.

Additionally, it served as an experiment for how a platform with porous boundaries that allow people to enter on their own terms for short periods of time could function. For Pastor, he had asked that I and another GT member that was in attendance, Jan, help him to stay on track and focused because as the Pastor he knew it would be difficult not to teach and address questions as they come up. When we did have to remind him that this was more to listen and ask clarifying questions, than a teaching session, he received it very well, reflected on it after the session and reminded himself of that verbally when he was tempted to chase the rabbit down the hole. The Believe Group had been equipped with the Bible-based printed resources that would be made available to the congregation when this church-wide series was launched. The Believe Group also gave input on these resources and how they saw them being used in their lives, and how they would describe them to others based on their reading preferences. Similarly, they were a source of ideas for experiential opportunities that would make it easy for others to participate in and share their thoughts around not only the topics of the curriculum but insights into how they see God active in their everyday lives.

Perhaps one of the more substantial and impactful things that were revealed to us in these meetings was that we were still assuming too much as far as where people are in

their beliefs and understandings of foundational beliefs. This shock wave resounded with us for some time over the summer, saddening us, and overwhelming us at times, making it hard to see the gifts that we were receiving from the Believe Group at times. This along with the focus groups and members of the team distancing themselves weighed heavy on the team that now seemed just as wounded and weary as the congregation they were trying to reorient.

### Focus Groups

Sharing their insights from the focus groups, Steve and Sue commented that, despite the fact they had not directly asked people about what they do not like, many came with a physical list of complaints and a checklist of what they thought would fix things they were unhappy with.<sup>22</sup> The reality of this highlighted that members expect that when they express their objections to how things are done or not done, they expect that to generate the change they desire. Similarly, they also shared that the older generation wants traditional pieces of a church they were accustomed to. One of the reflections they shared honestly came as a shock: they said that some of the focus group participants had an issue with the informed consent form, particularly one group, and they were put off that this was part of a research project. Most people knew this was part of research and came to me after they had attended a group and told me they had gone and it went well. One participant at the focus group that was referenced shared their experience and remarked, “yes, the research came up when the consent forms in their group but it was

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix D for the focus group leader’s reflection on the responses.

not an awkward or tense moment.”<sup>23</sup> They went on to share that one individual needed it clarified, and they just moved on, so we never were able to discern precisely what had happened, as Steve and Sue were not sharing any more details. Further insights Steve and Sue shared with the GT can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1 Reported Leader Focus Group Reflection and Insights**

Highlights	Themes	Reflections on the focus group process and design
<p>Most of those participating attended the contemporary service rather than the traditional service.</p> <p>The question, “How <i>could Grace help, or support you/ your family in connecting what you know about your faith in your everyday life?</i>” “was met with a lot of blank stares.”<sup>24</sup></p> <p>Lack of spiritual responses very telling.</p> <p>Concerning ministry with children and youth, participants did not want children to be “force-fed” doctrine, but rather accepted and loved and to experience Christian community and have the “family” feel to programming.</p> <p>They expressed the desire for more transparency from the Church Council in communicating information to the congregation and high levels of distrust of leadership.</p>	<p>High priority on community.</p> <p>People are noticing changes, things already happening.</p> <p>High priority on music.</p> <p>Coordinator for volunteers.</p> <p>Communication.</p> <p>Opportunities to serve in small snip-its.</p> <p>Coordinating service, theme, enhancements, and music.</p> <p>Coordination between different ministries and groups.</p> <p>Lifting burden on Pastor, they felt he has too much on his plate.</p> <p>Distrust for Leadership.</p> <p>Positivity around worship.</p>	<p>Offer fewer dates with no RSVP, allow them to just show up.</p> <p>Refreshments/cookies were a hit and helped relax and give people something to fiddle with.</p> <p>Those that run focus groups must handle the invites and communication as well.</p> <p>Have two or three of the deeper questions given to participants ahead of time.</p> <p>Interviewers being more in the loop on logistics.</p> <p>Active people in the congregation were the ones that were involved in focus groups.</p>

<sup>23</sup> Conversation with researcher.

<sup>24</sup> Focus group questions, e-mail to author and submitted to the IRB, June 6, 2018.

Steve and Sue seemed to view feedback as lack of control, and they could not see any other approach, even those that are controlled in some ways, and in a manner that was more aligned and framed in a more positive, conducive way, that allowed the Spirit to work without the barrier of cultural dysfunction could work. Following the focus groups, Steve and Sue both also interacted less electronically and personally with the GT for some time. It appears the process leading up to the focus groups and hosting them made Steve and Sue also feel that their leadership and abilities were questioned. They had no interest in holding any follow-up focus groups, or experimenting with new ways to try and learn from any other demographic or life-stage groups. For Steve, it seemed to have opened the wounds of past experiences in leadership positions at Grace.

Sue, as the new chairperson for the Adult Ministry committee, was determined to try and do more as a response to the insights from the RSLs and the focus groups alone, even though it was thought that this was not an accurate representation of the congregation and their needs. Sue successfully brought the action-reflection cycle into the administration of the committee. However, frustration with low response rates to any study offerings or opportunities led to this committee deciding that because of lack of participation in studies, they were only going to offer things they are interested in so that "when no one shows up anyway, at least it was something they were interested in."<sup>25</sup> This was deeply disturbing as their behavior functioned like a rubber band, snapping back to doing things they were comfortable and accustomed to, rather than focusing on what

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<sup>25</sup> Sue in conversation with the author, August 19, 2018.

we have learned, what we still needed to learn, and continuing to push forward focused on the Spirit.

### **End of Summer**

As the summer came to an end, it felt as though the drain plug on the well of energy and excitement got wholly pulled out and all that was left was the final, tightly spinning cyclone that would drag what remained down and leave us with an empty and dry well. Laura had taken a promotion at work that ended up requiring much more of her than she had anticipated, pulling her away from her home and family more and she could not continue with all her obligations to the various groups she was involved in throughout the community. This meant she graciously bowed out of the GT but thanked the team members for the experience, for helping her to view things differently, and the personal spiritual growth. She expressed gratitude for all the work the GT did, would continue to do, and would support and be a cheerleader for all experiments the GT was currently, and in the future would be engaged in.

Annie also had to take a different approach to the GT for the near future, contributing when and how she could, but her mental health needed to take priority, and she needed to seek help.

Steve, already keeping the GT at a distance now needed to travel to care for his ill mother for an extended period and then handle the estate when she passed away. While he was still included in all communication and virtual meetings, he never returned to the GT before the completion of this intervention. Following up and touching base with him, he shared that the last several months have had so much going on in his family life that he needed to attend to that he would not be able to join us, and asked to be removed from

communications. His family life situation made it a little hard to discern how he honestly felt about his GT experience. He had already started to distance himself, which was not a new pattern of behavior for Steve when he disagreed with a decision or did not like the direction leadership was taking.

### **Fall**

With the swing back into a program year in the fall, the Believe curriculum was launched church-wide. This was met with excitement and wonder about how all of this was going to work, and engagement in extra resources provided was like we had not seen in years. The input from the Believe Group was used and received well. Staff went into the community, interacting with people weekly to generate energy with personality-filled video blogs about the topic of the week that also provided additional links to further resources. Simple, tangible experiments such as a chalkboard with a question for others to respond to on was placed in the narthex to not only engage people in more than worship, but to share, and learn from and with each other in the community. This success seemed to perk up the GT members, despite the disappointment they had been experiencing for some time now. To adapt to the needs of those remaining on our team and their current life situations we met both in person and held virtual meetings via shared documents.

### **Virtual Meeting Guiding Team Intervention Seven**

Approaching this new way of meeting was an experiment that we were hoping would work to continue to move forward and fill the well once again. At the top of our virtual meeting document, we began reflecting on scripture. Everyone participated and reflected well, offering their response with engagement and interaction between



members. The scripture (Matthew 5:14-16) was selected as a response to not only insights we had gained, but where we seemed to be as a team, and identifying what gets in the way for both us as individuals and as a team, and set the stage for the next possible piece of this intervention. The reflections the team shared seemed to indicate they were discerning a similar direction, even though they had no prior knowledge of the process that Pastor and I had in mind, *Immunity to Change*. The virtual meeting was an experiment that went well and gave team members that needed to focus on other aspects of their personal lives an opportunity to still provide valuable insight, interaction, and keep them connected. I did not doubt that this process could work with this format; however, I did worry that some of the interaction and conversation that happens when this process is done face-to-face that can feed imagination might be lost. While the team did well with the process, and were engaged and interacting with others on the shared document, there was a piece lost: the face-to-face interaction that includes body language to check-in on each other personally. A video conference call would help with that, but the flexibility for members to contribute when it works for them is then compromised.

### Immunity to Change

Using the shared document, we described the *Immunity to Change* process using a current contextual example of a significant change made to youth faith formation. This was followed with questions for each participant to respond to about where we are in the intervention and in regards to the insights we had gained so far. There was a good discussion, follow up, and clarifying questions with some back and forth conversation. The group seemed very open to digging into the *Immunity to Change* process to learn more about it and think about how it could be beneficial. We also discussed that it does

require vulnerability, shared some basics of the process, and a sample immunity map was sent to the team members so they could try it personally and reflect and discuss it more at our next meeting.

### Summer Challenge

Engaging the action-reflection cycle and reflective questions a final time around the summer challenge the team again did a good job reflecting on the Spirit's movement within this experiment, what went well and what did not, and made some adapted plans for a future challenge. Future experiments would continue to nurture personal spiritual practices, as well as conversations within the larger community regarding the Spirit's activity and be tied in some way to other experiments or things happening within the church. They also discussed the importance of promoting and the timing they are launched.

### Believe Group

The Believe Group continued to meet and go through upcoming curriculum topics. The work of the Spirit was visible through the energy of those that came to these meetings that were repeatedly commenting how much they love these sessions and conversations on a personal level as they found others perspectives, whether they were shared or not were thought-provoking. They all received others perspectives and questions well with energy never dipping, only increasing. The Spirit was moving in this group and breathed life into them. However, as school had just begun, those that participated in the congregational life were the only ones that continued to come. Those with young families and engagement limited to faith formation programs for their

children and worship no longer came to meetings. This was expected, but we had hoped the life-giving energy and the Spirit would draw them back.

### Next Steps

As the team members reflected in the shared document on experiments, insights gained, and discernment of the Spirit's activity they laid out what they would like to pray and reflect on for our next steps. It was at this point in our virtual meeting one team member shared her spiritual struggles that she has been going through that made her doubt herself and the work she does, identifying it as a spiritual attack. She shared how she combatted the attack with very intentional time in God's word every day. She used this opportunity to encourage the rest of the team writing:

I have been feeling very overwhelmed and hopeless. Day to day I am fine, but overall, I have been feeling like my efforts at church, my volunteering and home life have been unproductive. I have felt I am not useful and so it makes me want to pull back and stop altogether. Paired with a small injury that causes daily muscle pain I have felt attacked. And honestly, that is what I believe is going on. I feel that I have been a servant of God and thus making me a target. During this time, I still prayed, sang to God and believed but was beginning to doubt my purpose in all of this and wasn't feeling God's love in my life. Over the last week and a half, I have been intentional in being grateful, spending 10-20 min daily reading scripture and journaling and focusing on God's truths and I have found it to be very helpful. I have seen and heard of all your struggles and I want you to know I pray for you all and am here right alongside you, fighting however we can. Our efforts, no matter how small they seem are not in vain. Praise God in your struggles. Please push through the hard times and know that in the end we win! God wins!<sup>26</sup>

The response from the team was kind, grateful, supportive, encouraging and it was great to see these relationships grow and the sharing of burdens, not just the surface level stuff of their lives. This also opened up space for others to acknowledge their struggles, and

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<sup>26</sup> Guiding Team virtual meeting notes, Big Lake, MN, September 15, 2018.

acknowledge that they also felt under attack by well-intentioned people armed with just the right words that were like daggers to them, adding that they too felt that because things had been going so well in the beginning and it was life-giving, that darkness was targeting them with “poison arrows” that he knew would throw us off. Jan, with her honesty, trust, and faith had reminded us all where our focus needed to be.

### Appreciative Inquiry

AI was briefly discussed again as an experiment to engage in based on the insights of the focus groups and RSLs as a resource to nurture positive and life-giving stories from the complacent or negative voices of the congregation. The hope was that this could help bring some energy and life back into their thoughts about what it means to be the church. Stories that surface could also help identify things they find valuable that we could weave into future experiments. They felt that this would be especially important to consider as we are amid change which can naturally bring about anxiety. The team members felt it could assist us to draw attention away from the negativity by giving unique and sustained attention to resources God has already provided us with in abundance, rather than the deficiencies. They also thought that this would be a great place to train some already good listeners and expand the leadership circle. We agreed that we needed to pray on this and watch for those that the Spirit places in our path with gifts for this type of work.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Eight**

Our next meeting was a brief face-to-face meeting in which all were in attendance, except Annie. We reflected on scripture and prayed as we had been doing. Reflection continued to spark the imagination for some, but was still more literal for Sue.

Sue's lack of interaction when we reflected on scripture had started to add a little tension to this time together, as her body language made others uncomfortable, and they did not know what to do about it or felt the need to wrap it up and move on. As we moved into the work of the meeting, we looked specifically at thinking through further experiments, those that we thought would be good to invite into the leadership circle, and those that have the gifts for specific tasks that we would like to observe and discern how and where their gifts could be used. We also covered the timing of experiments and how that can impact both the response to and the beginning of an experiment, especially as we were coming into the Advent and Christmas season. We agreed that the flexibility of using shared documents and virtual meetings would be best and should be utilized, so we do not lose even more momentum during this busy season. Concluding our discussion, we tasked individuals that knew specific people they had identified as possible facilitators, or leaders to have conversations with them and invite them personally into the process. We all agreed to continue to pray about where we were in this intervention and discern the Spirit's activity in ourselves, through us, in those around us, and our relationships with them.

### Immunity to Change

After reading about and working through the *Immunity to Change* process personally, team members shared their experiences. They believed the *Immunity to Change* process was very helpful personally, but because it also required them to be very vulnerable, many of our teams and leadership were probably not at a place that they would feel safe entering into this process. As we discussed this more, it was decided that this would be an excellent tool for other leaders to see and tuck away in their minds for

when they encounter roadblocks. We settled on a brief summarized version with examples for the leaders to be given with other leadership resources. The experience leaders had with the *Immunity to Change* process appeared to be something they spent time reflecting on and integrating into their thought processes. In several meetings that followed and personal interaction with GT members, they would refer to the process as well as how they had been reflecting on their leadership. In these interactions, they specifically identified what things stand in the way for them to make changes they genuinely want to happen.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Nine**

As we emailed back and forth trying to determine a date and format for our next meeting Sue responded that she had decided that she would not be moving forward with the GT.<sup>27</sup> While communication continued with her about other ministries, she never shared with us her reasoning. For the remaining members of the team, it did not seem to impact our work other than to highlight the need to invite others into GT leadership and for more relaxed reflection time. As we reflected on Ephesians 4, and considering the shrinking GT, the team members felt encouraged by the Spirit to have patience and remember that transformation takes time. They were reminded of the church as a community that is knit together in which everyone plays a role, and importantly, that while looking to find life-giving stories of the past will be part of this intervention, we cannot undo the past, but we can influence what happens next if we trust in, and follow the Spirit.

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<sup>27</sup> Sue, e-mail message to the Guiding Team, November 5, 2018.

## Bridging

The reflection on scripture continued to stir in the team as they wondered how do we help those who state that they are comfortable and fine with their place in their faith journey realize what an essential part of forming the next generations faith they are and experience the life-giving energy that creates. Imaginations were spinning out all sorts of ideas on how we could reach those that have never had a positive experience with a Christian community, are marginalized, or only have distant memories of the church so that we can share the same peace and comfort we find in our faith and Christian community. As the team talked through this, there was further reflection spurred by Annie that many people are seeking—or have found community in—other things such as sports teams, activities, and clubs, but there are also many who are isolated and alone. Jan then stated how she has often wondered about some friends she has that are either anti-church or atheists and felt we could learn so much from them. Jan shared that she felt nudged by the Spirit to do something about this and had thought about asking them questions when they had gathered for dinner at various times, but she was worried about their reaction and how it might impact the meal for everyone else. This started a fantastic design thinking cycle about what this could look like and discussion that led me to recall an experiment I had heard about from Dr. David Hahn in which listening and learning from each other was the goal, not a conversion or convincing them to try our church. We closed this topic for the day, and I was tasked with finding out more about Dr. Hahn's experiment. After that information was received, we would then engage in design thinking around this concept for our use via a shared document in which prompts were

given one by one and in which all gave input on before posting the next prompt so that work could continue to move forward, yet was flexible for everyone.

### Leadership

Next, we talked about leadership in the church, not only about identifying leaders to join the GT but how we could help shape and form those already in leadership positions. While the conflict within the church's past caused some leaders to leave entirely, we acknowledged it was not all bad because some of the influencers took their negative attitudes and dwelling in the past with them. However, it also meant most of the leadership framework left as well because those new to leadership were not necessarily equipped to lead and felt unsupported in their roles as no one came alongside them to help them navigate their new role. To transform the culture of this congregation, the current leadership culture also needed to be transformed. We discussed a retreat in which we could give our leaders tools that would empower them and begin to bring about a shift in mindsets that are needed for addressing the shift in our culture and nurture relationships among our leaders. With many of those currently in leadership positions using ineffective reactive practices we hoped to begin to shape them as adaptive leaders as we move forward. After discussion about what the GT members thought would have been, or was helpful for them when they entered a leadership position considering the tools and processes we have used as the GT, it was decided that Pastor and myself would start working on a framework and planning for a leadership retreat and then share it with the team to add to, cut, or adapt so that it is not too overwhelming for the new and existing leaders to take in. Jan also suggested honoring people's time we should have a working lunch and make sure we give plenty of notice so people can plan accordingly,



and communicating why we think this retreat is important. This was an interesting conversation in which we talked about the barriers that too much of a hierarchal structure can present, yet there is also a need for some level of framework so that people have enough information to be able to make decisions and act and not hampered by cumbersome processes and stay true to mission and identity.

### Create and Connect

Next, we discussed who we thought would be a good fit to host another Bible Art Journaling workshop as the wounded and weary GT just was not ready to think about this until this point. Some names came to mind of individuals that we would get in touch with over the next few days. After contacting the first individual, Shannon, we received a very quick, and excited “yes.” Over the next few days, Annie emailed back and forth with our new facilitator exchanging information and sharing ideas, while Annie encouraged Shannon to make it her own and not feel she had to handle it the same way Annie had. Shannon blossomed and shared her ideas, what she had learned at a journaling workshop at a local Christian store as well as the resources she already had. This role of mentor seemed to have given Annie a boost to her spirit. As it was in the planning of the first workshop, the most challenging part of this process was finding a date that worked with the Advent and Christmas seasons approaching and personal schedules.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Ten**

Reflecting on Isaiah 43:14-21, the team was struck by the thought that rather than being gripped by our perspective as we continue to work through this intervention, we needed to look at things from God’s eternal perspective and consider His audience, not solely our context, trusting Him no matter what. There was a clear and strong sense that

the Spirit was reminding us of what He has done for us so that we may trust Him. This meeting had an intimate tone of honesty, sharing our lives, supporting, and encouraging each other. As a team, we connected and shared more of how our lives are right now both personally, in our families, and how we are feeling and handling things within the congregation, both as leaders and as individuals with hungry souls. Those moments were Spirit-filled and beautiful, something that seemed to be just what was needed for all of us. We prayed for each other, our congregation, and the community; this filled most of our time together.

### Bridging

After receiving the experiment outline from Dr. Hahn, we began to engage in design thinking concerning this learning experience with those with different beliefs and experiences with the church. As our meeting time was coming to an end, we decided to use a shared document to engage in design thinking. On this platform, we would engage others by using prompts, responding to input, and asking questions. As they responded and highlighted areas of others input, there was visible energy from the participants, and they stayed focused on the goal. They were imaginative and creative as they approached this experiment that was not necessarily convenient for them but kept in mind the comfort level for all those involved to make it inviting and open for everyone. Taking all that input into account, Jan suggested we look at something along the lines of a shared meal, appetizers, or dessert. Jan also suggested we talk to the participants ahead of time to let them know they were invited to this as a learning event in which we could learn from each other, not as an attempt to convert them, but honest conversations about our beliefs. We landed on checking into the fee of using a public library space as a neutral location

that was also quiet enough to have conversations. Tasks for working out the logistics and conversation starters were assigned.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Eleven**

As we reflected on Hebrews 12:1-3, we found it to be an encouraging set of verses for where we are as the GT, but at the same time, it was daunting. Annie shared that she wondered how we could accomplish anything similar because we are nothing as remarkable as those in the text, nor have we experienced and witnessed what they have. Surprised, I asked “But isn’t it the same Spirit that was with them that is with us, in us, and among us?” They all indicated yes; indeed, it is the same Spirit. Finding encouragement to remain focused on Jesus was not all they felt encouraged to do; they also found encouragement to be active and keep going, a much-needed message for the group. One translation a team member used had substituted the word “parasitic” for “sin,” which we felt rang true as it seems to relentlessly seize every opportunity to divert our focus. Seen as an indicator that the team was possibly quite wounded and weary; the question was asked: “What hinders us as a team?” Almost in unison, they all remarked that the lack of people on the GT, and the concern that some work we may be doing may be viewed as crossing the line into another committee’s territory and the concern we may step on toes. While the team was finding moments of excitement, weariness was lingering and could easily pull things down again, yet at the same time, I recognized a pattern that was becoming clearer. While the GT had diminished in size, those that remained were those that not only had daily personal spiritual practices they engaged in, but also participated in the communal reflection with an openness to the Spirit’s activity

and attentive to what He was revealing. These spiritual practices seemed to be what gave them the desire and trust needed to keep going.

### Leaders

As we discussed the concerns that remained with us, we talked about who might be a person with gifts that would be a good fit for the GT. Only a few names could be thought of, one of which had recently agreed to be a part of AI. However, that did not mean that they could not join the GT, but rather than overwhelm them, we decided that we would wait and see how they handled and felt after AI is complete, allowing us also to observe their openness to the Spirit and their gifts. Also, while we knew it might not be the most effective, putting something in the bulletin and newsletter increased our chance of finding others with a passion for this kind of work.

### Personal Spiritual Practices

As the Lent season approached, the team wanted to take the opportunity to encourage personal spiritual practices with a natural connection to the upcoming season. We first contacted a member of the congregation, Mary, who has a passion for making journals that has blossomed into a booming business, to see if she was willing to partner with us in coordinating a make-and-take event to create personalized, bound Lent prayer journals. Not only was she willing, but excited to be a part of it and shared that we could easily do them for under \$2, which would make it a lot easier for people to try something new. Jan and Annie were excited about this project and tasked with looking at ideas for prayer prompts and scripture, including ones that I had, and one that was being used by confirmation students. Looking them over, they later communicated that they liked the same one the Confirmation students were using over Lent. This one was only a twenty-

one-day journal, but they felt that any of the forty-day journals, devotions, or prompts would be too much and might discourage some from participating. They felt that having a shorter period to commit to was less overwhelming, vital as we are still trying to nurture personal spiritual practices in the congregation. They shared that they also liked the idea of using the same journals as the confirmation students as it would offer an opportunity for parents to share the experience with their children and start some conversations at home which was in line with the goals of the Lenten Journey Partner ministry.

Further, they felt it might be best to offer it over a couple Sundays after both worship services, and that the low price would perhaps make it easier for those that are uncertain to try it and see how it works for them. Dates were chosen, and a meeting date was set to go over what we wanted to be printed on the pages and what other options we wanted to be included in the journals. This focus on spiritual practices seemed to renew their spirits and energize and excite the team, who moved through the design thinking process smoothly, not even needing prompts. This was one of the most straightforward experiments to plan as we had an excellent resource in Mary, who had a passion for the project, and carried no risk. If the turnout was low she would sell them at upcoming shows and donate the proceeds to her favorite charity.

### Appreciative Inquiry

After meeting with four individuals with gifts that are well suited for AI work, sharing the goal of AI, and providing summaries of the basics of AI over coffee, they were invited to be part of the process. Three of the invitees could commit: Julie, Kate, and Billie. These individuals were not only good listeners, but Spirit-filled and compelled

by their faith with a strong desire for intergenerational ministry, sharing and speaking of the role others of all ages have played in their faith formation.

Our first meeting was productive answering questions that remained or needed clarification and identified that our goal was to help dislodge the negativity and complacency that has a grip on many in the congregation by helping them to recall life-giving experiences of Grace at its best, and help them start to imagine a different future. The participants were visibly excited, not only expressed in language, but their body language as well. From there we moved on to thinking about who and how we would invite people into these conversations, how we could make the environment inviting, comforting, and casual, as well as communicate our plans to the congregation. We discussed what we felt would be essential to include in invitations and the questions. From this discussion, we generated a shared document that we would utilize to fine-tune our work, set AI conversations dates, and set our next meeting date. The meeting ended on a very upbeat and positive note, with another new group excited for what lies ahead.

### **Guiding Team Intervention Meeting Twelve**

Gathering as a team, we reflected on the parable of the sower in the book of Mark that revealed some very new insights to us that many of us. The team members were in wonderment, and you could almost see the wheels in their head turning. The conversation was robust, yet the still and quiet reflections were also powerful. The Spirit's presence was strong and palpable, and I could feel the Spirit embrace me. While the GT had only four members at this point, you could feel that we were involved in something much bigger than ourselves. There were a few points in this intervention when I would begin to feel defeated and when I would step back to see the balcony view of this intervention,

and was able to see the intervention as a whole. At these times, I imagined all the separate working pieces as gears that were all spinning but not yet connecting to power the machine. That perspective was calming, reminding me that many things were happening and moving along, and at each step, we were learning something. These moments were helpful and overwhelming at the same time for me. But, in this meeting it was different as we reflected on what was currently happening and what had happened it felt more like all the pieces that make up the bigger picture were moving closer to connecting and the Spirit was revealing to us that others are beginning to perceive that something new was happening and we were generating some forward momentum.

### Bridging

Having secured the location at the public library, we discussed the more logistical pieces of this listening event so that we could put together all the pieces and create our prototype. Jan was going to take the prototype to her friends and acquaintances that initially sparked these thoughts and get their feedback. The anticipation of this event was high, yet with a twinge of anxiousness wondering if people would come, and calming trust that the Spirit has guided us and will reveal to us what we need to know, whether that is something about the experiment or what we will learn from others.

### Create and Connect

We briefly discussed the Lent prayer journals at the GT meeting as we were meeting with the journal making partner in a few days. Jan and Annie had sent Mary the script for what they wanted, so she had a prototype available for them to look at. Mary offered some feedback on their ideas who walked them through the process of creating personalized covers, binding them, and then they adapted the prototype. Mary planned on

creating a new prototype of the journal over the next few days. The group also discussed different ways to get the word out, which included a sample and the amount of time they should plan on this taking. Considering those that might have children with them would be able to participate in the make-and-take they came up with some ideas for a craft the kids could do. Also, for those that wanted to make it even more personal, there would be other things like ribbons and embellishments available as well. The final product and workshops would be taking place out of the research framework, but the design thinking process went very well.

### Appreciative Inquiry

After opening with prayer, we went over the proposed questions on our shared document. We narrowed down the questions significantly by categories to a general focus, values questions about relationships and ministry areas, and worked on making them more concise. We also engaged in a design thinking process, which was new to these leaders around inviting members and building excitement. Their strengths clearly shined in this process, Julie was excellent at keeping the goal in mind, and Kate and Billie were great at divergent, followed by convergent thinking. Their thought process included who some influential people in the congregation that we knew had some great stories and wouldn't shy away from putting themselves out there to help build excitement. The excitement for preparing AI and conducting them was apparent, this appeared to be a perfect fit for these leaders. Tasks were assigned, and a loose timeline for the work ahead was made.



## Conclusion

This intervention period was rich with insights and experiences. While this period was entered knowing that the Spirit does not operate based on our plans or timeline, we could never have imagined the journey we were led down. The journey was littered with celebrations, disappointments, surprises, mental and physical exhaustion, and frustration, all of which included rich learnings and insight. While most of the conflict has ended and we have left those turbulent waters, the ripple effects of that time for this congregation continue. While the ship still rocks back-and-forth with each ripple adjustments must be made to keep the ship moving forward. While there are still many wounded and weary aboard this ship with wounds that have not healed, and others that are fearful because they cannot see what lays ahead, there are also those that are confident that the Spirit, our navigator will lead us to where we are called. The waters of change are dark at times and have the power to push you off course, but there are those moments just as the wave crests, rolls over and the light shines through that you get a glimpse of the beauty that can still be found in those rough waters as you see the glorious blue-green color of the water.

This intervention has shown me that this is what leading change is about. It involves entering waters you know they will be rough at times, taking what you know with you, observing, adapting, and improvising how you handle the ship. In the calm waters it is rather easy to recall and put your trust in God to make it to the shore, but when we enter rough waters it can be more difficult, fearing the waves may take us under, and making it seemingly impossible to reach the shore. But when we pause and look at the waves we are given a glimpse of the beauty of the continued presence and guidance of God as they crest and roll over. And as we naturally move towards

something solid to hold onto in rough waters, we need to remember that God is always close enough to grab hold of, no matter how rough the waters get.

## CHAPTER 4

### EVALUATION

Faith communities are called to participate in God's mission, by introducing people to and nurturing a life-giving relationship with God. Today's leaders of the church need to move with confidence into the future they are being called into by the Spirit, and that confidence will not come from programs, plans, reports, attendance, or giving, but from the strength of their spirit knit together with the Spirit of God.<sup>1</sup> Transformation of our churches in these challenging times is necessary, but many must transform from within the congregation before they can hope to effectively move out into the community to transform their relationship with—and the lives of—their neighbors, while nurturing their relationship with God. Discernment of their call requires that they listen to the Spirit that is always moving among, through, and within their souls calling them out of their comfort zones into the world that surrounds them, reconciling the divided and transforming communities.

Many times, Grace is the source of their own struggles and that has caused them to lose sight of whose mission they are called to participate in and whom they are following. This is a congregation that views these challenges as problems that need to be fixed so that they can return to the glory days of the church, not viewing the challenges as

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<sup>1</sup> Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregations*, 22-23.

a Spirit-empowered disruption, and part of the discernment through fire in which they will break free of the assumptions and programs that now serve as shackles.

The GT started with a high energy level, and excitement around this work as the congregation seemed to be turning a corner and at a point that they could address leadership and reorientate the congregation towards the discovery of their call to participate in God's mission. While the guiding team members as a whole did not all stay together to the end of the research period, the experiences of those that did not finish was valuable information to reflect upon and learn. This intervention served as a tremendous learning opportunity about transforming church cultures and developing adaptive leaders. This required leadership that not only was looking to further define challenges the congregation faced, but also looking at their own leadership capacities and who is really leading.

### **Leadership Postures**

When thinking about the leadership in this intervention I think of a common saying: “I have learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”<sup>2</sup> Living in a change by experience economy<sup>3</sup> it would do us well to understand that this also applies to leaders, they are not superhuman, and some may need to experience the new way of leading before they can commit to this challenging adaptive work.

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<sup>2</sup> This quote has been attributed to many different people including: Frank A. Patterson Jr., Maya Angelou, Carl W. Buechner, Carol Buchner, Don Aslett, and Jerry Johnston. The original source could not be located.

<sup>3</sup> In *Change by Design*, Tim Brown defines an experience economy as an economy in which people shift from passive consumption to active participation (page 110).

The leaders in this intervention that were open to the Spirit's leadership from the beginning and did not have past experiences to temper their view and were willing to get uncomfortable and step out of their comfort zone to explore the future they feel they are being called into followed the Spirit and remained attentive, open, and listening because they placed their trust in the Spirit. There were also leaders that began well-intentioned, but quickly slipped back into old habits of reactive leadership when they felt their capacities as leaders were called into question. Still others grew anxious as they hoped to see more significant signs of change sooner. While not all leaders were able to begin integrating a new adaptive posture, it should not mark them as inferior leaders. Much like the disciples who did not understand all Jesus was telling them would unfold, betrayal, suffering, death, and the resurrection, or the two men on the road to Emmaus, they may need to witness and experience this type of leadership first.

In the early work before the intervention began, the GT picked up the basics of design thinking quickly and using an action-reflection cycle. However, when the discomfort of change and impatience from the congregation started to manifest in the form of complaints, the pressure was felt by the group and particularly those engaged in the development of focus groups. A combination of mindsets, leadership styles, and the context caused some to slip back into past patterns of leadership, and those new capacities that they had built were discarded.

Those that were not engaging in communal spiritual practices, personal spiritual practices daily, or who had questioned if their own practices had become rote had the most difficulties with this work and struggled in times of criticism. This adaptive work required a more substantial commitment from GT members, and that is something few

people think they can give anymore. The focus groups serve as a good example where those particular leaders had difficulties. Not only did they perceive the feedback as criticism of their capabilities, but they also faltered from the goal of the experiments, and they gave up on the process. They were able to reflect well on the focus groups and identify what went well, and what could be done better, but what was lacking, and needed pointing out was what they believe the Spirit was up to in this experiment and calling them to move into. While they did address some of the findings of the focus groups that only confirmed the RSLs findings, the goal of further refining and defining the challenges this congregation faced, and to listen to those that they felt were missing from the RSLs results fell by the wayside. They did take what they learned and shared it within the appropriate ministry team, but developed a very narrow focus, and they did not reevaluate or engage in any further reflection or design thinking around how they could hear more from the missing voices and their needs. At this point in the process, it is not uncommon for those that are task orientated, need structure, and are unable to fathom what is going on leave teams.<sup>4</sup>

Team members that already had strong personal spiritual practices stayed the course when receiving feedback that seemed negative, and continued to place their trust in the work of the Spirit. However, this same group also ran into trouble when they felt they might be letting the team down. In instances that they rushed, they would push experiments, such as the summer challenge through quickly. They were, however, able to reflect well and used that information as they move forward. Additionally, as the GT's size diminished the spirit of the team also seemed to diminish. Work slowed for the GT

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 85.

and it was tempting to push the GT to take it all on rather than wait for those God placed in their path to join the team because we also wanted to see more "progress" before the end of this research time frame.

### Characteristics of Leaders

Through this intervention characteristics of individuals that were well suited for the work emerged. For this GT, those that were least experienced in any type of leadership and firmly rooted in spiritual practices appeared to be best suited for this work. The lack of experience in traditional leadership teams meant they were more open to this adaptive work without the constraints of traditional leadership models. These were individuals that pushed themselves, were engaging in experiments and new practices that were well out of their comfort zones because they knew and trusted who they were following and that what they were following the Spirit into would also shape them. These same leaders were also the ones that grew the most as leaders.

Jan was on Church Council, but a relatively new member, and knew she was asked to join council because of her faith and trust, not to devise plans or strategies. Jan found her voice through the GT and was no longer timid in her responses and participated in discussions at council meetings more and more, often reminding the business-minded members of God's plan, and that success is not based on dollars and cents. Annie was also new to a committee but was miserable. She had been pressured by a member of a small group she engaged in to join the committee and knew it was not the right fit from the beginning. Annie resigned after the first meeting, but again, she was pressured to stay on. She shared that it was not a sense of duty that kept her on that committee. Again, it was her trust in who she was following. She knew that somehow; she and others would

grow from the experience. Annie has now joined the Church Council and is spreading her wings further and adding her voice to reminding others of the Gospel and the lost, broken, and lonely, and bringing her deep faith to the Church Council. Additionally, she is also sharing the wise mind insight she brought to the GT with other leaders at the ministry team retreat, another massive step out of her comfort zone.

While Steve and Sue also had strong faith, how their faith impacted decisions they made was different. Though their beliefs were not so extreme to classify them as rigid, or law-driven, things did seem to be very black and white for them and resulted in a very closed posture. An excellent example of this took place outside a GT meeting when Sue was a guest at a Church Council meeting. In the meeting, the ministry team retreat was discussed, and Sue remarked that she did not understand why a retreat would need to be a yearly meeting. Continuing, she added that if the goal was to shape leaders in a way that they would be able to shape the other leaders around them and pass the baton, we should not ever need to do retreat again. When the council president suggested it would be nice to think that was how it would happen, she also stated that not everyone had the same thought process nor was as driven as Sue. Sue, still questioning and not seeing the point, continued to question if it was necessary. In addition to Sue's difficulty to see another perspective, she did not like slow processes, as they seemed inefficient to her as an extremely task-driven person. Sue's approach to scripture as something to be taken at face value is yet another example of this closed posture. Steve was a faithful man and led his family as a faith-filled man, but he too also seemed to have a black-and-white perspective about right and wrong ways to do things and did not seem to be able to break free from his past wounds and patterns of behavior when he felt challenged.



While the GT practices were new to Laura, and she also did not remain with the team until the end of this intervention, she did demonstrate an increasingly open posture in her time with the team. She is still active in the congregation and shares her joy and love for Grace every chance she gets on social media.

### **Practices Engaged In**

The GT's use of practices that reflect greater trust in the Spirit's guidance rather than human agency alone to generate, and surface life-giving narratives, that allow for movement into the future is mixed as well. Again, those without established personal spiritual practices or an open posture struggled. These members usually listened and contributed appreciating the perspectives, but they then generally fell back into patterns of their daily life. Their work with the GT did not spur a transformation in their life away from the church, and as a result, served more as a participant or worker bee in the process. Those that viewed reflections as the Spirit revealing things to them and guiding them generally used the reflections to inform the work they were engaging in, and it often came up and was built upon in future experiments. Those that tended to have a task-orientated mindset for getting things done were always ready to create another list of tasks instead of dwelling in a liminal space. Their skill set was needed for executing and launching the RSLs, but it was not helpful for continued listening and discernment. When engaged in a task and some of their personal thoughts were confirmed, or they discovered something new they could act on, the listening stopped so they could pursue what they saw as their new task and gave no more thought to pursuing the yet unanswered questions by continuing to listen broadly, deeply, and trusting in the Spirit.

### **Leadership Framework and Platform**

As Terri Elton and Hayim Herring had discovered in their research, organizations that are able to successfully navigate these challenging times need elements of both a hierarchal organization and a networked organization. While most of the leadership of Grace has a mindset of a hierarchal organization, they were very inconsistent in most aspects of how they function, and their anxiety about the future meant that their default was to shut down anything they saw as too risky. Throughout this intervention, interactions pointed to the breakdown of the hierarchal structure that existed at one time. With the breakdown of the structure over time, leaders at all levels were entering vacated positions with no support or direction for even the basic functions such as budgets from past leaders. With no structure and no one coming alongside them, frustration and anxiety levels were high. As someone who thrives in an ordered and linear system in which results could be measured, Sue and Steve not only struggled with the GT, but with leadership as a whole at Grace. Additionally, just as the environment the Pharisees operated in blinded them from seeing God's presence in Jesus, Grace's environment has made it difficult for them to form an identity and discern their call to participate in God's mission.<sup>5</sup> This system needs a minimal amount of structure so that leaders do not feel as though they are floundering, but it also needs to allow enough freedom for creativity and experiments.

The Believe Group that formed around listening to how others responded to the foundational beliefs presented in the church-wide curriculum was an experiment that was

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<sup>5</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 23.

life-giving to those participating and, in turn, life-giving for the leaders as well. As an experiment with part of its purpose to discern how a group that was minimally structured had porous boundaries that allowed people to engage in meaning-making practices so they felt they were connected to something bigger than themselves, and which was flexible to accommodate busy lifestyles, it did provide some insight into the potential of this type of structure. Frank Barrett described an environment such as this that enhances discovery, encourages the interplay of ideas, is fluid, and has a minimal structure as an essential part of leading in adaptive change. The porous boundaries in this experiment allowed for bridging relationships to grow, but as the church was still struggling to discover their identity and call, it was hard to have a vision of the common good to work towards beyond using the Believe curriculum. There was energy within this group, and it offered a glimpse into a future in which people felt genuinely heard and were a part of each other's faith formation. This is an area I believe needs more experimenting and inquiry.

The Believe Group also served as a practice grounds for leaders to develop their capacity to adapt within an ongoing experiment and change things in real-time as a response to what was going on around them. The participants' responses were many times surprising and at times shocking for the leaders, as they felt that they were having to regularly take a step back as they realized that they had gone into the experiment anticipating specific reactions and responses. While this revelation was at times somewhat jarring, it was also received as a gift that would inform the work ahead very well, allowing us to engage them on their level.

Similarly, Barrett spoke about the need to find the “groove” and move toward where the energy was, and create and connect workshops that nurtured spiritual practices was one area that had a lot of energy around it. The GT reflected on these experiments very well and took information and feedback they received and adapted as needed, offering different workshops and even moving out into the community to a senior living complex to make it more accessible to that demographic that had expressed interest. Continuing to design experiments that nurture spiritual practices like these will be important as Grace continues on this journey, relearning habits that Christians have engaged in that help to cultivate Christian identity.<sup>6</sup>

### **Building Capacities**

As the team approached tasks and reflected on them, they thought it would be helpful for them and for other leaders to have a visual aid that would give them an overall picture of how this practice works, that it is all moving forward and towards a bigger common goal.<sup>7</sup> This action-reflection cycle was used well by the team overall, but there were also moments that could have been done better. After the focus groups were conducted and Sue and Steve distanced themselves from the GT, there was not a reflective cycle conducted as a team to discern what we could have done better to make that a better experience for Steve and Sue as leaders, and then adapt and continue the work. What got in the way? The opinions and assumptions other GT members had about why Steve and Sue stepped away from the team were evident by the comments they

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix B.

made as little side notes that reflected they had opinions, but they were not comfortable sharing them. It was known that in past situations where people walked away from a project it would have been handled very publicly and in a way that shamed others. So, perhaps to avoid this, the GT did not take the time to take a step up to the balcony to get a broader view of the system. Though some would feel that the lack of shaming was a success, it ignores the fact that by not reflecting and focusing on the goal, there was still a large portion of those within the congregation that still were not heard from. A valuable opportunity was lost by not reflecting on that.

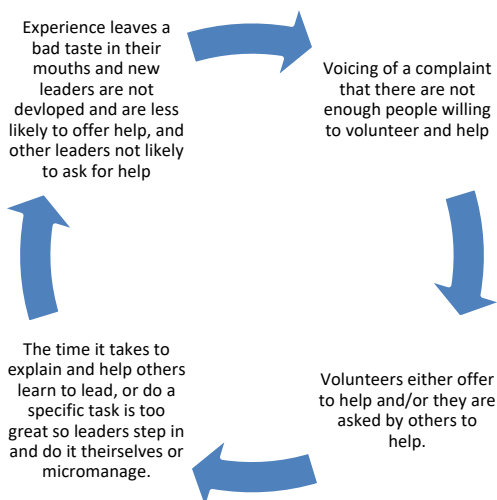
The GT members analyzed the data well from the start when looking at the RSLs results. Reflecting on all the data and finding connections, themes, apparent contradictions, and identifying that there are areas where work can be done now came rather easy. Importantly, they were also able to identify that there were missing voices and a great need to listen more. They were able to work through the design thinking process to design experiments to nurture the areas they classified as needing attention. Prototypes for nonphysical things were a bit harder for them in the beginning, but after a couple of run-throughs, they were also able to do this. As the intervention moved forward, the GT members began to reflect on experiments as learning opportunities, rather than “failures,” as well as their leadership skills, including their own Immunity to Change.

### **Expanding Leadership**

The GT needed to develop their skills with the practices introduced, learning from and with each other before they could invite others into additional experiments and begin to develop their capacities. This is a task that requires leaders to know the people in their

congregation. Knowing your people and their gifts means you can offer them opportunities to enter a leadership position that are an easy "yes."

Sue and Steve tended to avoid people at times and made it difficult for them to trust others. Steve also had a considerable history within the congregation that appeared to constrain him from reaching out and trusting. There was push back, and hesitancy from Steve and Sue to mentor others because of the perceived lack of efficiency they believed would result. Those that were more task-oriented seemed to like efficiency and control and favored imposing processes over investment in future leaders. I believe this is an example and contributes to a typical cycle this wounded and weary congregation, and many others struggle with as visually represented in Figure 2. This cycle is difficult to break, and just one of the reasons for creating an environment in which people might be formed takes time.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1 Cycle of Volunteer Experience in a Wounded and Weary Congregation**

<sup>8</sup> Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregations*, 149.

As the relationships within the GT strengthened and the GT stabilized near the end of the intervention period, getting to know others along with their observations of them made it possible to invite others into specific opportunities and processes to come alongside them to support and mentor them as leaders. Bringing others into leadership positions with porous boundaries that are a good match for their abilities and gifts, and which did not require them to commit to an extended period, allowed for an easy “yes” and helped to begin expanding leadership and transforming the culture. While not all the tasks the others were invited into were complete at the end of this intervention, the Spirit was moving in the individuals, and within their new relationships with these new leaders. While a complete evaluation of their ability to build capacities within others is difficult to do with only a few opportunities and processes, for the short period of time they were observed, the GT members were observed interacting with the leaders and partners for specific tasks in ways that demonstrated they had internalized the process and were acting as coaches. A transformation was visible in not only the GT members that were trusting and stepping farther and farther out of their comfort zones, but also in the confidence and excitement for the new future they were beginning to envision.

### **Learning Environment**

What Grace needs is not a quick fix or a linear problem-solving approach to the challenges; they need a different perspective and approach that is attentive to the Spirit, not a human plan or strategy. This is adaptive work and requires leaders that can cultivate an environment that releases social imagination. This is a difficult task for leaders in this time and place because they must introduce people to a new way of being and help them learn about new ideas, behaviors and postures, and alternatives that are more appropriate

for this unprecedented time for our churches.<sup>9</sup> Leaders must be willing to open themselves up with a posture that assumes and anticipates that God is up to something new and rather than looking to fix the problem, they seek to discern how they are called to join God in the journey to something new.

While there was trust and strong bonding relationships between some members of the team, after the hurt that was experienced as individuals, and as a team, it was difficult for the team to regain momentum for some time. The perceived lack of trust that Sue and Steve experienced around the designing of the focus groups, the following distancing, then leaving, had an impact on the team. Adding to that hurt, the personal struggles for the remaining team members along with the summer lull had an even greater impact on the team. However, the small core of individuals that remained to the end had developed strong relationships and supported each other through their struggles when they felt safe and opened themselves to each other. While the GT still met, personal conversations over coffee or tea separate from the GT meetings strengthened those relationships. Through these relationships, the team members shared in each other's burdens, and it was a very tangible reminder of the three ministries Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses in *Life Together*, bearing, listening, and helpfulness. Ministering to each other strengthened the team members and cultivated a learning environment that prepares them to do the same with others we are called into relationship with beyond the GT, within Grace, and the community. It also serves to point out that leadership development is not a cold static process of acquiring new skills. It is indeed a ministry as well. Without these strengthening relationships, it is hard to imagine that the GT would have survived at all.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 41.



Due to the instability of the group and the timing of the introduction to the Immunity to Change process, it was not officially engaged as a team. Team members that worked through the process on a personal level did report that it helped them to understand the concept better and gave them a different lens to view some reoccurring issues within teams they were involved in with. This lens allowed them to stretch their leadership wings and gave them confidence in speaking into situations in which those teams repeatedly returned to the same issues without growth or imagination for the future.

### **Limitation of This Research**

While there was considerable autonomy given in this intervention, there were limitations. I could listen, empathize with, and provide additional lenses to view experiences with to those that had wounds from past experiences in this congregation. However, I could not transform their mindset; that is the work of the Spirit, and the Spirit's timeline is not the same as mine. My hope was through spiritual practices, they would assume a more open posture in which they allowed the Spirit to heal and guide them. Additionally, time was a substantial limitation. More time was needed for the new postures, theories, and skills to take hold.

### **Effectiveness of the Intervention**

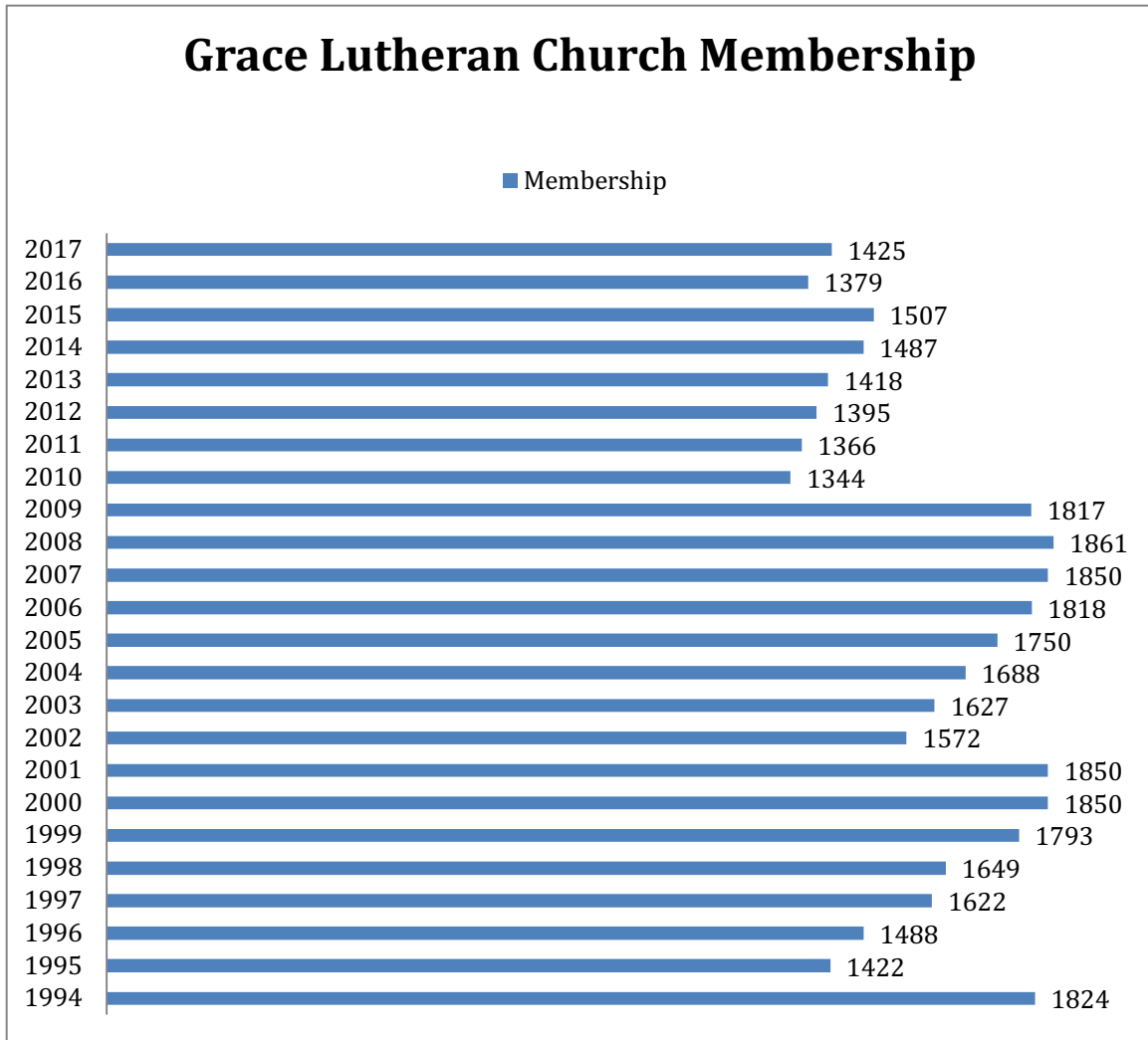
Although the GT did not stay together as a whole, I believe this was an effective intervention from a learning perspective, not necessarily in regards to the research question, because more time is needed to see a more systematic transformation. While not every member of the GT developed as an adaptive leader and experienced transformation, the characteristics of those best suited for this adaptive work were

discovered. Additionally, it highlighted that being grounded in spiritual practices did have an impact on developing leaders for adaptive work. This small core of individuals trusted whom they were following, and recognized their humanity, recognizing that at times they were tempted to respond to criticism in emotional ways. In these times of temptation, they reminded themselves, or others, that emotions they felt, usually anger or fear, did not come from God, and shifted their focus back to the Spirit. Importantly, through the GT meetings and experiments, they began to reflect from the perspective of a learner, not only in regards to matters in front of them, but about their leadership, and the leadership culture within Grace. Those with a closed posture, those without consistent rhythms for personal spiritual practices, or ones they were willing to alter or experiment with, struggled and fell victim to the culture of this world. Although it was later in the intervention than had been hoped for, other leaders were identified and brought into leadership that were eager to learn, coachable, and possessed the characteristics of the type of person best suited for this work.

### **Conclusion**

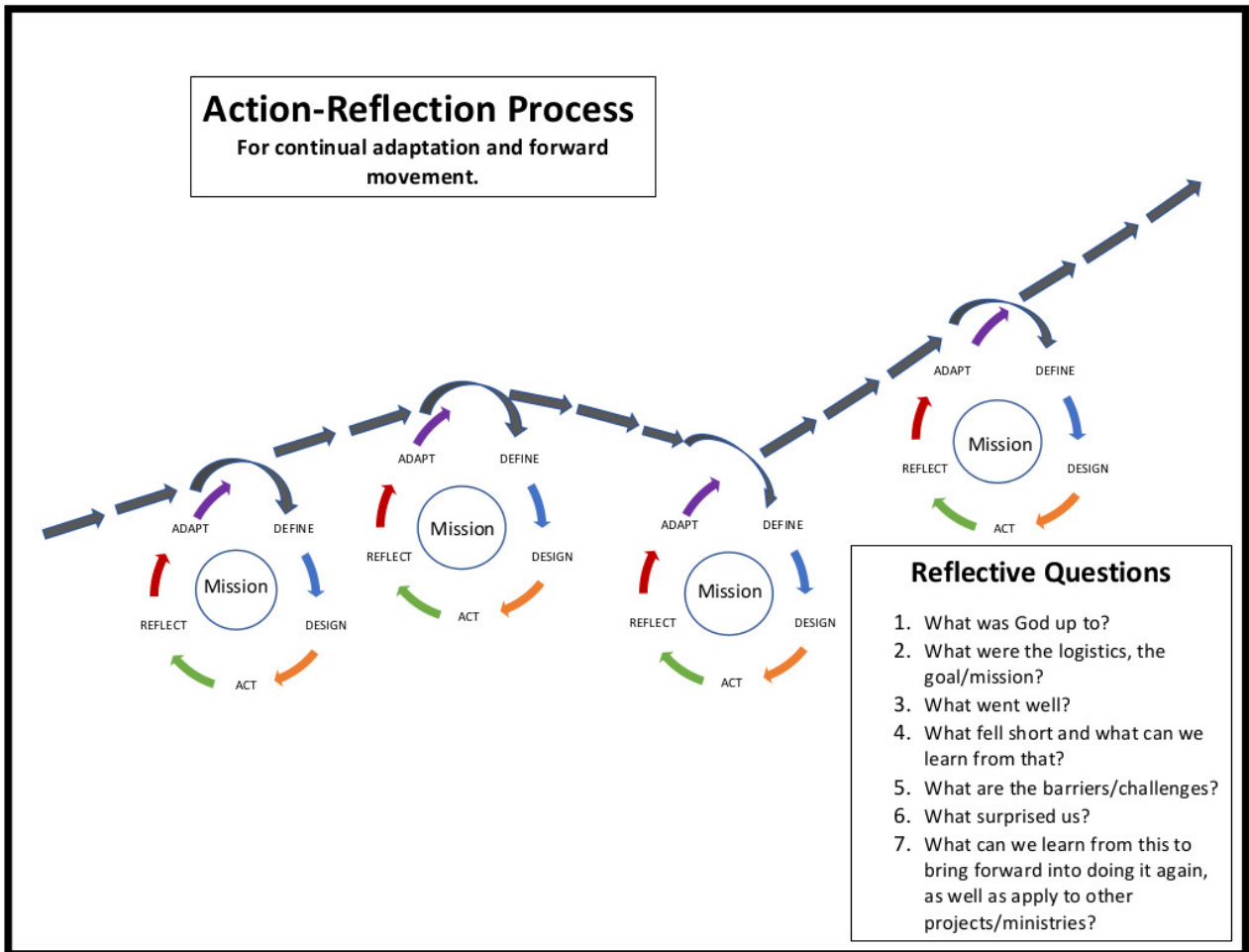
These challenging times call for leaders that are willing to learn new ways of leading that are not always comfortable. Today's leaders will not always know what is coming next, how to fix things or control the outcome. But what they can be sure of is that they will need to cultivate a community and leaders that are not only attentive to the Spirit, but anticipating and trusting in the Spirit as their guide.

## APPENDIX A



Dramatic drop in 2010 is due to a known Membership list purge. The reason for the drop between 1994 and 1995 is unknown.

## APPENDIX B



## APPENDIX C

### Focus Group Questions

1. How long have you been coming to Grace, and what initially brought you here?
2. What inspires you or “keeps you coming back”?
3. Could you share a story of a meaningful moment you experienced in worship here at Grace?
4. (families) What is important to you or a priority in your children's spiritual growth?
5. Could you share a time you felt your faith made a difference in your everyday life?
6. What may be some barriers, or make it a challenge to connect your faith in your everyday life?
7. Thinking about involvement in the life of the congregation, what are some barriers, or challenges to participation?
8. What are some ways Grace supports you/ your family in connecting what you know about your faith in your everyday life? Followed by, is there anything further that would help, or support you/ your family in connecting what you know about your faith in your everyday life?
9. If you could make three wishes for Grace, what would they be?

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