

# **Competing Frameworks: How theoretical and theological frameworks influence congregational renewal efforts and color external evaluations**

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## **Abstract**

Numerous books have been written in response to declines in mainline churches. Some call for technical improvements in congregations, others for congregations to expand their missional imagination through adaptive change, and newer sources call for a complete re-imagination of the church itself. This paper explores how using different theoretical and theological frameworks changes both the way congregations engage in renewal and the way their progress is evaluated. I studied four congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) that are striving to renew themselves and their community in a vibrant, racially diverse, inner city context that struggles with violence. Congregational visitations, interviews, and focus groups with congregation leaders and members provided a wealth of information that took on different meanings depending on the framework used. These findings have substantial implications for the ELCA, as it identifies new strategies prioritizing congregational vitality.

“To say that Christianity in the world at large is undergoing a major transition is to indulge in understatement.”<sup>1</sup> (p.1) Numerous surveys, like the FACT survey, describe declining trends in membership rolls across nearly all denominations.<sup>2</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is no exception. Steady declines over the years have inspired a variety of approaches to stem and, ideally, reverse the trend. Each year, the ELCA spends over two million dollars on a variety of renewal strategies with congregations. In January 2017, the Tiger Team taskforce performed an internal review of the renewal process and found that half of all change efforts fail from the start. Since the current curriculum didn’t appear to be working, the reviewers recommended that a new curriculum be develop to help congregations become more vital.

As a researcher and project manager for the Congregational Vitality Project of the ELCA, my job is to help congregations and the denomination use outcome measurement tools to learn what renewal practices are and are not working. I am expected to use this information to help develop the new curriculum. Unfortunately, all the denomination’s evaluations to date described outcomes, but did not explain what was happening on the ground to produce those outcomes. I decided to study one initiative in depth to gain a better understanding of the causes of these outcomes before creating a new curriculum.

This initiative was one of many Area Ministry Strategies in the ELCA. In this case, it was a collaborative effort by four very different congregations from the same community who worked together to renew their ministries and deepen their impact in the community. After collaborating intentionally for over two years and accomplishing many tasks, members of this project were asked about the results of their efforts. No one in the collaborative group felt that the effort had resulted in the renewal of the congregations or had an appreciable impact on the community. To learn more about what happened and why, I moved to the city and spent a month listening to people from all four congregations and the collaborative group itself.

That study produced four learnings. First, I identified the elements required to move congregations forward together. Second, I learned the causes within congregations that produce specific strategies and drive outcomes. Third, I learned that the theoretical and theological framework used by the congregations led them to reflect on their own work in ways that limited their capacity for learning and changing. Fourth, I saw how using a different framework facilitated asking new kinds of questions which led both the congregations and me to different conclusions from the same data. This paper will focus on the final two learnings. It will show how evaluating congregational efforts varies depending on the framework used and the research questions asked. It concludes by recommending the adoption of a new framework and a more God centered approach to evaluation.

### **Current theoretical and theological framework of ELCA renewal strategies**

The ELCA’s renewal strategies rest within an understanding that congregations operate within the developmental life cycle as described by Rothauge in 1996.<sup>3</sup> The Domestic Mission Unit

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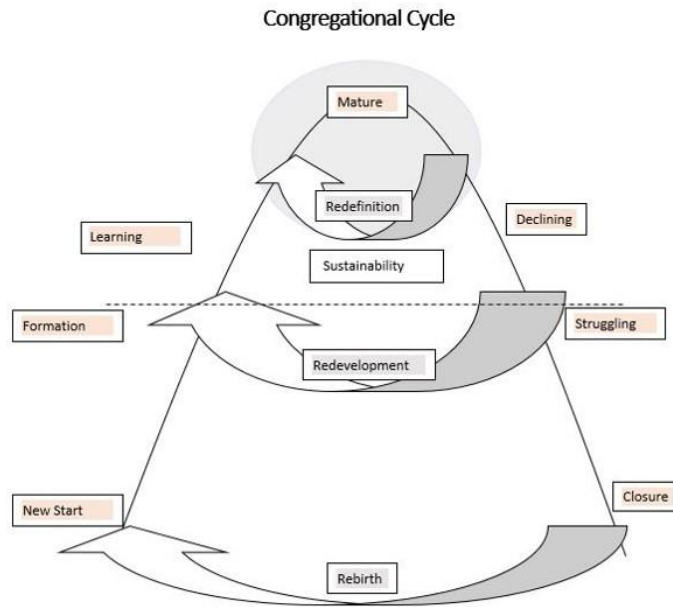
<sup>1</sup> Douglas Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> David A Roozen and Faith Communities Today, *American Congregations 2008* (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Arlin J. Rothauge, "The Life Cycle in Congregations: A Process of Natural Creation and an Opportunity for New Creation," (Congregational Ministries Cluster, Episcopal Church Center, 1996).

of the ELCA trains leaders using a modification of Rothauge’s congregational life cycle, as illustrated in Figure 1.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1: Congregational Life Cycle



The model assumes that when congregations are formed they establish patterns and traditions that create a distinct identity. They grow and become stable and may even thrive, acquiring people, staff, a building, and many artifacts. At some point the structure of the congregation plateaus, and the congregation enjoys a bit of stability. At this time the congregation’s membership is consistent, and its programs appear to be working well. However, congregations eventually notice that the things that used to work well no longer have the same impact. At this point, congregations may redefine themselves. Redefinition is indicated on the life cycle model by the first arrow that moves from the upper right to the upper left.

*Redefinition*

Numerous resources are available to congregations that seek redefinition. Resources help congregations find new ways of doing the same essential practices, including worship, evangelism, youth ministry, hospitality, leadership, church administration, and stewardship. Faith Communities Today was one of many surveys over the past fifteen years that pointed to correlations between doing these kinds of practices well. “Success” was most often measured by congregational growth.<sup>5</sup> The assumption behind providing these resources is that congregations simply aren’t doing a good enough job in critical ministry areas.

A slightly different approach imagines that the problem lies within the relationships among its members. One prominent example came from Peter Steinke who described congregations as a

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> David A Roozen, "American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving," in *Faith Communities Today* (Hartford CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2015).

family system and pointed to the need for members within that system to function in healthy ways.<sup>6</sup> Other researchers view the congregation's culture as the problem, focusing especially a congregation's willingness to change. From this perspective, congregations must change how they operate or die.<sup>7</sup> The corollary is that if they change, they will succeed. Most of the time, being successful means they will grow.

This begs the question, "What kind of change is necessary to keep congregations alive?" Dougherty studied congregational mortality and identified leadership transitions across generations, usually after 45 and 75 years of ministry, as a time of high mortality.<sup>8</sup> He found that mortality was related to the congregation's identity and sense of purpose. If the congregation was imprinted with an identity designed to address the needs and concerns of the founders themselves, then the congregation was less relevant to succeeding generations. However, if a congregation was founded on ideals that transcended the immediate needs of the founders, the congregation was more likely to continue across generations. Dougherty's work suggests that one of the key problems in congregations is that their identity is imprinted from former generations and needs to be updated to bring it in line with the needs of the current members and local context. That kind of work falls beyond the scope of redefinition, which focuses only on the internal functions of the congregation. Addressing matters of identity and context require what Rothauge calls redevelopment.

#### *Redevelopment*

Congregations in need of redevelopment are assumed to be focused on preserving their own traditions and a sense of family rather than changing to focus on God's vocational call for the sake of their neighbor. According to Rothauge, "A redevelopment effort returns the congregation to the earlier stage of "formation." Starting over again necessitates letting go of pride, guilt, shame, deception, illusion, and fears about the congregation and about change."<sup>9</sup>(p. 5) Rothauge appears to assume that this earlier stage was focused on God's mission and that the congregation has gotten out of touch with that mission. However, Dougherty's work suggests that many congregations were never primarily focused on mission beyond their own walls. The need to change the church's understanding about what it means to be the church was taken up by the missional movement.

The missional movement was summarized by Van Gelder and Zscheile. They described the church as an incarnational ministry sent by God into the world for its redemption.<sup>10</sup> It shifts attention from what is happening inside the congregation to how well the congregation connects with its context. Branson and Martinez summarized the missional literature by asking, "What is God doing in our community and how can we participate?"<sup>11</sup> This is a much deeper question than, "How do we fix the church?" Branson and Martinez propose that asking this kind of question recognizes

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<sup>6</sup> Peter L Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Robert D Schieler, *Revive Your Mainline Congregation: Prescriptions for Vital Church Life* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Dougherty, "When the Final Bell Tolls: Patterns of Church Closings in Two Protestant Denominations," *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Rothauge.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Baker Academic, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (InterVarsity Press, 2011).

the disruptive nature of the Spirit and opens the congregation up to the kind of change that challenges their very identity. That is the kind of change Dougherty's work calls for, but shifting a congregation's identity requires an adaptive change.

Adaptive change was laid out originally by Heifetz for business applications.<sup>12</sup> Heifetz distinguishes between problems that require technical vs. adaptive change. Technical problems are those where the problem and solution are both understood. Change in these situations is a matter of developing, implementing, and evaluating a plan to help the organization move from the current state to the desired and defined solution. Adaptive change is required when either the problem or solution is not understood. In this situation, a specific plan toward a solution cannot be created because there is no clear direction. Instead, the organization must adapt to its new environment or condition.

Keifert applied those concepts to congregations, describing how activities like discernment, listening, experimenting, and reflection allow congregations to move through four distinct phases: Discovering, Experimenting, Visioning for Embodiment, and Learning and Growing. Discovering occurs when congregations listen through practices like the "three great listenings": listening to God, one another and their neighbor.<sup>13</sup> Experimenting takes place when congregations try out new ideas based on what they learned while listening. Each experiment is reflected upon in ways that expand the congregation's imagination and clarify its sense of missional vocation. As experiments continue and imaginations expand, new possibilities for ministry present themselves. In the Visioning for Embodiment phase, the Spirit uses people within the congregation whose imaginations have shifted to cast a new clear vision and give it shape through structures, so that it can be implemented. Once that vision is embraced and new structures are implemented, congregations begin living out their newly understood vocation by integrating the practices they learned in earlier phases into their everyday activities which are continually experimented with and reflected upon. This phase is called Learning and Growing.

ELCA renewal efforts teach practices of discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting, yet most efforts do not result in a learning and growing church. One possible reason is that the way they engage these steps is lacking the disciplines described by Zscheile.<sup>14</sup> These disciplines call a congregation to cultivate a culture where adaptive practices can take root.

#### *Re-birth*

If redevelopment is not attempted or not achieved, the congregation will continue to decline until it is unsustainable. Once unsustainable, a congregation is no longer eligible for formal ELCA development funds. Unless the congregation can change course on its own, the only option for "renewal" is re-birth. Rebirth typically means closing the congregation and preserving its legacy by using remaining assets to begin a new ministry.

#### *Need for a new model and new questions*

Despite years of attempts, numerous programs, and millions of dollars, only a small percentage of congregations have successfully implemented the changes required to avoid decline or achieve renewal. The downward trends of the ELCA has continued. Years of research has asked questions

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Abadian Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Harvard Business Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Stephen P Bouman, *The Mission Table: Renewing Congregation and Community* (Augsburg Fortress, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Dwight Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (Church Publishing, Inc., 2014).

like, “What is going wrong?” and “How do we fix the church?”. These questions assume that congregations are most healthy and missional when they are at the top of the bell curve and that those who have decline are somehow less faithful. They also assume the failure to successfully use technical and adaptive change techniques is what leads to the death of a congregation. However, several scholars have suggested that the downward trends aren’t a sign that the church is failing, rather they are a sign that God is doing something new. Adaptive change actions aren’t techniques designed to save the church of the past, rather they are tools to allow the church to adapt to a new environment by changing all together.

### **Emerging theoretical and theological framework**

*The changing context requires congregations to reconsider their identity and adapt their structure.*

Alan Roxburgh represents this perspective when he suggests that the problem isn’t a failed sense of mission, rather a failed structure.<sup>15</sup> This perspective agrees with the call for a shift in missional imagination. However, in this case, a shift in imagination will not result in the restoration of a stronger, more missional institution. Rather, it will result in something entirely new and potentially radically different. Many authors point to the shift in today’s society away from hierarchies and toward social networks. They call for the church to join this shift to become relevant to today’s young adults and future generations. Authors like Roxburgh<sup>16</sup> and Herring & Elton<sup>17</sup> describe newly emerging networks binding society together in new ways and call for the church to adopt these structures as well.

Before racing to create new networked structures, it is helpful to stop and reflect on what the church is trying to accomplish. If the church is serious about the need for adaptive change, then it must follow those steps itself. That requires shifting from an evaluative stance to a learning stance. This shift changes the research question from, “What went wrong per our plan for renewal?” to “What is God doing here and now?”. Asking God questions rather than church questions is fundamental to the missional movement, yet it has not been seriously engaged by researchers and evaluators who are too busy comparing actual outcomes with their own definitions of success.

For this project, I decided to engage this perspective by asking a second research question, “What was God doing in the area ministry strategy I studied”. To help me answer the question, I decided to use the lessons of adaptive change described above but to place them into a different change model that looks forward rather than backward. That change model combines the work described in two different books. The first, by Roxburgh and Romanuk<sup>18</sup>, illustrates how congregations are continually undergoing change. The second, by Rendle<sup>19</sup>, describes what adaptive change feels like from the inside.

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<sup>15</sup> Alan J Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church* (InterVarsity Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Hayim Herring and Terri Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World: Platforms, People, and Purpose* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

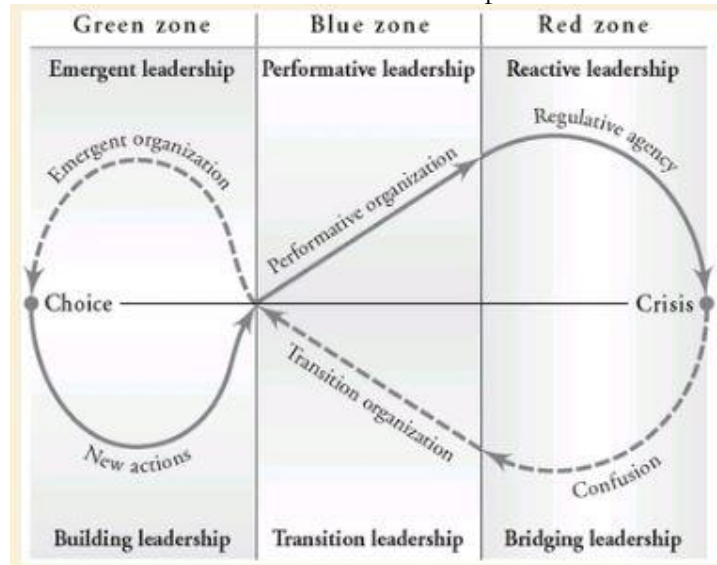
<sup>18</sup> Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, vol. 17 (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert R Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual & Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

*Exploring a new model for how God is always transforming congregations over time*

Asking what God is doing in and with the Church suggests that God continues to act as creator in the world with us. For this reason, it may be helpful to consider a change model that looks less like the discrete life of a mortal congregation and more like the continuous ongoing creation of God. Roxburgh and Romanuk offer such a model. Figure 2 illustrates their model.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 2: Three Zone Model of Missional Leadership



The authors describe how congregations begin their life with a choice. That choice establishes the core identity and purpose of the congregation. From there they start in the green zone with “new actions” that put their identity into action. From the lower left they move up through the blue zone to become a “performance organization”. In this stage, congregations continue to refine their programs and processes through technical changes. Many resources about how to improve programs and systems are helpful in this stage. Over time they move into the upper right in the red zone. By then the congregation has become regulative and stuck because its underlying identity is no longer connecting with the current generation or the context. Congregations struggling to make the transition across generations are often in the red zone. It is in the red zone that congregations find themselves in crisis and in need of adaptive change.

Rendle described the process of adaptive change in terms of a Spirit led journey. This process is illustrated in Figure 2. Rendle’s description of the adaptive change process maps nicely onto Roxburgh and Romanuk’s change model beginning at the top of the red zone and moving through “confusion” and “transformation” back to the top left where a new “emergent organization” begins. The process described by Rendle also integrates nicely with Keifert’s phases of adaptive change. Next, I will use Rendle’s model and Keifert’s phases to describe the transition from confusion to emergence.

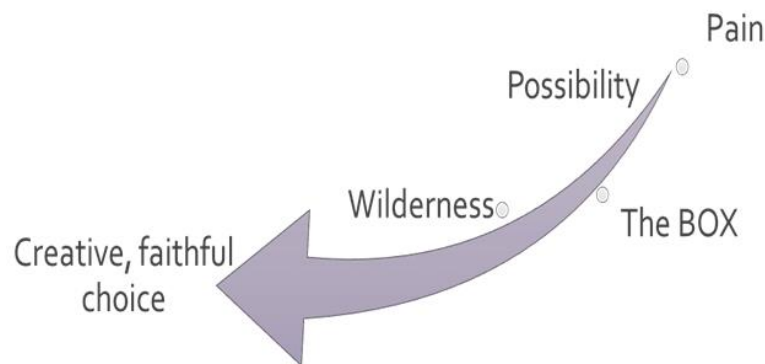
Adaptive change begins at the top right of the red zone when congregations are reactive “regulatory agencies”. Here congregations perceive pain when the difference between where they are and where they feel called to be is large enough that people are motivated into adaptive change. The crisis point is a time for decision about whether and how to move forward. As they consider the question of their survival, they are pulled forward by the possibilities they imagine. These

<sup>20</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, 17. Figure 3.1.

possibilities aren't solutions, but general values and beliefs about what could be. These possibilities may also be described as their sense of a call from God. Considering these questions requires discernment activities like those described by Keifert in the Discovery phase.

If a congregation chooses to continue, it is drawn by the possibilities past the "crisis" and into "confusion" described in the lower red zone. Here the congregation continues to listen to God, one another, and their community. It also begins to experiment. As they listen and experiment, congregations will be confronted by what Rendle calls The Box. The Box represents the limit of a congregation's imagination. Every congregation's imagination is limited by its previous experience. That is why listening and experimenting are so important. Unless the congregation reflects upon what it hears, it will not be able to use that information to challenge its assumptions and break out of its box. This is a difficult time for congregations. Inside the box is familiar, but outside the box is new territory. Breaking out of a box requires creativity, risk, and faith.

Figure 3: Rendle's adaptive change process



Once a congregation lets go of its assumptions, it moves into the wilderness. This is an uncomfortable place for congregations. It is the leader's job to hold them there so that new possibilities can emerge as God reveals them. This stage is both frightening and liberating, as people begin to experience God's agency and explore new ways of thinking and experimenting with new ideas. While in the wilderness people in the congregation continue to confront new boxes, and learn to let them go before moving on.

Through this process the congregation grows in faith as it moves through the blue zone's "transition" which coincides with Keifert's Experimenting phase. Eventually they come to the upper left "emergent organization" in the green zone. Here, there are fewer boxes and more successful experiments. After the congregation lets go of many boxes and done many experiments based on new ideas, a creative and faithful choice presents itself. The Spirit guides leaders to articulate God's new vision and identify the structures necessary to live it out. That is the end of Rendle's adaptive process, but it marks the beginning of Keifert's Visioning for Embodiment phase. The decision to adopt the new vision and structure represent the "choice" in the green zone. From here the congregation will live into that vision through what Keifert calls Learning and Growing where the cycle starts all over again.

It is only through this process of moving forward, confronting boxes, and letting them go that adaptive change can happen. Congregations cannot begin by adopting a new missional purpose without adaptive change because that purpose will be constrained by the congregation's lack of imagination. New structures cannot be adopted until a new identity has emerged through this process.



As I moved into the research, I began by considering the data from the perspective of the current ELCA's framework. I then continued by applying lessons from the new framework, creating a shift in my own understanding. I describe the methodology and results below.

## Methodology

My first research question was broad: Why is the Neighborhood Area Ministry Strategy or NAMS not leading to substantial renewal or having substantial community impact in the participating congregations? I wondered whether the apparent failure was related to the specific strategies or the way the strategies were implemented. I then considered whether the failure had something to do with the congregations themselves.

NAMS is made up of four congregations that coordinate their combined effort through a parish council. Data came primarily from leaders and members in each congregation via worship visits, six focus groups, and eighteen interviews. I asked each congregation about its identity, perception of the neighborhood, perception of NAMS, and use of adaptive practices.

Analysis took place in three stages. The first stage studied the NAMS parish council to see how it was perceived by participants, what strategies were used, and how these strategies were implemented. The parish council's practices were compared to existing theories to see if there were any obvious problems with the implementation that could explain the failure. Stage two of the analysis looked at the congregations themselves to better understand the failures in strategy or implementation that had taken place. For this phase, I used a grounded theory approach.<sup>21</sup> I realized the congregations' identities were the key phenomena. Then I explored how their identities came into being. Next, I considered how each congregation's identity interacted with other aspects of that congregation to generate strategies with resulting consequences. During that analysis, I realized the restrictions my original research question had on the analysis, and I began looking at the data using the question recommended by Branson and Martinez, "What is God doing in our community, and how can we participate?"<sup>22</sup> That revealed new uses for data that did not fit in the former model. In the third stage, I share what happened in the parish council meeting where I presented initial findings based on the new question toward the end of my visit.

## Results

The four congregations of NAMS are all considered part of the same community that I will call "Westside". All names in this study are pseudonyms. The Westside neighborhoods are adjacent to a major mid-western metropolitan area. This is a diverse community with almost no census blocks containing a majority of any single race. It is a vibrant community with many congregations from different denominations and faiths. It is also a community that struggles with both violent and non-violent crime.

The four NAMS congregations are: Our Savior, Peace, Trinity, and New Beginning. These four congregations include three distinct ethnicities. The Caucasians, mostly from northern Europe, call themselves "white". The first-generation West Africans consider themselves to be of African Descent or African American, but they do not identify themselves or refer to themselves as black. The third group consists of African American people, who mostly grew up in or around this city. Members of this group have been part of the United States for more generations than either of the

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<sup>21</sup> John W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Branson and Martinez.

other ethnic groups. I will respect their identities by calling them the terms they used themselves: white, West African, and black.

### *Phase One: Evaluating NAMS*

Interviews with members of the NAMS parish council showed that NAMS had practiced discernment, listening, experimentation and reflection. Some of their accomplishments included joint programming for congregational youth, group asset mapping, group discernment, and cross congregation-community conversation around issues of race and justice. There was also a recent activity designed to strengthen relationships among group members. Focus groups with members revealed that people in each congregation had heard of NAMS and knew of some of the things they had done. However, none of the participants described NAMS as a renewal process, and there was little apparent investment. During interviews, parish council members' descriptions of NAMS included the following: "Not effective"; "We are still trying to figure out who we are,"; "We don't really know how to be church together,"; "We aren't part of each other's lives.,"; "We're making the road by walking on it.,"; and "We don't know collectively what we're doing.,". Some pointed to a sense of difference or inequality among the churches which got in the way of collaboration. One person asked, "When do churches have to look out for their own self-interests, and when are they committed to caring about the other? Are we married to each other or dating?,". One of the pastors pointed out, "We all thought in those early meetings that working together might help us grow our individual churches.... That really hasn't happened. But wanting to get to know the other Lutheran's in the neighborhood doesn't seem to be something the congregations particularly care about."

When the NAMS process was compared to the adaptive principles and disciplines described by Keifert and Zscheile, the following technical reasons for the apparent failure became clear:

- Lack of Intentionality: Participants did not join this with the goal of congregational transformation.
- Lack of Imagination: Congregations were not thinking beyond themselves, and there was no common vision for a joint future together. If NAMS's journey to date was described by Rendle's adaptive change model, it would be placed neatly inside *the Box*.<sup>23</sup>
- Lack of Intimacy: Leaders knew each other, but congregational members did not know one another and didn't feel it was important. Some congregations had feelings of superiority or inferiority in relationship to others.
- Lack of Investment: None of the congregations had invested emotionally or materially in the project, the fate of the other congregations, or the larger community. There was a general lack of buy-in, especially at the member level.
- Lack of Internal Leadership: The parish council is chaired by Sandy who is synod staff, rather than someone who is part of the participating congregations. Many people consider Sandy to be the "keeper of the vision" and bringer of energy. The domination of the group by pastors fails to tap into ideas, skills, and energy within congregations while also missing opportunities to build relationships. All of these issues reduced buy-in.
- Lack of Integration with the Neighborhood: Nearly all the efforts to date have been about building relationships among NAMS participants. Very little focus has included the community itself.

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<sup>23</sup> Rendle.

- Lack of Inspiration from the Holy Spirit: Few people saw NAMS as something the Spirit was doing with them or a way in which they joined the Holy Spirit. Rather, they only thought of NAMS as just one more thing they were each doing.

Although these four congregations lived within 3 miles of one another, joined the synod with an earnest desire to collaborate, had a positive impact on the community, and kept experimenting and reflecting, something was keeping them from developing mutual commitments for the sake of the issues they all signed up to address. To find out why, we must go to stage two of the analysis.

### *Phase Two: Grounded Theory Results*

This analysis named the congregation's identity as the central phenomena upon which its behavior hinged. Identity dictated who was considered part of the congregation, where members imagined church taking place, and what the purpose of the ministry was. The present placement in the change cycle determined whether they thought they were healthy or not.

My findings agreed with Dougherty, that a congregation's identity had roots in the theological lens of the founding narrative. However, three of the four congregations I studied had a modifying narrative, and for two of them, the process they went through altered their identities. The following story describes the process one congregations went through to change its identity.

Twenty years ago, eighty-five years after its founding, Our Savior was at the Crisis point of the red zone in Roxburgh's change cycle. The twenty remaining members, mostly elderly, were facing closure. When they considered their future, they decided to remain open, so they could be a beacon of hope for the neighborhood that needed them. Realizing they could not do this alone, they built new partnerships and called new pastors to help them. It took years for them to move from the Confusion stage through Transformation as they repeatedly confronted the boxes that confined their imaginations. Eventually they emerged with a new identity that understands the entire neighborhood where their congregation is located is included in "us". Their purpose revolves around the residents in the neighborhood; Church happens both inside the building and out on the streets. Now they are in the Performing stage and they see themselves as thriving.

In the case of Our Savior, a decision to continue for the sake of the neighbor changed their identity to one that was missional. Now, after twenty years they are a performing congregation, participating in their vocation as part of the community. New Beginning was formed fourteen years ago as a merger between Bethel and Grace. Both of those churches were shrinking and decided to continue. However, unlike Our Savior, Bethel's decision was made for the sake of the members who wanted to find a way to stay together. This did not change their identity, it only changed the context and conditions of their ministry, so they moved through the change loop and are now back to "crisis" facing another decision about whether to continue in ministry.

Each congregation's identity combined with its current context and the conditions within the congregation to determine strategies and outcomes. Context includes the current state of the immediate neighborhood, the congregation's demographic makeup, its financial realities, the state of its facility, and the human capacity for engagement. Contextual elements are not easy to change, particularly in the short term. Conditions are things that may be changed. Important conditions within a congregation include the lay and clergy leadership, leader's perception of an active, present God, member's attitudes toward their neighbors, and their relationships with one another.

Identity, context, and conditions can be put together like a puzzle. The shape of the puzzle depends on the question asked. When I asked, "What about the congregations themselves caused NAMS to fail?" the following pieces came together:

- Our Savior’s neighborhood centered identity meant that they did not consider the rest of Westside as part of “us”. Their current thriving state combined with the formal leadership’s sense of a God who judges congregations by how much they care about their neighbors, led to feelings of superiority over two of the other congregations that they believed did not care for their neighbors as much as they did. This created concerns about partnering with others who might weigh them down. The staff-driven leadership style meant that only staff attended parish council meetings, so there was little awareness and no relationship between the people of Our Savior and the rest of the congregations.
- New Beginning’s normal red zone “confusion” is deepened by different ethnic groups with different understandings of God’s active presence and call to the congregation. Frequent transitions in pastors have added to the confusion. Because most of its members did not live in the neighborhood and many worked six or seven days a week, there was little capacity for ministry or intentional listening and discernment. Limited participation in NAMS led to a lack of relationship with other NAMS congregations. This caused them to look for their own solutions to their financial crisis rather than partnering.
- Trinity is in the red zone for the first time and is presently approaching the point of “crisis”. The facility at Trinity is failing, and the leadership is regulative, reactive, elderly and weary. The members see themselves as a big family, so they don’t understand the need to have intentional conversations about what is happening. This lack of conversation has kept them in denial. Because the lay leader’s sense of God as a rescue worker who will step in at the last minute, they do not have a sense of urgency to act. While lay leaders have regularly participated in NAMS, one of them is pessimistic, outspoken, and prone to making racist statements without knowing it. This hurt trust and decreased other congregations’ interest in collaboration.
- Peace went through an identity challenging “crisis” for the first time in 2009. This led to a new identity, centered on a progressive theology that celebrates the GLBTQ community and seeks to share God’s message of love and acceptance with all. Weak lay leadership has so far, failed to articulate their vision for the future beyond the resurrection of their past with a progressive twist. The pastor, whose strong leadership brought them this far, plans to retire this Spring. At Peace, “us” is defined by those who attend worship. Because there is a different style of worship each week, four separate congregations have formed. Many leaders are elderly and weary. There has been little participation in faith formation practices among adults. Few people at Peace talk about God, and there does not seem to be a common imagination for an active, present God even though it is often articulated by the pastor. The congregation’s endowment has allowed them to run a deficit budget for the past ten years, but leaders are not actively working to adjust the budget. Instead, they hope the money will continue to show up as it has in recent years. Some members fear traveling to the center of Westside because of the crime there. This makes buy-in for a shared ministry in the heart of Westside more difficult.

When the questioning why NAMS didn’t work, it is easy to see how the identities, contexts, and conditions of the congregations combined to make collaboration difficult. Even though there were some assets in each congregation, the nature of the question either minimized those assets or dismissed them as not enough to change the outcome.

However, when I asked the missional question “What is God doing here and now?” the data took on a new meaning. Assets within congregations that were not enough to change that congregation’s outcome, now appeared useful for the sake of the neighbor. Below is a description of some of the assets that could come together toward a vision of a Westside ministry.

- At Our Savior, the leadership development expertise, passion, financial and political capital, professional skills and spiritual energy could be used as a significant resource to NAMS if these assets were shared in humility. Their experience of moving from crisis through transition to become a thriving congregation is a story that would lend strength and courage to other NAMS congregations. Their informal leadership that is participant-driven and networked could be a source of energy for NAMS because Our Savior experiences an active, present God who is busy fighting for justice in the neighborhood. This group sees the church beyond the immediate neighborhood and is passionate about addressing injustice in the wider community.
- At New Beginning, the current state of crisis and confusion means the community is open to ideas and willing to try new things. Many congregants and leaders understand the need for a Lutheran witness in the neighborhood and want there to be a strong urban ministry even though they do not have the energy to do it themselves. The current interim pastor has strong leadership and community development skills which he has used to develop relationships with local non-profits. The large facility in the heart of Westside has great potential as a center for ministry. It may be that God is calling some members of New Beginning to start a new congregation in and for the people in the suburb where most West Africans live. If some members leave to begin a new ministry, it may make room for a more contextually based ministry at the New Beginning site. The people within New Beginning who have a heart for urban ministry could join with people from other NAMS congregations, community members, and God, to do something new and powerful. The experience of former members of Bethel, who successfully left their original building to merge with another congregation, may be useful to leaders at Trinity, as they consider what to do with their failing building.
- At Trinity, strong lay participation in NAMS gives them the relationships they need to move the process forward. Their pastor of a little over a year has built trust and is now able to guide the congregation into intentional discernment where they will confront their financial and facility realities. Their trust that God will eventually intervene may allow them to see new opportunities as God’s invitation to move in a new direction. The looming financial crisis may be the motivational push they need to make bold moves for the sake of the neighbors whom they do genuinely love even though they are sometimes afraid. Their heritage as a multi-ethnic congregation and their compassion for the neighborhood provides good potential DNA for a future ministry. If Trinity sold its building and moved to New Beginning or Peace, their genuine compassion for the neighborhood might be the seed needed to help either congregation become a stronger center for urban ministry.
- At Peace, a history of tearing down and constructing new buildings on the same ministry site leaves members open to making changes for the sake of mission to their neighbors. Their success with an experimental monthly community meal, where members both serve and eat with neighbors, is growing the missional imagination of members while it

strengthens their ties to the neighborhood. Peace has already invited NAMS members to participate in these meals on a few occasions. The NAMS secretary is a member of Peace. Her vision for NAMS and Peace along with her sense of God's quiet but active presence may allow God to use her to help Peace move toward the Visioning and Embodiment phase of adaptive change described by Keifert. She may be the one the Spirit uses to cast a clear vision and give it shape through structures. In this way, she may help lead this effort as Peace enters a new time of transition. Peace's location on the less violent edge of Westside may make it ideal for members of Trinity or New Beginning that aren't interested in active urban ministry in the heart of the neighborhood. Peace's well-articulated progressive theology is unique in Westside. This may be a gift to the rest of NAMS and the community.

While identity, context, and conditions prevented NAMS congregations from engaging in renewal as individual congregations, it is clear that God gave each of them gifts that, if used together, could produce something new in Westside.

### *Phase Three: Revisiting NAMS*

In stage three, I used the information gathered in phase two to take a big picture view asking what God was doing. This allowed me to see that right now is a Kairos moment for NAMS. When the entire collaboration is viewed in light of the current opportunities for greater participation in God's mission, one can see that many possibilities are already presenting themselves. These possibilities were made visible to NAMS leaders when participants in the parish council spent time in spiritual discernment, listened to a summary of what I had heard, and spent time reflecting upon it. When the Woman at the Well story (John 4:1-42) was used in a Dwelling in the World exercise, members recognized that their imaginations might be as limited as the woman's when she asked how Jesus could give her water without a bucket.

During my portion of the meeting I shared my observations of both helpful and harmful conditions described above. The harmful conditions were not a surprise, but many of the helpful ones were. Participants did not know that other congregations longed for more from NAMS or that each congregation had a love for the neighbor and desire to connect more deeply. They also had not yet realized how bound their imaginations were to their own congregation's walls. Naming this reality allowed the group to begin thinking about Westside as a larger community from God's perspective. Finally, they had not realized the many different ways people in each congregation understood how God interacts in the world. Talking about these perspectives allowed them to see how their own understandings of God influenced their own decision making and their opinions of one another. Learning about the Roxburgh-Romanuk change cycle allowed them to see beyond present appearance of success or failure. They could see that successful congregations today were once in a state of crisis and confusion. That allowed everyone to wonder how congregations in a stronger position now might be guides to those presently in the red zone. This led to a more collaborative attitude. Participants saw that the work they had done so far was not a failure that had wasted time and resources. Rather their work had built up relationships among leadership that were necessary as they considered moving forward. They recognized that their frustration stemmed from the fact that their imaginations were stuck in a box and that there was a way out with God's help. Sandy, the parish council chairperson, asked whether they would be willing to move forward

together exploring options for using the New Beginning facility in new collaborative ways. This sparked energy among the group which continues to move in this direction three months later.

## Discussion

The original research question asked, “What prevented NAMS congregations from renewing their congregations or impacting the community?”. Looking for the cause, I focused on the harmful conditions that, combined with imprinted identities in some congregations, to prevent them from both realizing God’s call and allowing collaboration to have a meaningful impact. There were many reasons why NAMS didn’t work, but understanding those reasons didn’t get me any closer to a solution. Ironically, by expecting NAMS to successfully implement adaptive change practices, I had applied a technical change model of evaluation to what was supposed to be an adaptive change process. My preconceived ideas about success and the steps necessary to achieve it kept me from seeing how God was using the pain of failures to spur new, more creative and collaborative actions.

When I shifted the question from, “What went wrong?” to “What is God doing?” I found the ELCA’s framework did not adequately explain what was happening while the newer one did. From the new perspective, I could see that each congregation was acting appropriately for its stage in the change cycle. I could further see the helpful conditions God had planted like seeds waiting for water. When I zoomed out and considered all the congregations together, I could see how crisis was actually an opportunity for creativity. When elements of the new framework were shared with the congregations, they, too, could see God at work in new ways, and their imaginations sprang forward. The God centered questions opened imaginations and provided life giving direction, but they were not enough. It was the understanding of what went wrong, combined with an understanding of what God might be doing, that provided congregations a realistic way forward.

What if future ELCA evaluations used the new framework to ask questions about what is happening in congregations in the context of what God is doing? Would this allow the ELCA to move from its current place as a “regulative agency” in the red zone into an adaptive change process? Would it allow the role of the ELCA’s church-wide offices to shift from focusing on accountability to focusing on learning? Indeed, the Tiger Team report provided evidence that God is already drawing the church from pain toward promise when it stated, “There is enough urgency when seventy-five percent of management is genuinely convinced that the status quo is more dangerous than launching into the unknown.”<sup>24</sup>(p.1) The framework described in this paper may provide a tool for the ELCA to use as it confronts its boxes and learns to listen to and learn from God in new ways.

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