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## Characteristics of Congregations That Empower Missional Leadership: A Lutheran Voice

*Terri Martinson Elton*

### Introduction

Imagine this: doctors, lawyers, firefighters, teachers, students, and parents all believing that their ordinary lives are opportunities for living their faith every day. Imagine this: communities of faith welcoming the lonely, serving meals to the hungry, speaking out against injustice, and partnering with other organizations seeking to transform individuals, neighborhoods, regions, and the world. Imagine this: congregations actively discerning how to participate in God's creative and redemptive mission in the world. Imagine God's people living for the sake of the world.

Why should God's people in community live for the sake of the world? Because God's gathered people exist not for their own sake but to join God in what God is already doing in and for the world. To put it differently, the church has no other mission than to participate in God's creative and redemptive mission *in the world*.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) professes to be a church that exists for the sake of the world. However, the lived reality of the ELCA has not always embodied this commitment. Yet, could the ELCA be a church that lives for the sake of the world? Could ELCA Lutherans allow God's mission to define their identity and their actions — both their being and their doing?

"Faithful, yet changing" is how Mark Hanson, the presiding bishop of the ELCA, described the current state of the ELCA when he began his

term in 2001.<sup>1</sup> What does a faithful, yet changing ELCA look like? Currently, mainline churches, including the ELCA, have become overly instrumental: that is, their actions are substantively driven by their policies and structures — what is primarily a functional view of church — and the result is ministry that is often stalemated as the church seeks to respond to the diverse contexts present in the United States today. So, what is being faithful and what needs to change? The answers, I believe, are located within our ecclesiology.

The structures and patterns of church both inform and are informed by our particular views of church, ministry, leadership, and the world.<sup>2</sup> Structures and patterns are certainly needed, but they can become limiting and restrictive at times. If the church is to faithfully and effectively engage in ministry in the twenty-first century, it is time for the church to evaluate its ecclesiology once again. While an instrumental view of church tends to permeate the ELCA, missional impulses are also present, and the place where we can best observe these impulses is within numerous congregations. Many ELCA congregations are attending, implicitly and explicitly, to the dynamic relationship between God and God's people — and within their contextual realities. What can be learned from these congregations is worth mining, and that is the specific focus of this chapter. It is crucial that we explore the contribution of such congregations, placed in conversation with the richness found in Lutheran traditions and theology, as a Lutheran missional ecclesiology is formed and reformed.<sup>3</sup>

1. Mark S. Hanson, *Faithful, Yet Changing: The Church in Challenging Times* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2002).

2. For example, a view of church that focuses on practices and functions often translates into ministry as programs, leadership evaluated pragmatically, and the world as the environment from which to draw people into the church and the place where the church serves. A missional view of church has at its core a dynamic relationship among God, God's people, and the particularities of being located — geographically and historically. Structures and forms enhance these relationships and are flexible and secondary in nature. Ministry and leadership are varied and diverse, often reflective of the contexts.

3. For a discussion of forming and reforming, see Craig Van Gelder, "How Missiology Can Help Inform the Conversation about the Missional Church in Context," in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 37.

## Part 1: A Study of Missional Leadership

I set out to study missional leadership in the ELCA by paying attention to the three-way dialogue concerning context, God's activity in the world, and God's people participating in God's mission in the world. With the belief that missional leadership is needed, that communities of faith are significant in shaping missional leaders, and with a curiosity about why some ELCA congregations cultivate more missional-minded people than do others, I asked two research questions:

- What are the cultural dynamics within a congregation that are vital to empowering missional leadership?
- What commonalities, if any, exist between various ELCA congregations with regard to these vital cultural dynamics?

Using a grounded-theory, qualitative-research method, my study focused on identifying common cultural dynamics for empowering missional leadership in a purposeful sample of five ELCA congregations.<sup>4</sup> I collected four sources of data for each congregation: a congregational profile, an on-site ethnographic visit over an extended weekend, four focus groups, and my own research journal. I analyzed the data from each of the sources separately and then comparatively. All four sources of data served to create narrative findings on each congregation, and the focus group transcripts served as the primary source for the deeper analysis where I had identified the cultural dynamics.

### *Key Definitions*

Two concepts are important to define for this study. The first is *missional leadership*. Mission, according to David Bosch, is undergoing a transfor-

4. I selected the five ELCA congregations in a three-stage process: I solicited nominations for ELCA missional congregations from various ELCA leaders; once the names of congregations were submitted, I created a preliminary list and e-mailed a letter to a select group of congregational systems stating the purpose of my research and inviting them to consider being a participant. I conducted phone interviews with the lead pastors of the churches that responded positively, in which I clarified the purpose of the study and the expectations of the congregation's participation, and determined their availability within the given timeline of the research. After I had completed the phone interviews, I selected five congregations.

mation. “Missions” has been a word that was used to refer to a particular activity of the church, primarily ministry working across various boundaries, be they geographic, cultural, or socioeconomic. Church leaders who have used “missions” in this way have often referred to missionaries being sent to particular locations or to particular populations.

The concepts of “mission” and “missional,” however, are understood more broadly today: they focus on the *identity* as well as the *activity* of the church. A view of God that is missional declares that God is a missionary God inviting all people into communion with God’s self and sending God’s people into the world to share God’s transforming message. “Missional” describes both God and the church’s very nature. The new missional self-definition sees a missional imagination as an imperative for all Christian communities, and it considers missional leadership the call of all Christians.<sup>5</sup>

A basic definition of missional leadership has been developed based on this rationale, and it includes persons who understand their calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, see themselves as equipped by God with certain gifts to be shared with the larger body of Christ, and believe that they are empowered by the Spirit to engage the world by participating in the creative and redemptive mission of God.

A second concept worth defining is that of *cultural dynamics*. Culture, according to Clifford Geertz, “denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>6</sup> These varied — and often abstract — dynamics are significant in understanding a culture and are at the heart of what my research set out to discover. Richard Shweder says that a cultural account assists “in explaining why the members of a particular cultural community say the things they say and do the things they do to each other with their words and other actions.”<sup>7</sup> It is through identifying and naming cultural dynamics that one begins to discover why particular congregations do what they do and what gives them life.

5. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), xv, 9.

6. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

7. Richard A. Shweder, *Why Do Men Barbecue? Recipes for Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 11.

Margaret Wheatley adds that there is much to be learned from the space between and the relationships of one part to another.<sup>8</sup> Space, in addition to words and actions, defines and shapes congregational culture. This fluid yet powerful aspect plays into meaning-making and sustaining life. Therefore, the concept of cultural dynamics refers to this: any dynamic (words, action, space, or relationship) that shapes the meaning of the culture, influences its members, and perpetuates its life together.

### *Describing the Five Congregations*

I studied five ELCA congregations in five different contexts. This section highlights both the unique dynamics of each congregation and those they shared in common. Each congregation had unique cultural dynamics that shaped it for empowering missional leadership. In summarizing their stories and highlighting some of their key characteristics, the summaries below provide a glimpse into these congregations.

#### *Congregation No. 1: Casa para Todos*

Not a proud people, but a purposeful community with a particular calling, the Casa para Todos faith community is growing not only in membership but also in diversity and as a community on a mission. (All names in this section are pseudonyms for the actual congregations studied.) One of the members put it this way: “We are not called to be comfortable. . . . I think it’s . . . good to remember where the focus is. . . . It’s not on what we do . . . but what God does through us. If we lose that, we are not the church.”

A gracious and active view of God draws this congregation into the world. The changing world serves as their horizon as they continually discern where God is leading them. The heart of this community of faith is to be a people who are shaped by a Lutheran identity, but not necessarily by Lutheran traditions. Leadership is shared between the ordained clergy and staff, the elected lay leadership, and the community of faith as a whole.

This church has several key characteristics:

8. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 10.

- This congregation is Christian first and Lutheran second: that is, they are Christian in that Christ is their center, and they are Lutheran in that a theology of grace clearly lives and breathes within this community of faith. Their mission is: “God’s love comes *to* the church in order for that same love to flow *through* the church to the world.”
- “A Home for All” was not only the theme of their recent building campaign, but it is a metaphor for their life together (and was a phrase used many times by focus group participants). It is a home for all the members, and those members are also meant to contribute as if it were their home. It is a home for all, not just those who are members, but also to those outside their doors as they continually open their building to the greater community.
- The people in this congregation live within a tension of being leaders and followers, or in their words, being *servant leaders*. Worship is the most public way this attitude is shaped and formed, but it is also modeled and lived within the people themselves as they lead and serve within the church and the world.

In summary, this congregation is a community of God’s people who live with and for each other, and who are centered by a gracious God at work in their lives, a God who is calling them into mission in the world. In worship and through leading together, they engage in ministry with eyes toward the future and the changing world.

### *Congregation No. 2: Bread for the Journey*

One participant said: “It is not about our politics or social issues or comfort zone, it is all about a community that is growing in faith and taking the message of Jesus to the world.” This congregation is a community of disciples with an active faith in a living, Trinitarian God, disciples who participate in God’s mission in a changing world. They believe that this living God continues to create, redeem, and sustain life, both within their faith community and in the world. They participate in God’s mission by being a storied people, seeking to be a vibrant presence within their greater community and around the world. Seeking to engage their diverse context with resources and power, this congregation has accepted its call to be a church for the world, and it has a story to tell.

This story is informed primarily by the Christian story, but it has a

Lutheran flare. Planted in an area where Christianity is in the minority, the people of this congregation have attempted to create a fresh, Christian community that draws on Lutheran theological roots, while it also recognizes the particularities of its context.

This church has several key characteristics:

- It is rooted in the Word of God, as witnessed in its preaching and learning opportunities, has a high value on discipleship and equipping people for a life of faith, and holds the sacrament of Holy Communion in high regard. With Christ at its center, the congregation's posture of welcoming catches people on their first encounter and draws them into a deeper discipleship journey.
- Relationships are critical to the people in this congregation. The sacraments are social, the welcoming is social, the missional initiatives are social, and the people of this congregation value being social — mainly by being connected through small groups.
- The passion and commitment of the people within this faith community are contagious. They truly are living out their mission “to *invite* people to faith in a living God; to *grow* and *equip* people to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ; to *serve* others by the Holy Spirit.”

In summary, this is a community of Christian disciples who are following an active and living Trinitarian God. They are narrating their life together, sharing power and leadership, and participating in God's mission in a changing world.

### *Congregation No. 3: Mission Central*

One member summed up the spirit of this congregation this way:

The Lutheran theology keeps our focus on the center, which is Christ, and seeking first the kingdom and all else will follow. . . . That is what drew us to this congregation, the focus on the center. There's one thing in our life that's rock solid, and that's this congregation. It's the most humble group of people.

This congregation is located in an area in which Lutherans are a minority, but it has established itself as a vibrant ELCA mission outpost. It has done



so by being a community of God's people joined together in a journey with a living God.

As a congregation of humble saints and sinners, their belief in God deeply and variously connects them — not only to God but also to each other. They see themselves being tied to the ELCA and to the greater history of the Lutheran church, which means that *Lutheran* is part of this community's DNA. However, their identity is not passive but active, as they seek to participate, influence, and shape it both now and in the future. It's most evident expression is in its planting of several other ELCA congregations in their area.

This church has several key characteristics:

- This community is a group of sinners who believe in something greater than themselves. They come together to refocus their lives, and with this overarching view, their worship and ministry continue to significantly shape their thinking and way of being.
- The congregation has a story to tell, a story that is continuous and is being added to as it moves into the future. People know the story, share the story, are humbled by the story, and want to continue the story.
- The community has a social agenda: that is, being in relationship with one another is important and needs tending to. Whether it be on Sunday mornings, during special events, at small groups, or while serving together, this is a group of people who value each other.

In summary, this congregation is a Lutheran community of God's humble people who are connected to each other on a journey with a living God, and who are seeking to live their faith in the world. They are both willing to respond to the realities of their context as well as influence and shape the community's future.

#### *Congregation No. 4: New Wine*

This congregation is undergoing a transformation, just as its people are. One member expressed it this way: "It is a process for people to come to faith, it's a relational process, and we try to build relationships wherever they are." Talking about the ministry of this congregation, another member added: "We try to remove speed bumps when people come to faith. We

try to make the main thing the main thing.” The main thing for this faith community is to be faithful followers of Jesus living in and for the world.

This congregation is a welcoming community that believes in an active, relational God; the people in it come together to share in the journey of discipleship, spiritual growth, worship, and prayer, and then they are sent into the world. Within this process they openly accept one another, allow each other to be authentic, and are willing to risk and forgive.

Keeping a Lutheran identity at their core, they have also learned that they need to be willing to adapt and be flexible as the world around them continues to change. One of the biggest changes has been the diversification of their immediate neighborhood. This reality has provided both challenges and opportunities.

This church has several key characteristics:

- A doctrine of incarnation is present here. It is a come-as-you-are, grace-filled community that seeks to keep discipleship the main thing. Simply stated, in whatever way they can they try to share Jesus with those who do not yet know him.
- The congregation has had a roller-coaster history, but the small remnant of it that remains seeks to be a welcoming presence in its changing and mobile community. For many, this community of faith is the connective tissue for them in the greater neighborhood.
- As a praying church, this congregation is living *into* being a people fueled by learning and growing in faith and *out of* their passion for reaching out to others. The Spirit moves freely through this faith community, surprising many, igniting passion, and empowering all.

In summary, this congregation is a group of God’s people who are living as a discipling community, discerning God’s leading as they are open to and sent into the world. They are a small faith community poised to make a significant mark in the world.

#### *Congregation No. 5: Cross in the Road*

“This church is the first church I’ve been to that’s given me a way to live my faith,” one member confessed. Mature and confident in its ministry and mission, this congregation won’t allow itself to become too comfortable or complacent.

Grounded in Lutheran theology and tradition, this community of faith is equipping God's people to be mission-minded followers of Jesus. As a community of the baptized, they are Spirit-led and mission-shaped. Operating within a Lutheran framework, they have developed a missional theology that weaves together discipleship, service, and worship. The leaders of this congregation believe that when learning and service come together (and people of all ages are engaged), missional discipleship and Christian community emerge. In other words, there is both a sense of belonging to something and a responsibility to reach beyond.

Leadership is centered on the pastors and council, as they set the direction; but it is also decentralized as participants become involved, are empowered, and take ownership of the ministry. This shared leadership is made up of veteran members and new people.

This church has several key characteristics:

- The congregation operates within a Lutheran frame and takes seriously Lutheran traditions; it is also relentless in proclaiming that every congregant has a call. There is a fervent belief that God is alive and active in their midst as a congregation, in the lives of their people, and in the greater community.
- Service is prevalent among the ministry of this congregation and among its people, and it is more than charity work. Service is framed theologically and is seen as part of a Christian way of life. As several said, "From those to whom much is given, much is expected."
- Baptism centers and directs this community. Rituals are created around this journey, and people of all ages are invited to participate.

In summary, this congregation is a Lutheran community with a missional identity. It is a ministry of the baptized, who are led by the Spirit into the world, and who seek to faithfully worship, learn, and serve together.

### *Comparing the Five Congregations*

Having now briefly described each congregation, in this section I want to compare them contextually, numerically, historically, and programmati-

cally.<sup>9</sup> Contextually, the five congregations are dispersed across the United States, located in three different states and four different metropolitan areas. While all are located in some kind of metropolitan area, the population of those areas range from 361,000 to 3.6 million. When seen from the perspective of U.S. averages, four of the five congregations are located in areas that are above average economically.<sup>10</sup> Four congregations are located in counties that are average or above the national average in education.<sup>11</sup> Three of the congregations are located in counties that are more ethnically diverse than the U.S. average.<sup>12</sup> This diversity translated into diversity in language: four of the five congregations are located in counties that had more than the U.S. average of people whose primary language is something other than English.<sup>13</sup> Finally, all these congregations are located in areas in which they are a religious minority.<sup>14</sup>

With regard to congregational makeup, by ELCA standards these congregations are large, ranking between the 69th and 99th percentile.<sup>15</sup> Three of the congregations are similar in size, representing the higher end

9. It is worth noting that the sample was purposeful in that I sought ELCA congregations that were empowering missional leadership. Secondly, in my selection of congregations I was seeking diversity, but this diversity was limited and not the primary lens.

10. Only one of the five congregations is located in an area that was above the national average in the level of poverty and below the national average in median income.

11. The congregation referred to in note 10 had a lower percentage of people with a high school diploma than did the national average and a higher percentage of dropout rates for 16- to 19-year-olds than did the national average.

12. Two of the five congregations are located in counties in which the percentage of whites is higher than the national average, but one of those counties has a higher percentage of Hispanics than does the national average. The other three congregations are located in counties in which the percentage of whites is lower than the national average. The areas higher than the national average varied in each county: one was higher in African-American, all were higher in Asian, and all were higher in Hispanic.

13. Four of the five congregations were located in counties that had higher than the United States average of people whose primary language was Spanish.

14. One congregation listed mainline Protestant as the third most represented group, after Unclaimed and Roman Catholics. The other four had it listed fourth or fifth (out of five).

15. Three of the congregations were in the 99-99.6 percentile based on placement within ELCA congregations in 2004, which translated into between 166 and 804 in weekly worship. While a range in size was one of the secondary factors that I used in selecting congregations from the initial list, I should acknowledge that there is an opportunity for further study that would address congregations smaller than the ones in this study. Comparing the findings would allow the chance for deeper reflection on missional leadership.

of the scale; one congregation is small, representing the lower end of the scale; and the fifth one is in the middle.<sup>16</sup> In the 1998-2005 period, all five congregations grew in confirmed membership, and all but one grew in baptized membership. Two congregations reported a high percentage of members worshipping, over 50 percent, while the others were closer to 33 percent. Many factors influenced these numbers: during that period, one congregation birthed another ELCA congregation; another had facility constraints and then moved into a new building; and two experienced lead pastor-transitions. All five congregations experienced an increase in giving; all but one also increased their mission support. All in all, these congregations have demonstrated vitality and growth.

Historically speaking, these congregations ranged in age from twenty-two to forty-seven years.<sup>17</sup> Pastoral tenure ranged from one year to sixteen years; the number of paid staff ranged from six in the smallest church to twenty in the largest one, including both part-time and full-time employees. All but one congregation had a first-call pastor currently serving on the staff. These congregations also varied in their programs: three had preschools; two had ethnic-specific worshipping communities that were sharing their facilities and partnering with them in ministry; and another was at the beginning stages of starting a Hispanic ministry. In addition, one congregation had recently birthed another congregation, and another was exploring the possibility of adding a second site. Overall, all five congregations are finding ways to be intentional with respect to engaging their particular location.

## **Part 2: The Findings: Eight Common Cultural Dynamics for Empowering Missional Leadership**

All of these ELCA congregations have unique expressions of ministry and different personalities. But a deeper analysis brings several commonalities to the surface, and eight cultural dynamics become evident, which I will examine in this section.

16. The three large congregations, based on baptized/worshipping membership in 2005, are: 1,348/804, 1,825/515, and 1,449/556. The numbers for the one small congregation, based on baptized/worshipping membership in 2005, are 253/166.

17. This is a factor worth acknowledging. There exists an opportunity to study congregations that were begun in different eras and compare the findings with this study. This comparison would deepen the learnings on missional leadership.

*Dynamic No. 1: An Active and Present God*

At the core of these five congregations is a view of God that is *active and alive* in the world, in their community of faith, and in the people as individuals. God is identified as being at work leading, guiding, challenging, and empowering these communities of faith and the individuals within them. Not surprisingly, worship is the main communal encounter with this active God: it provides the compass that keeps each of these faith communities focused. Worship serves as the central, focal point of these communities, informing and shaping their life together.

While worship is at the core in shaping each church, the congregations' worship experiences are remarkably different. Yet, in all five congregations, God is expected to show up and be present in worship, and people anticipate their worship time together. One of the tangible ways God is present in worship is through the sacraments and the proclaimed Word of God; but I must note that this usually includes a brief teaching that explains the meaning of these practices for those not familiar with them. One unique thing about worship is that it is not only about the people's life together as a community, shaping and forming them into God's faithful people; it also has an outward turn that equips people to see the world through God's eyes and challenges them to exercise their faith in their daily living.

While worship is the primary place where the active God is witnessed, this view of God accompanies the people into their various ministries — both within the congregation and in the world. This view of God allows the people in these congregations to see that God is active in the world in which they go to school, work, and share their lives together. Sometimes this results in seeing community needs that the congregation can respond to; other times it means one person caring for her or his actual neighbor; and at other times it impacts how the congregants care for members of their immediate families. But for all of them, God does not live in a box, nor is God simply part of history. God is alive and present in their world, in their lives, and in the faith community in which they participate.

### *Dynamic No. 2: The World as the Horizon*

With an active view of God at the center, the changing world marks the horizon. Each congregation has an *outward focus*, an eye to the *future*, and each exists for the sake of the *world*. Each incorporates into its self-understanding an identity shaped around reaching out to people outside the church. They exist to love their neighbor and welcome others, and loving the neighbor happens both inside and outside the walls of the church building.

Welcoming others is primary and something they strive for when they gather together as a community. Each congregation arrived at this conclusion, thus blurring the lines between church and world. People in these congregations see real needs in the world and they, as individuals and communities, seek to engage the world in God's name and participate in God's mission in real and tangible ways.<sup>18</sup>

### *Dynamic No. 3: Discipleship as a Way of Life*

With God as the center and the world as the horizon, discipleship defines the way of life together for these congregations. The people in each of these

18. It is important to note two critical reflections on how these systems see their relationship to the world. First, being a church with the world as the horizon is one of the critical elements of what it means to be a missional church; yet the language of "missional church" was not prevalent among the people in these faith communities. Some of the leadership used missional language when they articulated what they were about, but most of the people within these systems used other language, such as "neighbor, inviting others, serving the needs of people, or living for the sake of the world." This is worth noting because the people within these systems are not consistent or clear about this aspect of their life together. This leads me to believe that they are in the early stages of their missional understanding.

Second, the majority of the language that is used to articulate this aspect was about *doing* rather than *being* missional. From my perspective, it seemed that the doing of acts of mission was the first part of the transformation of a congregation toward being missional. People were able to get their minds around helping others, serving tangible needs, and inviting their neighbors. However, a shift in attitude — that the church exists not to add more members to its roster but to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others through one's words, actions, and attitude — is a deeper shift. For some of these systems that deeper shift has taken place across the majority of the faith community; for others it still rests primarily within the leadership. For these reasons, we can conclude that these congregational systems are at various points in making the transformation toward being a missional church.

congregations are *passionate* about their faith and about being on a journey, both individually and communally. The discipleship way of life within these congregations has some common characteristics. First, there is a humble spirit present in the people and an understanding that they are both saints and sinners. People are aware of their brokenness, but they are also aware of the gracious gift they have received from God. Second, the people are curious. While they have confidence that God is among them and active in their lives, they are also open to the mystery of God and interested in learning and growing in their faith.

Third, diversity within each of these faith communities provides an enriching and dynamic atmosphere, forcing these communities to continually redefine themselves. People within these systems come from diverse faith backgrounds: from lifelong Lutherans to people new to the church; from those with European backgrounds to those from Hispanic and Asian cultures; and from people who know the language of the Christian faith to others who are just learning it. Framed theologically, these congregations have a lived practice of being the priesthood of all believers, of being called and sent, and of being God's presence in the world through their various vocations.

#### *Dynamic No. 4: The Congregation as a Network of People*

Life in these congregations is messy, and it was difficult to figure out how this discipleship as a way of life became embedded in the people. Ironically, the answer was obvious: it was the people themselves. These congregations are communities of people who operate as a *network*, or a human system of relationships. In networking language, people are the "nodes."<sup>19</sup> Clues about this network come from the variety of relational words: empowering, growing, welcoming, inviting, connecting, supporting, loving, and encouraging. Focus-group participants often refer to their shared life together.

This networking aspect, so natural to the people themselves, is not often talked about directly. Yet these relationships have a rhyme and reason to them. The people of these congregations have multiple ways of relating

19. "Node" is a networking term that refers to one element or unit within a network. Networks and nodes will be defined in more detail later in this essay.



to one another for various and multiple purposes. This relationality is fluid yet intentional, as people pass on the congregation's DNA to others. Certain people clearly serve primary roles as the hubs, but relationality as a whole is the foundation undergirding each congregation.

### *Dynamic No. 5: The Dance of Leadership*

Each congregation had formal leadership roles, but all of the people within these faith communities had a part in the leadership dance: leadership was *communal* in nature. It was clear across the board that pastors had a critical role in creating the tone, were expected to lead, and were expected to proclaim God's Word. Yet all of these congregations also had strong lay leadership, both in official capacities and among the people in general. There was a leadership dance occurring within these congregations, a give and take between clergy and lay leadership and between formal and informal leaders.

Woven into this leadership dance is the paradox that people, who are both saints and sinners, boldly assert themselves as God's people leading within their congregation and the world. They do so within a culture that allows imperfection and that practices forgiveness. In the end, leadership sets the communal tone, articulates the mission and vision, and creates an atmosphere that sets people free to lead and serve.<sup>20</sup>

20. One important finding was that there was no uniform organizational structure across these five congregations. While there could be many different reasons for this, including their various sizes, in the end it was clear that the organizational structure was less important than the core understanding of this leadership dance. A second and related finding was that very few of the focus group participants could clearly articulate the leadership process within their system. Over the course of the focus group time the leadership process questions were answered, but not when they were asked directly. Yet in all of the systems, people were confident in the leadership of their congregational system and knew how to make their way through it. Even in systems where the leadership process was changing, or had changed, there was little doubt in the leadership. In the end, leadership was more about planting the DNA within the people and creating an environment in which that DNA could be lived out. While the pastor, staff, and lay leadership all had roles, ultimately what emerged was created by and credited to God.

*Dynamic No. 6: The Tension of Ministry and Mission*

Within the network of people, ministry and mission provided the connective tissue.<sup>21</sup> Ministry and mission exist in tension and move people back and forth between their *internal, communal* life together and their daily encounters with their *neighbor and the world*. In some congregations the combination was missional ministry, or internal ministries with an external focus; in others the focus was ministry partnered with mission, side by side yet influencing each other; in still others it was mission that turns into ministry, like Alpha with a twist.

Whatever the makeup, these two foci created formal opportunities in which people in these congregations could gather and engage in discipleship, while they were also attentive to the greater culture. With worship as the primary hub, mission and ministry serve as secondary hubs: they provide people with places to grow in their faith, to exercise leadership, and to connect with the world in intentional ways. However, it was clear from my study that the mission activities and ministries were not ends in themselves. Interestingly enough, it didn't matter what the ministry or the missional activity was, because all served these purposes.<sup>22</sup>

*Dynamic No. 7: A Vibrant Lutheran Identity*

Lutheran identity is important, yet it is a Lutheran identity in which the Christian and Lutheran parts *inform each other* within the context of the world. Some participants stated this notion explicitly, while others simply lived it. The primary focus of these congregations is to help the people in their midst grow in their discipleship journey. While all the congregations

21. I use “ministry” and “mission” here in the following way. “Ministry” refers primarily to attending to the discipleship journey of the people of God. While the particulars vary from congregation to congregation, this might include Christian education, support ministries, age-specific ministries, and so on. “Mission” refers primarily to engagement with the other — in the context, in service, and so on. One tends to be focused internally (though certainly not exclusively), and the other tends to be focused externally (though certainly not exclusively). The point here is that *both* focuses (internal and external) and impulses (to sustain community and to expand community) were present and significant.

22. One example was the choir at one of the churches, which served as an outreach ministry even while its primary role was to lead worship.

have various Lutheran elements in their DNA, these Lutheran elements are more about core Lutheran theological commitments than about loyalty to the ELCA or Lutheran traditions.

Word and sacrament are important Lutheran components, as is the notion of grace. All of these five faith communities consciously hold these elements as the core dynamics among their people. Preaching is vibrant, relevant, memorable, challenging, and accompanied by the study of Scripture. The sacrament of communion is defining for all members as they strive to become a confessing community seeking to share their life together. Being the baptized people of God shapes these communities on their faith journey, but in a less prominent way.

### *Dynamic No. 8: A Changing and Adapting Posture*

Finally, these congregations are *fluid, living systems* that keep an eye toward the future and maintain an *adaptive posture*. They continually seek to discover what it means to be church as they live within a changing world. Many participants noted that change was part of their DNA. All of these congregations live with an attitude that change happens and, over time, they have come to expect and recognize it.

This is partly because all five congregations have experienced some kind of significant change in their recent history (be it a new building, new staff, or a new leadership structure), and change is real in their lives and systems. As a result, people have gained a confidence in God and their congregation: they know that neither can be restrained by any particular form or way of being. God has proven to be bigger than any one particular congregational issue. In the end, this points right back to the first cultural dynamic: a God who is active and alive in the world, in these congregations, and in the people themselves.

## **Part 3: A Proposal for Missional Leadership from a Lutheran Voice**

“[T]he Lutheran posture toward missiology in North America can be characterized as ‘reactive reform.’ We let other theological traditions innovate missiological programs, ideas, and theologies,” declares Richard Bliese.

“While others innovate . . . we constantly reform their work by making it ‘more Lutheran.’”<sup>23</sup> Historically, Lutherans have not set out to be key players in the missional church conversation.<sup>24</sup> “But ‘reform,’” Bliese continues, “as a permanent theological posture is insufficient for mission vitality. Every church must discover, finally, some basis for its own tradition’s missiological genius. The key for Lutheran missiology in the future is to move from ‘reactive reform’ to some kind of ‘innovative initiative.’”<sup>25</sup>

Some missional thinking has recently taken place among some Lutherans, but overall Lutherans are late in the game and underdeveloped in providing a missiology that draws on Lutheran tradition and theology.<sup>26</sup> What might a Lutheran voice contribute to the missional church conversation? Might the findings of this study provide a base for developing such an innovative Lutheran missiology? What is missional leadership at the dawn of the twenty-first century?

As others have already established in this volume, missional leadership involves working a hermeneutical process that brings the gospel, church, and world into conversation. This study of congregations empowering missional leadership affirms that hermeneutical work. Van Gelder has developed a hermeneutical process of leading in mission that brings lived experience, theology, and theory into conversation.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on his framework, on Lutheran theology, and on the cultural dynamics identified

23. Richard H. Bliese, “Lutheran Missiology: Struggling to Move from Reactive Reform to Innovative Initiative,” in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 216.

24. Yet, there have been Lutheran missiologists: some examples are Carl Braaten, James Scherer, and the work of those in the Lutheran World Federation. However, few are actively working on a Lutheran missiology for North America.

25. Bliese, “Lutheran Missiology,” 217.

26. Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *Evangelizing the Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); Richard Cimino, ed., *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Patrick Keifert, “The Return of the Congregation: Missional Warrants,” *Word and World* 20, no. 4 (2000); Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church: For the Life of the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004); Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Cheryl M. Peterson, “The Question of the Church in North American Lutheranism: Toward an Ecclesiology of the Third Article,” (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 2004); and Gary Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

27. Craig Van Gelder, “The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3, no. 1/2 (2004) 139-72.

in this study of five ELCA congregations, this final section presents the seeds of a Lutheran hermeneutic for missional leadership.

### *Communicatively Discerned*

A process of communicative discernment is taking place within these congregations. People exist within a web of relationships, namely, within the church and the world. Discernment is taking place within these webs, which allows congregations to live their unique calling within their particular context. How can this communicative discernment be explained? As a way of unpacking the communicatively discerned aspect of missional congregations, I offer three perspectives below.

#### *Congregations as Complex Systems*

The first perspective is that missional congregations are *open, complex* systems. Open-systems theory provides a general framework for looking at congregations, and within open systems there are varying levels of complexity.<sup>28</sup> The missional congregations that I studied are not only open systems; they are also highly complex. In addition to relying on the environment for their survival, they also seek to be countercultural, to exist only by the volunteer exchange of resources, and to vary in form.

#### *Congregations Create a Cultural Identity*

A second perspective focuses on a congregation's work of creating its own *cultural identity*. Kathryn Tanner, a theologian who draws from cultural anthropology, offers insight into how congregations create identity.<sup>29</sup> Tanner says that common investments are what bond a culture and serve as its reference point; they determine how it lives and what sense it makes

28. Systems theory looks at things holistically and helps explain how systems survive. Within systems theories there are closed or self-maintaining systems and open systems, which rely on the environment for input and support to sustain life. Mary Jo Hatch, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36-37.

29. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

of its social action (Tanner, p. 57). What makes any culture what it is involves the process of defining and redefining elements that have been transported across boundaries from other cultures. In reality, all cultural identity is a *hybrid*, a relational affair that lives as much between cultures as within them (pp. 57-58).

Congregations are open, complex systems, and they are cultures that are always working to create meaning within their context. This reality means that congregations must develop the ability to be self-critical, both outwardly against other cultures and inwardly in creating and re-creating their own identity (p. 58). Ironically, this process of creating identity and the congregation's ability to be critical of itself does not threaten the culture's identity, but actually strengthens it. The congregations I studied have developed the ability to do this work.

### *Theology as a Way of Life*

The final perspective is that theology becomes a *way of life*. The question that finally has to be answered is this: How is the truth of the gospel to be lived in this time and place? Discerning God's work within a specific community requires attending to the particulars of a context, as one also tests and seeks understanding of previous claims about God. This reality means that God's people can no longer separate their church life from their home life. Since culture refers to the whole social practice of meaningful action, then Christian theology has to do with the meaning dimension of Christian practices.<sup>30</sup>

This understanding pulls theology in two different directions: in one sense, theology defines a culture of people and their way of life; in another sense, people challenge theological claims as they press against them in an effort to create meaning in their particular location. Congregations live in the midst of this tension, constantly wrestling with creating and re-creating their hybrid identity. The cultural dynamics of an active view of God and discipleship as a way of life have at their core this issue of the meaning-making of Christian practices.

30. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 70: "Christian social practice essentially involves making theological affirmations about God and Jesus and about human life in their light."

### *Biblically/Theologically Framed*

Communicative discernment highlights two voices within the hermeneutical process. The church has another key dialogue partner, the gospel, which must be biblically and theologically framed.<sup>31</sup> This section highlights four perspectives: views of church, God, ministry, and leadership.

#### *View of the Church*

*Church* is a loaded word, holding various meanings. The mainline church can no longer assume a shared understanding of what it means to be church. This reality provides both a challenge and an opportunity. The mainline church has been an *ecclesiocentric* church, a church centered on structure. This ecclesiocentric focus is now being challenged by the idea of a *theocentric* church, a church centered on one's view of God. In an ecclesiocentric church, God's mission is synonymous with the church's mission, collapsing the two into one. The church was placed in the center, with God working only through the church, not outside it. In a theocentric church, the church exists to participate in God's mission, the *missio Dei*, with God working through the church yet keeping a distinction between the two. A theocentric view of church translates into God's being active in and through the church, but also in the world. Using the language developed by the "missional church," the church's calling and vocation is to represent the kingdom of God in the world.<sup>32</sup>

Seeing God's mission as larger than the church reorients the church's focus toward the world. Simply stated, God and the church exist for the sake of the world. Therefore, *missio ecclesiae* must follow *missio Dei*: that is, the church's structure must follow God's mission. It was clear that the congregations I studied saw themselves in this way. While there was no uniform perspective, the commitment to the world and their communal discipleship journey kept the tension between mission and

31. Hunsberger describes this three-way dialogue between the gospel, culture, and church in George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 8-9.

32. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 80-81. Matthew 16 is an illustration of this. Here the *ekklesia* and the *basileia* are separate — but closely related — concepts (*Missional Church*, 97-98).

ministry alive in these congregations and kept them open to new opportunities for dialogue.

### *View of God*

Currently, there is a renewed focus among many theologians on understanding God from a Trinitarian point of view. Recent scholarship has lifted up two aspects of the triune God: God's *sending* nature and God's *perichoretic* nature. The sending nature, traditionally connected with the Western line of Trinitarian thought, has God the Father sending God the Son, and the Father and Son sending the Spirit (see, e.g., John 20:21: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" [NRSV]). This view highlights the particularities of God: God creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Within this view, the triune God sends the church into the world to participate in God's mission.

The perichoretic nature, traditionally connected with the Eastern line of Trinitarian thought, has the Father, Son, and Spirit dwelling in relationship within the Godhead (see, e.g., John 14:11: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" [NRSV]). All of God indwells in the Father, Son, and Spirit, with each completing who God is. Each is in relationship with the other two, being equal but not the same. God, in God's self, is a God in relationship. The triune God moves together, creating a three-way circulation of love based on equality. This view highlights the kenotic nature of God: the emptying of the persons, one to another, and in turn to humanity and all of creation.

Humankind, created in the image of God, is created with both a communal and sending nature, created for mutuality and interdependence, as well as for being open to the other. Christian community seeks to live with this perichoretic, relational identity *and* with this sending — for the sake of the world and reality. Both the perichoretic and sending natures suggest movement, one internal and one external. These movements were present in the congregations that I studied. The people of these faith communities were continually shaping their life together by emptying themselves to one another, and by going out as people sent into the world to participate in God's mission.



### *View of Ministry*

While the previously stated views of God and church are more broadly Christian, what would a missional view of ministry influenced by Lutheran theology look like? We need to address two broad themes: the creative and redemptive aspect of God's mission and the community of the baptized.

**God's Creative and Redemptive Mission** God created the world and continues to create in the world. Luther sets this forth in his explanation of the first article: "I believe God had created me and all that exists." God "provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day."<sup>33</sup> This is not a one-time event in the past, but God continues — and will continue — to actively create and sustain life. God, the creator of the universe, enlists humanity to join in this ongoing creative process and the congregations I studied believe that (see, e.g., Gen. 1–2).

Yet sin exists in the world. Not only has the Fall taken place, but a power encounter exists in the world. Humanity lives in "a situation in which there are two kingdoms (earth and heaven, in Luther's terminology), two contending powers (God and the devil) . . . in which Christians are involved in constant struggle."<sup>34</sup> But this is not the end. God so loved the world that God sent God's son, Jesus, to save it. "The death of Jesus on the cross is the centre of all Christian theology. . . . All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the Crucified Christ."<sup>35</sup> This focal point of the Christian faith is the gospel message, which is good news.

**The Baptized Community** What is the role of Christian community? Christians are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection and joined in community. In baptism, Christians become a new creation, dying to their

33. Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism in Contemporary English with Lutheran Book of Worship Texts: A Handbook of Basic Christian Instruction for the Family and the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), 11.

34. Marc Kolden, "Luther on Vocation," *Word and World* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 383.

35. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 204.

earthly will and rising to a heavenly one.<sup>36</sup> Yet this one-time event is the call to a lifetime journey. How does this happen?

In baptism God is the primary actor; in baptism God extends and invites humanity into God's self; in baptism God creates anew, forgives sins, promises life eternal, gives the Spirit to each baptized person, and releases the Spirit into the world.<sup>37</sup> God does all of this; the one who is baptized simply receives. Baptism is God's free gift to humanity. In its most inclusive ways, baptism is the opening up of God's self to the world, so that people will come together and be united.<sup>38</sup>

The faith community receives the baptized and professes to faith on their behalf. This is most clearly seen in infant baptism. Although this is a practice that has not gone unchallenged, it is both theologically sound and symbolic of a Lutheran understanding of baptism. Baptism is not about the proclaimed faith of the one baptized; it is a gift from God to the baptized, which is received by the Christian community for the purpose of the creation of faith in the one newly baptized. In baptism, faith, not works, orients the Christian way of life.<sup>39</sup>

In baptism, the baptized receive a call to a new way of life. This new Christian way of life is lived in community and committed to serve the world. "Baptism clearly articulates that we are not our own. . . . [R]elationships mark the Christian life."<sup>40</sup> This community of the baptized has two

36. "In baptism the recipient is buried with Christ; he must die with him that he may rise and live with him (Rom. 6)." Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1999), 28.

37. "Baptism as reception into the Body of Christ is a divine act independent of man's action, one which, in and with his being set within the Body of Christ, confers on the baptized person the grace that he 'be clothed with Christ' (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3ff.) just at this particular place within the Body of Christ. In this Body the resurrection power of the *Holy Spirit* operates." Oscar Cullman, *Baptism in the New Testament*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: SCM Press, 1950), 39.

38. Cullman puts it this way: "At Golgotha, the prevenient grace of God in Christ is appropriated to *all* men, and entry into Christ's kingdom is opened to them. In Baptism, entry is opened up to . . . the 'inner circle' of this Kingdom, that is, to the earthly Body of Christ, the Church. Golgotha and Baptism are related to one another as are the wider all-inclusive Kingdom of Christ and the Church." Cullman, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 34.

39. "This is the Christian liberty, our faith, which . . . makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation." Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 2nd rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 284.

40. Martha Ellen Stortz, "'The Curtain Only Rises': Assisted Death and the Practice of Baptism," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 26, no. 1 (1999): 14.

movements: internally, it is both forming and reforming its members and their way of life together (as sign and foretaste); externally, it is witnessing to and engaging the world, participating in God's mission (as agent and instrument).

### *View of Leadership*

Christians, communally and individually, have agency. Ignited in worship, empowered through ministry, and lived daily in the world, agency was a powerful source within the congregations I studied. Agency was present both in individual persons and within the faith communities as a whole. As baptized Christians they had discovered that they had been transformed into "agents of Christ's love"<sup>41</sup> by the Holy Spirit. This agency was communal and aimed at serving the neighbor.<sup>42</sup>

For Luther this call, both general and particular, is best articulated in the notion of the priesthood of all believers. Developing a theology of vocation can help the baptized people of God understand their particular callings on earth and the particular, concrete ways in which they can love and serve their neighbor. Home, work, faith community, and civic community are all places where Christians are to be God's presence in the world and to give witness to the gospel. These are the places where the gospel is discovered and the ways in which the baptized are dispersed throughout the world. Therefore, vocation belongs to the Christian's life between baptism and resurrection, and it is what connects God's people with the *missio Dei*.<sup>43</sup>

41. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 87.

42. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 75, quoting Luther, "Third Sermon on Pentecost," in Lenker, 3:321.

43. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 250. It is worth noting that the relationships that constitute the Christian way of life not only are with those within Christian communities, but also include relationships in other communities in which God's people are stationed in the world. Christians are always located within the world and are God's presence — God's agents of love — in the world. In varying degrees the people within the congregations I studied have discovered not only a communal identity as baptized believers, or the agency they have received in baptism through the Holy Spirit, but they have also claimed their particular vocations as stations in which they can participate in — and are participating in — God's creative and redemptive mission in the world.

### *Theoretically Informed*

Congregations are communities of faith that need to be framed theologically; but they are also organizations and thus need to be understood theoretically. Organizational and leadership theories are fruitful conversation partners for understanding congregations. I will now address the theoretical informing of our ecclesiology in four broad themes: change and adaptivity, congregations as networks, leadership as a dance, and lifting up the gifts of people.

#### *A New Worldview Requiring Change and Adaptivity*

Margaret Wheatley challenges leaders to adopt a new worldview, for the “old ways of relating to each other don’t support us any longer.”<sup>44</sup> To get to this new worldview requires looking at connections, seeing energy in relationships, acknowledging the power in what is unseen, and leaving behind the Newtonian worldview, which sees the world as a machine with separate parts. In this new worldview, chaos and change are givens. Leading requires new leadership skills around adaptability and the ability to deal with change. Leadership looks at the whole rather than the parts, tends to the development and retention of the core identity, and fosters relationships inside and outside the organization.

Wheatley’s findings describe the workings of the congregations I studied. As the church seeks to create missional communities, Wheatley’s ideas highlight the work that needs to be done and give leadership guidance on where to focus (Wheatley, pp. 157-70). Organizations that operate within this worldview focus on participatory management, tend to relationships, work within networks, share information, and create meaning. The voices of the people in five congregations I studied would agree.

#### *The Congregational System as a Network*

Networks, a foundational reality in Wheatley’s work, are seen to be critical in this new worldview. Alberto-Laszlo Barabasi predicts that “[n]etworking thinking is poised to invade all domains of human activity and most fields of human inquiry . . . [for] [n]etworks are by their very nature the

44. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, xi.

fabric of most complex systems.”<sup>45</sup> As I have noted above, networks were the primary topology in the congregations I studied.

We can learn many things from networks. Networks are made up of nodes, links, and hubs. Within a social network, *nodes* represent the individual persons, *links* are the things that connect these persons or nodes, and *hubs* are the key people (or nodes) who represent dense populations and diverse connections that create shortcuts to other parts of the network. Identifying the nodes, hubs, and links within a network illuminates key information about a network. Hubs are the “generic building block[s] of our complex, interconnected world” (Barabasi, p. 63), and are created when a large number of nodes attach to one particular node. In a network, the greater the number of large hubs, the more effective and robust that network becomes.

Connectivity is key for networks, for vulnerability comes when networks are not interconnected (p. 130). “Achieving robustness is the ultimate goal” for networks, since it is their greatest protection against failure (p. 111). Without robustness, a network can be dismantled by the disabling of only a few hubs (p. 118). Scale-free networks are a key way that networks organize themselves for robustness, because they increase the number of large hubs strategically throughout the network. Each of the congregations I studied not only had networks as their topology, but they were robust, scale-free networks.

### *The Dance of Leadership*

“Leadership would be a safe undertaking if your organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions.” These kinds of problems, according to Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, are technical ones.<sup>46</sup> Treating problems as technical ones has been a common approach for church leaders in dealing with change. Yet the new worldview suggests seeing change differently: “[T]here is a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. . . . We call these adaptive challenges

45. Alberto-Laszlo Barabasi, *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002), 222.

46. Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13.

because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization and community” (Heifetz and Linsky, p. 13). This approach to change requires both shifting one’s perspective and posture of leadership.

Most organizations look to leadership, or, more specifically, to individual leaders, to solve their problems. However, “[w]hen people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction” (p. 14). For too long organizations have relied on technical responses — restructuring, new leadership, changing methods, or adopting new styles — for the answers to problems that require major shifts (p. 14).<sup>47</sup> However, the leadership within the congregations I studied operated with a different posture. These systems did not rely on quick fixes, but were able to dig below the surface: they sought to discover the core issues, and they changed not only programs but attitudes.

As the church is called to shift from an ecclesiocentric view to a theocentric one, church leaders will have to shift their thinking from technical to adaptive change and from solo to shared leadership. With an adaptive posture to change, leaders are not the experts who handle the problems but the conveners of the people who are directly affected by the problem. As one pastor said, “You don’t shape congregations rationally but behaviorally. Modeling is how you shape people. . . . It’s shaping the culture. . . . Our job is to shape the culture.”<sup>48</sup>

### *Lifting Up the Gifts of the People*

The congregations I studied operate as complex, open systems made up of robust networks with shared leadership, and they have an active, missional view of God as the source of their life together. They find the energy for their life together in the work of the Spirit and in the people themselves. People, called and gifted, are what make up these congregations. Equipped by the Spirit and empowered by communities of faith, these baptized people of God live out their particular callings in the world and within their

47. This issue is not only common within the church but in organizations as a whole. Heifetz and Linsky say: “The single most common source of leadership failure we’ve been able to identify — in politics, community life, business, or the nonprofit section — is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.”

48. Interview participant from congregation No. 1.

communities of faith; they are the invisible force field present within each community of faith.<sup>49</sup>

Many theories have been developed — within both secular and Christian literature — that highlight human potential and help people discover their unique gifts and design.<sup>50</sup> For the purposes of this missional view of leadership, the particulars of these various theories are secondary to my main point, which is the empowering and lifting up of God's gifted people. The work of discovering and empowering the gifts of God's people will be done within the holdings of one's individual vocations, located within community, and with an eye to the world and the *missio Dei*.

### *Strategic Action*

The reality is that the church will need to live into this new worldview at the same time that it is discovering it and certainly before it can fully understand it. This can be unnerving, yet it is the work of current church leaders to lead in the midst of this real dilemma. Within this liminal time, church leadership will need to act, and to do so strategically, helping faith communities make their way forward.<sup>51</sup> I want to address here one final

49. The concept of force fields has to do with the “invisible forces that occupy space and influence behavior.” Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 15.

50. Within the Christian literature, resources have emerged from teaching congregations such as Willow Creek, and their own gifts ministry called Network. One of their current resources is Bruce Bugbee, *Discover Your Spiritual Gifts the Network Way* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2007). In addition, Saddleback's gift ministry is named SHAPE. See more at [www.saddleback.com](http://www.saddleback.com). Individuals working this area include Jane A. G. Kise, David Stark, and Sandra Krebs Hirsh, *Lifekeys: Discovering Who You Are, Why You're Here, What You Do Best* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996); Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Oxnard, CA: Regal Books, 1995). Within the secular literature, the resources are multiple. Here are some examples: Renee Baron, *What Type Am I? Discover Who You Really Are* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998); Renee Baron and Elizabeth Wagele, *The Enneagram Made Easy* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); David Keirse, *Please Understand Me 2* (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis, 1998); Otto Kroeger and Janet M. Thuesen, *Type Talk* (New York: Tilden Press Book, 1998); Don Richard Riso, *Personality Types: Using the Enneagram for Self-Discovery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); and Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

51. I use “leadership” here to intentionally note that this is a shared, communal view of leading rather than an individual's sole responsibility.

aspect — strategic action — by looking at missional leadership from four perspectives: as cultivation, as agent of change, multidimensionally, and as fostering Christian community.

### *Missional Leadership as Cultivation*

Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, in *The Missional Leader*, have set out to be bridge builders. Deeply committed to the missional church, they are helping congregations become missional. For them, missional leadership is about cultivation. Cultivation describes leadership that “works the soil of the congregation so as to invite and constitute the environment for the people of God to discern what the Spirit is doing in, with, and among them as a community.”<sup>52</sup>

Leadership focused on cultivation is organic and fluid, more of an art than a skill. Cultivation is not a linear process; rather, it is the ongoing work of missional leadership. Cultivating awareness, co-learning networks, fresh ways of engaging Scripture, and new practices, habits, and norms are four key elements.<sup>53</sup> The congregations I studied exhibited cultivation as part of their ongoing work. At times a large part of the faith community was involved, while at other times a smaller group was involved; but over all, leadership as cultivation was prevalent.

### *Missional Leadership as Agent of Change*

Leadership in a missional church also guides and leads change within an ever-changing, complex set of systems. Roxburgh and Romanuk recognize three zones in the change process.<sup>54</sup> This perspective provides a framework

52. Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 4, 28, 31-32.

53. These three types are: awareness of what God is doing among the people in the congregation; awareness of how the congregation can imagine itself as the center of God’s activities; and awareness of what God is already up to in their context. The co-learning networks “create an environment that releases the missional imagination of a congregation.” The scriptural element deeply connects God’s people to God’s work in fresh ways as they put into practice their new awareness. These practices are not based primarily on programs and traditions, but on Christian formation and the disciplines of discipleship. Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 31-34.

54. Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 41. These zones are: reactive leadership, performative leadership, and emergent leadership.



to “assist leaders in understanding the adaptive shift in leadership style required amid such change; identify the skills and competencies required in each zone; and help congregations understand their own location in massive change” (Roxburgh and Romanuk, p. 40).

The preferred zone for missional congregations is one of pioneering and experimenting/emerging (pp. 41-44). Working this change process creates both an understanding of the current situation and helps an organization find a new way, with new language and common commitments (p. 114).<sup>55</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk’s emergent zone leadership is descriptive of the congregations I studied. All were on a journey, with an unforeseeable end, and they allowed for ambiguity and failure. They were also about the work of creating new language with clear meaning.

### *Missional Leadership as Multidimensional*

As I have already revealed, leading a missional congregation requires navigating multiple complexities. Missional leadership requires being a cultural anthropologist, a contextual theologian, a student of organizational leadership theory, and one who empowers others. Roxburgh and Romanuk acknowledge these complexities as they highlight both the personal attributes and skills that leadership within a missional congregation must have. The leadership skills are about cultivating people, forming mission environments and congregations, and engaging context. The personal attributes are personal maturity, conflict management, personal courage, and developing trust (Roxburgh and Romanuk, p. 114).

These four clusters of work and/or skills are vital for missional congregations and align with the cultural dynamics explored in this study. For example, the cultural dynamic of discipleship as a way of life focuses on cultivating people, attending to the particularities in the congregation and their context, and requires a commitment to the leadership’s own discipleship journey.

55. To do so, the change process includes five aspects: awareness, understanding, evaluation, experiment, and commitment. This model of change is a five-step process based on Everett Roger’s *Diffusion of Innovations*.

*Missional Leadership as Fostering Christian Community*

Missional leadership, however, is about fostering Christian community and helping God's people live into and out of Christian disciplines. Programs within missional congregations are present, but only as mechanisms for something greater, a vibrant relationship with God. Diana Butler Bass, in *The Practicing Congregation*, discovered that congregations that experienced a renewed sense of identity, vocation, and mission were intentionally attending to and embracing particular Christian practices.<sup>56</sup>

Bass is not alone. Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass add: "The distinctive understanding of *Christian practices* . . . [represents] the constituent elements in a way of life that becomes incarnate when human beings live in the light of and in response to God's gift of abundant life."<sup>57</sup> Christian practices of missional congregations are Christian practices of Christian communities. Missional Christian practices tend to the forming of faith communities as well as the ever-changing translatability of contextual realities. Hence, this hermeneutic ends back at the beginning, communicatively discerned.

56. This study included fifty congregations from various mainline denominations, including the ELCA, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and Reformed Church in America. Congregations were large, medium, and small; they were diverse geographically, pastorally, and in class, race, and ethnicity. Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Washington, D.C.: Alban, 2002). Bass describes these congregations as: "Communities that choose to reword denominational tradition in light of local experience to create a web of practices that transmit identity, nurture community, cultivate mature spirituality, and advance mission. These practices — as varied as classical spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina* and centering prayer, or moral and theological practices like householding, Sabbath keeping, forgiveness, doing justice, and hospitality — are drawn from, recover, or reclaim individual and corporate patterns of historic Christian living that provide meaning and enliven a sense of spiritual connection to God and others. In these congregations, transmission of identity and vocation does not occur primarily through familial religious tradition, civic structures, or the larger culture. Christian identity is neither assumed nor received. Rather, transmission occurs through choice, negotiation, and reflexive theological engagement, in community, by adopting a particular way of life as expressed by and sustained through historically grounded Christian practices."

57. Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 21.

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## Conclusion

This chapter plants the seeds of an innovative Lutheran missiology with a view toward identifying a Lutheran hermeneutic of missional leadership. Rooted in a grounded-theory approach, the research of this study, combined with current theoretical and theological resources, has offered a missional Lutheran ecclesiology for these changing times. I have proposed a hermeneutical approach, one that takes into consideration texts, both biblical and theological; culture, and the forming of it; Christian community, God's people working out their Christian way of life together; and strategic action, the lived practices.

What I am finally suggesting can be summed up in two words: *intentionality* and *openness*. The changing times are real, for the landscape is changing at rates faster than ever before. Yet the opportunities and the need for missional leadership in these changing times are also real. So the question needs to be asked: Are we as church leaders willing to be faithful, yet changing, as we seek to participate in God's creative and redemptive mission in the world?