

“Growing:” A Case Study of One Church’s Change

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Abstract: This qualitative research study presents a case study of one church that is adapting to the shifting religious landscape in the United States and overcoming the deep-seated resistance to change found in most congregations. The story of the church’s transformation is reconstructed from interviews and observation. Then, key themes that emerged in the study are explored; relevant scholarship in the fields of theology, leadership studies, and organization development is discussed; and lessons that could be applicable for other congregations and church leaders are identified. Throughout the study, attention is given to the role of leadership in the church’s change effort.

Surveying: First Impressions

Third Sunday of Advent, 2015: The church is in a small, unincorporated community thirty miles outside of the city. As I pull into the parking lot, I notice the large garden area, the animal pens, and the playground equipment behind the building. All are empty or dormant, given the season. I am met on the front steps by a young girl, maybe three years old, who has tired of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and is attempting to throw it onto the lawn for the birds to eat. She misses, and it lands on my shoe. Her mother, recognizing me as a visitor, is horrified that this sandwich-on-the-shoe incident would be anyone’s first impression of the church. The little girl is made to apologize, though for what she probably is not certain. The mother introduces herself, offers her own apology, and retrieves the sandwich. Then, as I make my way inside, she and her daughter make their way down the steps in order to increase the likelihood that a bird, and not someone else’s footwear, will be the recipient of the proffered sandwich.

The drive did not take as long as I had expected, and I am early for the worship service. A woman at the door welcomes me and introduces herself. There are a dozen or so people in the sanctuary, and they all appear to be busy with something: setting up musical instruments, putting finishing touches on Christmas decorations, holding informal meetings. Most are dressed casually in jeans; red sweaters and Christmas sweatshirts feature prominently. The pastor, to whom I have previously spoken on the phone, sees me enter and makes her way over. She envelopes me in a hug even before I introduce myself, and she invites me to the parsonage immediately following the worship service for the annual Christmas party. This explains the preponderance of holiday-themed attire.

The sanctuary itself is small and nondescript, but it has been decked out with greenery, poinsettias, and nativity sets. There is a piano, a drum set, several guitars, and a collection of microphones on the small stage, surrounding the pulpit. The communion table holds more greenery. A projection screen scrolls through announcements of upcoming events. The setting is not substantially different from other sanctuaries in which I have worshipped. I settle into one of the padded chairs that link together to form the pews, and I watch as more people trickle into the sanctuary: old, young, and middle-aged; single people, opposite sex couples, same sex couples. Small children run around enthusiastically. Several people slurp on coffee or soda from the local

convenience store chain. One woman has a dog on leash. A number of people introduce themselves and welcome me.

The service begins with music and singing, led by the band—two guitarists, a drummer, a bassist, and a pianist. The mother of the little girl who threw the peanut butter and jelly sandwich is the pianist, and the only woman in the band. The music is loud, and it fills the small sanctuary. Words to the songs are projected onto the screen. I know only one of the four songs; it has been many years since I regularly attended a church with a praise band instead of a hymnal. Still, the service feels familiar and not substantially different from all of the other contemporary worship services I have encountered.

The service has been underway for fifteen minutes before the pastor has a role. She offers a long prayer, invites the ushers to collect the offering, and then instructs everyone to hug five people. The congregation, seemingly accustomed to this ritual, willingly complies. I receive even more friendly welcomes and introductions, along with at least five hugs and several handshakes.

The service continues with more singing, a children's sermon by the associate minister, a scripture reading, and a presentation by a young man who is planning a trip to Greece to work with an aid organization providing assistance to Syrian refugees who are fleeing to Europe. The presentation is part documentary, part commercial, part sermon, and part valedictory address. He is earnest and sincere. When he chokes up, people in the pews offer him words of compassion and encouragement.

After the young man finishes and someone prays for his upcoming trip, the pastor steps into the pulpit and tells a joke. Then she begins her sermon. Her message centers on the joy that comes from knowing and loving Jesus. Her delivery is energetic, informal, and conversational. She tells a few stories. She references and quotes from the New Testament frequently. She speaks from her own experiences and the experiences of those in the congregation. People respond with laughter, "amens," occasional commentary, and answers to questions I assume to be rhetorical.

The sermon concludes, and the pastor invites everyone to make a circle around the sanctuary. Once again the congregation, seemingly accustomed to this ritual, willingly complies. Sixty or so adults get up from their seats and begin to move around the perimeter of the room. The dozen children who had gone to the basement for Sunday School earlier in the service return and join the circle. Everyone holds hands. The pastor offers a benediction, and then recorded music begins to play. The final song must be a familiar one; though the words are projected onto the screen, I am the only one who looks in that direction. Even still, I have trouble following along. The song ends, clasped hands are released, and chatter begins as people move about collecting belongings and children, tidying up the sanctuary, shutting off the sound system and projector, and making their way to the door. Several more people make a point to say hello to me and invite me to the Christmas party at the parsonage.

The parsonage is a short drive down the road from the church building. As I get out of my car, I am greeted by a small group of people having a smoke at one end of the driveway; I recall a similarly sized group doing the same at the base of the stairs when I exited the sanctuary. A woman stationed at the front door of the house introduces herself, and gives me a tour so I can find my way to the most important locations: the bathroom, the table where the lunch buffet will soon be set up, the drinks table, and the best place to eat if I wish to watch the football game. She returns to her post by the door and I make my way past the soda- and wine-laden drinks table to the kitchen. The kitchen is a flurry of activity, with dishes being taken out of the oven and the microwave and placed on the pass-through to the den, where the buffet table is being readied. Actually, the entire house is a flurry of activity: children are running around; adults are moving from one room to the next as they check the football score, refill their drinks, and inquire as to the status of the lunch buffet; groups are having animated and engaged conversations in several different rooms; Christmas music

is playing somewhere. The scene is not substantially different from the thousands of other church socials I have attended.

Lunch is ready. The pastor gets the attention of as many people as possible and says a blessing. Then the various centers of activity converge briefly as everyone moves toward the buffet in the den. I fill my plate and find a seat at a table in the converted garage, now a multi-purpose room. My lunch companions are three men and one woman in their late-20s to early 40s. They are discussing stalled educational pursuits and unsatisfactory job opportunities. After the meal, I pass by the television to see the score of the game; the local team is winning, much to the surprise and delight of those watching.

The pastor finds me to ask what I thought of the church. “We are a little crazy, in case you haven’t noticed,” she says. She tells me that what I experienced today was a rather typical Sunday, though the shrimp cocktail and wine were special additions to the luncheon because it was Christmas. Then she tells me the children are disappointed because the unseasonably warm weather has prevented the creation of a skating rink in the back yard, as has become tradition during the winter months. We talk about the church in particular and ministry in general for a few minutes until Santa Claus arrives and she excuses herself to round up the children so Santa can distribute gifts.

I decide to take my leave. As I walk through the house toward the door, I receive several expressions of “Thanks for being here” and “Come back again sometime.” The sentiments seem sincere. Outside, the group of smokers occupies their former position at one end of the driveway. I say a final goodbye, get in my car, and jot down my initial thoughts about the church who just shared their Sunday with me: friendly, welcoming, unpretentious, energetic, loud, boisterous, inclusive, rough around the edges. On the return drive, I reflect further: Neither the setting, nor the worship service, nor the scene at the luncheon was significantly different from others I have encountered. Yet the church itself was unquestionably unique. What, exactly, made it so? Same sex couples in the congregation? Wine at the luncheon? Unapologetic smokers? The number of times I received a handshake, a hug, or a welcome? The answer seems to be all of these, and none of these...

Plowing: Issue Identification, Purpose, and Method

Since at least 2000, church attendance in the United States has been on the decline.¹ Although first noted in churches affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations, the trend has expanded to include evangelical Protestant and Roman Catholic churches as well.² Meanwhile, the percentage of the U.S. population who identify as Christian has decreased significantly, and the percentage of those claiming no religious affiliation has increased dramatically.³ These findings have been widely reported in mainstream news outlets,⁴ and the trends are both well-known and much

¹ David A. Roozen, “American Congregations 2010: A Decade of Change in American Congregations 2000 – 2010,” A *Faith Communities Today* Research Report (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religious Research): 2, 14.

² David A. Roozen, “Negative Numbers: The Decline Narrative Reaches Evangelicals,” *Christian Century* 130, no. 25 (11 December 2013): 10.

³ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” A Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study Report (12 May 2015): 3-4.

⁴ For example: NPR Staff, “Losing Faith: A Religious Leader on America’s Disillusionment with Church,” *National Public Radio* online, 16 May 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/05/16/407073073/losing-faith-a-religious-leader-on-americas-disillusionment-with-church>; Nate Cohn, “Big Drop in Share of Americans Calling Themselves Christian,” *The New York Times* online, 12 May 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/upshot/big-drop-in-share-of-americans-calling-themselves-christian.html>; Denver Nicks, “The U.S. is Becoming Less Religious, Survey Shows,” *Time Magazine* online, 3 November 2015, <http://time.com/4098544/u-s-becoming-less-religious-survey/?iid=sr-link2>.

lamented among churchgoers and clergy. Churches in the United States are, without a doubt, facing challenging times.

As a lifelong church member and an ordained minister, I have more than a passing interest in the church's present condition and future health. Church has played a formative role in my life, and my vocation is inextricably tied to the church. Yet my concern for the status of the church stems neither from sentimentality nor from self-interest. Rather, it is grounded in conviction. I believe in the importance and the necessity of church. I believe in the centrality of community in the life of faith. I believe in these communities' power, and responsibility, to shape lives, confront injustice, serve the needy, welcome the outcast, and "keep alive the dangerous memory of the gospel."⁵ At the same time, I also believe if churches are to remain relevant and fulfill these responsibilities, then they must find new ways of being and doing. The former paradigms are no longer effective, as evidenced by two decades of declining attendance and increasing perceptions of irrelevance.

Churches, however, are notoriously resistant to change. While the United States' religious landscape shifted around them in recent years, churches themselves stayed essentially the same. A comprehensive survey of U.S. congregations found most churches to be impervious to innovation in their worship style, programming, and theological emphasis, in spite of the companion finding that growth and vitality are directly tied to innovation.⁶ Even more troubling for the future is that the percentage of congregations who are willing to adjust in order to meet new challenges has continued to decline.⁷

There are, however, churches that appear to be defying the trends. This case study, which takes place against the backdrop of the shifting religious landscape in the United States, the deep-seated resistance to change found in most congregations, and my own convictions about the church, focuses on one such congregation: The Growing Church, formerly known as Fairview Denominational Church.⁸ The methodology for this case study was straightforward.⁹ After contacting the senior pastor of the church to receive her blessing on the undertaking, I made a personal visit to The Growing Church for a Sunday worship service and fellowship luncheon. At that time, I solicited volunteers to participate in the case study. I later conducted in-person, individual interviews with these participants: the Rev. Dr. Robin E. Matthews, senior pastor; Linda D. Burke, Esq., a longtime church member;¹⁰ and Randy Horst, a newer member.¹¹ Interviews were recorded, with the participants' permission. After all interviews were completed, I made a second visit to the church for another Sunday worship service. What follows is a narrative description of Fairview Denominational Church's transformation to The Growing Church, an exploration of the key themes that emerged in the study, a discussion of relevant scholarship, and the identification of lessons that could be applied to other churches facing similar circumstances. I begin with the story of the church itself, as reconstructed from interviews with the case study participants and my own observations.

⁵ William C. Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 228.

⁶ Roozen, "American Congregations 2015," 9-12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ Pseudonyms are used for the church's current and former name, and for all participants in this case study.

⁹ This case study was approved by the Internal Review Board of Antioch University.

¹⁰ "Longtime member" was defined as an active, adult participant who was part of Fairview Denominational Church and experienced its transformation to The Growing Church.

¹¹ "Newer member" was defined as an active, adult participant who had joined The Growing Church since its reorganization.

Planting: Narrative Description

Fairview Denominational Church (FDC, or Fairview) did not become The Growing Church (TGC) as a result of a single change initiative. Rather, the transformation resulted from numerous change initiatives over the course of three decades. These seeds eventually yielded The Growing Church.

The Rev. Dr. Robin Matthews, age 56, has been senior pastor of what is now The Growing Church for twenty-six years.¹² She arrived at Fairview Denominational Church as a seminary intern over thirty years ago. At that time, FDC was, in her words, “a very traditional church.” Founded in 1898 in an inner suburb of a large city, FDC was an established congregation with large, impressive facilities and 350 people on the membership list. Each Sunday, several hundred people gathered for restrained worship services that featured hymns, organ music, and formal attire. Thoroughly traditional in many ways, FDC was nevertheless a rebel when compared to the neighborhood in which it was located. The neighborhood was predominantly Roman Catholic, Republican, and conservative. FDC was affiliated with a mainline Protestant denomination, its membership skewed Democrat, and the church had a history of social engagement that, at best, made it an outlier in the neighborhood or, at worst, resulted in conflict with the surrounding community. For example: Then-seminarian Martin Luther King Jr. preached at FDC on more than one occasion, drawing a large African American crowd to the overwhelmingly Euro-American church and neighborhood. Much later, in the 1990s, FDC allowed local bands to use its facilities for rock concerts when they were barred from playing elsewhere in the neighborhood; numerous complaints and several citations for noise violations ensued. Although FDC was very traditional, according to Matthews, “It was the personality of the church all along to do crazy stuff.”

After she graduated from seminary, Matthews was hired by FDC as an assistant pastor. Several years later, she became co-pastor when she married the church’s senior pastor.¹³ In 1990, she assumed the role of solo senior pastor when her husband became ill and retired, becoming pastor emeritus.¹⁴ Throughout her entire time as senior pastor, Matthews has capitalized on the church’s historical propensity “to do crazy stuff” and has broken away from the “traditional” label in order to keep pace with a changing world.

The first seed that would become The Growing Church was planted as a strategic response to a growing dissatisfaction among congregants. Like many churches within its denomination, FDC relied on a number of boards and committees to oversee the church’s ministries and governance. Also like many of its sister churches with such a structure, FDC was slow to make decisions and to move from idea to action. Matthews found that many congregants were becoming frustrated with this process, so in her first year as senior pastor she proposed a new structure that would be more efficient and effective: a single board divided into Elders, with responsibility for overall guidance and leadership, and Deacons, with responsibility for the church’s physical property and assets. While such a structure was unfamiliar to many in the church, it was received well and did serve to streamline decision-making. The change initiatives that followed, however, were more controversial and divisive.

The second seed was a theological shift. In the early-1990s, while maintaining her role as senior pastor of Fairview Denominational Church, Matthews started a Sunday evening worship service for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community a few miles away in the

¹² Participant ages and tenures with the church are noted as of the time of the interviews, which took place December 2015 – January 2016.

¹³ In her interview, Matthews acknowledged that such a career trajectory could be seen as ethically dubious, but she stated that, in this case, “it was right and good and it worked.”

¹⁴ Matthews’s husband remained in the role of pastor emeritus until his death in 2014.

city. Though Matthew's theology had at one time aligned with FDC's conservative stance on sexuality, it had more recently shifted as a result of intensive biblical study and reflection. Desiring to minister to the LGBT community and knowing it was not possible to do so through FDC, Matthews began the downtown worship service independent of the church. At the same time, however, both she and her husband, the pastor emeritus, led studies and small groups at FDC around the topic of sexuality, laying the foundation for the exploration of a different theological perspective. After several years of maintaining two separate congregations, Matthews essentially rescinded Fairview's implicit "don't ask, don't tell" policy by welcoming the downtown worshippers to FDC and by giving both new attendees and established members the freedom to be open about their sexuality. This, predictably, proved to be far more controversial and divisive than the earlier change to the church structure. For many members of FDC, the acceptance of openly LGBT persons was utterly incompatible with their interpretation of the Bible and their understanding of the Christian faith. A sizable contingent of the congregation disassociated from the church as soon as the "don't ask, don't tell" policy was rescinded. Others followed as the theological shift took firm root in FDC's identity during the ensuing months. At the same time, the church gained new members who were attracted by the welcome extended to the LGBT community. When Fairview later held a congregational vote on becoming a recognized "welcoming and affirming" congregation, the motion was unanimously approved.

The next significant seed related to the practice of worship. In the course of becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation, FDC had experienced the exodus of many longtime, stalwart members and an influx of new members, many of whom were younger than the émigrés and less steeped in traditional church culture. The hymns, organ music, formal attire, and restrained worship for which Fairview was known were not appealing to the newer members, nor were they appealing to many of the younger members who had spent their lives at the church. In response to the church's changing demographic, and in an effort to engage newer, younger members in the church, Matthews made some changes to the worship services. She eliminated hymns, added contemporary worship songs, and invited the musicians in the congregation to form a band. As a result, worship services became more informal, less traditional, and noticeably louder. This shift, according to Matthews, was even more difficult than the journey to becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation, in part because those who were adamantly opposed to the new worship style did not immediately leave the church as former disaffected members had. Rather, they remained at FDC, making their dissatisfaction known and polarizing the congregation over more than just the music. Eventually, some of these members did leave FDC, while others came around to the louder, less formal, contemporary worship style. Matthews described those who remained as "lovable, unselfish people [who] were willing to change because that's what [the church] needed to do to stay alive."

Through attrition,¹⁵ schism, and change-induced exodus, the membership of Fairview Denominational Church in the late-1990s and early-2000s was a mere fraction of the 350 people who were on the membership list when Matthews first arrived at the church in the mid-1980s. Yet in spite of its tumultuous history, FDC was remarkably healthy, according to both Matthews and Linda D. Burke, Esq., who joined around this time.

Burke, age 60, joined FDC in the early 2000s. Though she had a strong Christian upbringing, was active in a church through young adulthood, and identified as a Christian from age 19, Burke had not been part of a church for nearly twenty years when she began attending Fairview Denominational Church. The churches that shared her approach to scripture did not accept her as a lesbian; the churches that accepted her as a lesbian were not, in her words, "Bible-based." Rather

¹⁵ As noted in the previous section, churches of all denominations and affiliations were experiencing a membership decline during this time.

than hide her identity or cast off her theology, Burke elected to abandon the church, but she did not abandon her Christian faith. When she and her then-partner, now wife, adopted their son, they searched for a church in which they would be welcomed as a family. Their search led them to Fairview, which was, in Burke's words, "LGBT-friendly and Bible-believing." FDC also had solid preaching, extensive Bible studies, a conspicuous dearth of "negative, rigid people," and an overall friendly, accepting character.

In spite of its vitality in other regards, however, FDC struggled financially during this period. The small congregation was unable to maintain facilities that covered an entire suburban block and were sized for several hundred congregants who were no longer present. In the coldest parts of winter, heating bills reached \$18,000/month. The income generated from renting the chapel to an immigrant congregation was not enough to offset expenses. Because of the significant financial and human resources dedicated to keeping the church solvent and the facilities intact, "it seemed more like [congregants and staff] were running an institution, rather than being a church," according to Matthews. Meanwhile, the church had a newfound vision for environmental stewardship that could not be brought to fruition in their concrete-laden suburban neighborhood. This combination of financial insufficiency and environmental consciousness were the final seed of The Growing Church.

Recognizing they could neither maintain the existing facilities nor achieve their vision for a eco-friendly church in the present location, FDC made the decision in 2012 to sell the suburban property and relocate. Around this time, they also selected a new name. Going forward, Fairview Denominational Church would be known as "The Growing Church." The immigrant congregation who had been renting FDC's chapel for several years was quickly identified as a potential buyer of the suburban property. The process of finding a new location for what was now The Growing Church, however, was not as straightforward. Burke, the church's moderator and chairperson of the board, described it as "a treasure hunt." Over a period of months, church leaders looked at several properties in rural communities beyond the suburbs with space for a building, a community garden, and, eventually, animals. A bid was even placed on one such property, but it was not accepted. The congregation continued to wait. Then, Matthews had a dream about a house with a distinctive exterior. Matthews could not place the house, but she clearly sensed that it was in some way connected to the church's future location. When Matthews shared her dream with the church's leadership, Burke immediately recognized the description of the house: it was in an unincorporated community approximately twenty-five miles from the FDC neighborhood, and it was for sale.

Sometime in 2013, the church purchased what was dubbed "The Castle"¹⁶ when the offer on their suburban property was officially secured. While there was near unanimous support for this move, two members did leave over the decision to sell the former property and purchase The Castle. According to Burke, they felt the church had to be a building, and there was no building initially. Though it served as the parsonage and the church's fellowship hall and offices, The Castle could not be used for worship services due to zoning regulations. Instead, the church's leadership made arrangements to hold worship services in a local park or community center, weather depending, while the treasure hunt continued.

Burke was as instrumental in locating the church's new building as she was in identifying the house in Matthews's dream. In searching township records, Burke noted a listing for a church less than a half-mile down the road from The Castle. However, there was no signage on the property itself to indicate that it was for sale. Burke contacted the church's pastor, who explained that the property, which included a small church building and eleven acres of land, had recently been taken off the market because there had been no acceptable offers. The Growing Church made an offer,

¹⁶ Also a pseudonym.

not even realizing that the property was zoned for the farm stands and agricultural endeavors that were central to TGC's evolving vision. The sale closed as soon as the sale of the former FDC property to the immigrant congregation was finalized and settled. Said Burke of the church's response to the treasure hunt that led to The Castle and TGC's eleven-acre property, "We really feel that God led us there, because everything just fell into place."

The Growing Church has been organized under its new name and in its new location for over three years. Worship attendance hovers around sixty, and the church has recently embarked on a campaign to double the size of the congregation in two years' time. Since the church settled into its new identity and location, none of the existing members has left, and some of those who exited during the earlier times of uncertainty and transition have now returned. New members, who were not present when the seeds of change were planted, have also joined. One such new member is Randy Horst, age 40, who joined The Growing Church a year-and-a-half ago. After feeling there was "something missing," or some disconnect between belief and practice, in other churches he had attended, Horst visited TGC on the advice of a friend, who simply said, "It's different. You should come and try it." What Horst found was a "welcoming, growing, faithful, nonjudgmental family" that eats together every Sunday after worship services, "helps people out when they need it," accepts everyone for who they are, and is faithful to God above all else. What Horst found was a church that has, by all accounts, successfully weathered its three-decade season of change and been renewed in the process.

Sprouting: Key Themes

In interviews and in my personal experiences with The Growing Church, certain characteristics of the church stood out. In regard to its theology, TGC is thoroughly evangelical.¹⁷ Yet unlike most other evangelical-leaning churches, TGC is a welcoming and affirming congregation. Homosexuality and trans-gender identity are not viewed as incompatible with scripture or Christianity; therefore, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons are accepted for who they are, with no condemnation and no intent to change them. While this stance is not entirely unheard of among evangelical churches, it is exceedingly rare.¹⁸ Also rare among churches is TGC's commitment to environmental stewardship, or, in more theological language, creation care. The driving force behind TGC's ecological focus is the desire to redirect energies away from consuming and toward producing, and to create something sustainable: sustainable in the environmental sense of the word, and also in the sense of a church that survives while others die.

As prominent as TGC's evangelical theology, its welcoming and affirming stance, and its commitment to creation care are, however, these are simply characteristics of the church; they are not the church's identity. TGC's identity is rooted in its relationship with God, and by extension, in the members' relationships with one another. Judging from interviews with the case study

¹⁷ The National Association of Evangelicals and LifeWay Research categorize evangelicals as those who "strongly agree" with the following four statements: "The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe. It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior. Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation." NAE/LifeWay Research, "What Is an Evangelical? Defining Evangelicals in Research," National Association of Evangelicals/LifeWay Research, accessed 5 May 2016, <http://nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

¹⁸ For a recent discussion on attitudes toward LGBT persons in evangelical churches, see: Tom Gjelten and Marisa Peñaloza, "As U.S. Attitudes Change, Some Evangelicals Dig In; Others Adapt." *National Public Radio* online, 10 May 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/05/10/476651373/as-u-s-attitudes-change-some-evangelicals-dig-in-others-adapt>; and Tom Gjelten and Marisa Peñaloza, "Acceptance Grows, Slowly but Steadily, for Gay Evangelicals," *National Public Radio* online, 10 May 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2016/05/10/476651599/acceptance-grows-slowly-but-steadily-for-gay-evangelicals>.

participants and observations during my two visits to the church, The Growing Church identifies itself first and foremost as a people of God. This relationship with God was at the center of each of the seeds that led to The Growing Church. During each change initiative and at each crossroads, Matthews and the congregation together sought to be faithful in following God's leading, even when doing so took them on paths they had not imagined. TGC's relationship with God is also at the center of the members' relationships with each other. Believing they are loved and accepted by God, the people of The Growing Church strive to be loving toward and accepting of others as well. While this acceptance is certainly modeled in the church's stance on LGBT issues, it extends beyond sexuality to lifestyle and life situation as well: cigarette smoking, alcohol drinking, manner of dress, socioeconomic status, family composition, faults and foibles. Thus the presence of wine at the Christmas luncheon, people openly smoking on church property, casual attire in the worship services, the openness with which life's struggles are shared, and the occasional, unapologetic curse word in conversations with church members. Both Matthews and Burke acknowledged that such authenticity has its challenges, and that the congregation does experience conflict from time to time. However, the church has been intentional about building relationships and has learned to address conflict constructively, in order to better live as a people of God. Whether TGC's identity is something that is explicitly discussed or implicitly understood, it is evident that members do embrace their identity as a true community of faith.

TGC's firm understanding and embrace of its identity is one key theme that emerged from this case study. Leadership is another. In her role as senior pastor, Matthews models a low power distance between herself and the congregation; she considers herself a member of the church community, rather than the ruler of it. Perhaps this has contributed to Matthews's longevity with the church: her twenty-six-year pastorate is four- to six-times longer than the average pastoral tenure.¹⁹ In that time, Matthews has been able to carefully and thoughtfully lay the foundation for each change initiative through topical Bible studies and the focus of her preaching. In the latter days of FDC, she devoted three years to sermons on what it means to be oneself, how to love one another, what it means to accept others, and why the connection to nature is important—topics that she and the church explored together and topics to which she returns whenever she notices herself or the church losing sight of TGC's vision. Matthews has also established relationships with everyone in the congregation and has earned their trust, such that the church was willing to sell its 22,000 square foot suburban property and purchase a house that appeared to her in a dream. Neither this decision nor the series of change initiatives that led to The Growing Church would have been possible had Matthews's tenure been that of a typical pastor or had her leadership style been significantly different.

Leadership has not been confined to Matthews, however. As both co-pastor and pastor emeritus, Matthews's husband held a leadership role in the church until the time of his death. During the transitional period as FDC became The Growing Church, Burke provided indispensable leadership: interpreting Matthews's dream about The Castle, communicating the church's vision to others during the uncertainty of the "treasure hunt," locating the new building and property, serving as the church's moderator and chairperson of the board. Today at TGC, many people take part in leadership: an associate minister directs the children's ministry and Christian education program; laypersons have responsibility for activities as varied as planning worship services and managing the farming endeavors; and, from a polity standpoint, the Elders provide overall guidance and direction for the church. Leadership has been, and continues to be, a shared endeavor.

¹⁹ Four to seven years is a typical tenure.

The issues of identity and leadership, which emerged as key themes in this case study, are addressed by literature in the realms of theology, leadership studies, and organization development. It is to this literature and its connection to the key themes that I now turn.

Trellising: Connection of Key Themes to Literature

I begin the discussion of literature and its relationship to the key themes of this case study by exploring theological scholarship. With its identity centered on God's character and purpose, and with its intentional engagement with a changing world, The Growing Church exhibits aspects of a missional understanding of church. Originating in the 1980s and further developed in the 1990s, the missional approach to church is a response to cultural shifts coinciding with the collapse of Christendom, and to the resulting crises facing churches in the Western world. Rather than a technical response,²⁰ the missional church approach is an adaptive response that seeks to address the church's identity and purpose, and the spiritual and theological foundations of the church.²¹ From a missional perspective, church is not a place, but a body of people; a church's purpose is not institutional perpetuation, but joining in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world.²² TGC, like other churches with a missional self-identity, is a community of God's people who forgive and are forgiven, model "companionship and wholeness," strive for unity, and respond to "the whole range of needs in humanity and in creation."²³ While the word "missional" was not mentioned in any of my interviews with case study participants, these central features of a missional church were readily evident.

From a theological standpoint, The Growing Church aligns with a missional understanding of church. From the standpoint of organizational development, TGC displays characteristics of a learning organization. The model of learning organizations was developed in a similar context to the missional understanding of church: namely, in response to external factors that necessitated a change to the status quo if extinction and irrelevance are to be avoided.²⁴ Learning organizations are highly adaptable, integrated systems that exhibit a willingness to look at and respond to the world in new ways.²⁵ In a learning organization, curiosity and the desire to learn are cultivated at all levels,²⁶ and the impetus for change is derived from an intrinsic desire to align the current reality with the organization's vision.²⁷ As the case study narrative demonstrates, TGC has shown a remarkable ability to adapt in the past three decades, even during its days as FDC. In recent years, a desire to embody the church's fourfold vision—"To love God above all else. To love others. To love ourselves. To love God's creation."—has been the driving force behind changes at The Growing Church, including the change of name and location. Congregants have actively and intentionally engaged in learning how to align their faith with their daily living: becoming a community of faith, embracing authenticity, constructively addressing conflict, practicing creation care, and extending hospitality to those in their midst. There is a sense that such learning is the responsibility of all who

²⁰ For a discussion of technical challenges/technical work vs. adaptive challenges/adaptive work, see: Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), passim.

²¹ Darrel L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 81.

²³ *Ibid.*, 104-107.

²⁴ Michael J. Marquardt, *Building the Learning Organization: Mastering the 5 Elements for Corporate Learning*, 2nd ed., (Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing, Inc., 2002), xi-xii.

²⁵ Peter M. Senge "The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organization," *Sloan Management Review* 32, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

are part of the church, not just the leadership, and that to be part of TGC entails constant learning in response to new needs in an evolving context. While the model of the learning organization was developed in a corporate context and all aspects of the model are not directly transferable to a church setting, The Growing Church could, nevertheless, be identified as a learning organization from an organization development perspective.

From the perspective of leadership studies, both missional leadership²⁸ and the leadership of learning organizations²⁹ have bearing on this case study. However, I wish to focus instead on complexity leadership theory, transformational leadership, and the social identity theory of leadership, as I found these to be of particular relevance. The social identity theory of leadership posits that effective leaders are those who are perceived by the group as “prototypical,” or representing the group’s particular norms and identity.³⁰ In other words, leaders are most effective when they are seen by group members to embody who they are.³¹ Because of their strong identity with the group, prototypical leaders are granted influence, trust, and a high standing by the group.³² Because they have trust, influence, and high standing, prototypical leaders are therefore able to lead the group to innovate and to change.³³ These elements of the social identity theory of leadership are evident with Robin Matthews and The Growing Church. Matthews’s personal theology and personality align with the church’s collective theology and personality. Additionally, it was apparent from interviews and from observation that Matthews is considered, and considers herself, part of the church community, rather than over above or separate from it. She is “Pastor Robin,” but from the perspective of the congregants, she is also “one of us.” Based on her identification with the group and the group’s identification with her, Matthews enjoys a high level of trust. As a result, TGC willingly followed her leadership during times of transition and uncertainty: working to become a welcoming and affirming church, adopting a different worship style, selecting the church’s new location and purchasing the parsonage on the basis of a dream. I suggest this trust is an outgrowth of Matthews’s prototypicality, as discussed in the social identity theory of leadership.

Transformational leadership “broaden[s] and elevate[s] the interests of [followers], ...generate[s] awareness and acceptance of the purpose and mission of the group, and... stir[s] [followers] to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group.”³⁴ In doing so, transformational leadership fosters group cohesiveness, as individual members increasingly self-identify with the group’s vision, mission, and goals.³⁵ This increased cohesiveness leads to a stronger group identity, which, according to the social identity theory of leadership, further reinforces the status of the prototypical leader. A story from Matthews’s interview provides an example of this interplay between transformational leadership and group identity: When an older, male, Euro-American, heterosexual, longtime congregant stopped attending church activities because it was

²⁸ See: Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006); or Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

²⁹ See: Senge, “The Leader’s New Work.”

³⁰ Michael A. Hogg, “Social Identity of Leadership,” in *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, ed. John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010), 802.

³¹ See: Daan van Knippenberg, “Embodying Who We Are: Leader Group Prototypicality and Leadership Effectiveness,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (December 2011): 1078-1091.

³² Hogg, 802.

³³ *Ibid.*, 803.

³⁴ Bernard Bass, “From Transactional to Transformational Leadership: Learning to Share the Vision,” *Organizational Dynamics* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 21.

³⁵ Fred O. Walumbwa, Bruce J. Avolio, and Chad Hartnell, “Transformational Leadership Theories,” in *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, ed. John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010), 935.

announced that a younger, African American, gay man would be preaching at TGC following his seminary graduation, Matthews said to the congregant, frankly, “You have been at this church all this time; where is this coming from?” The man acknowledged his opposition was not in keeping with the church’s beliefs, nor was it something he was proud of; nevertheless, he was struggling to support the plan to invite the guest preacher. Matthews responded to him, “I know it’s hard, but you can rise to the occasion. [The young man] is going to preach, and you have to get over it. I know you can see things with different eyes.” In the mode of a transformational leader, Matthews challenged the congregant to adopt a different perspective and alter his priorities. She also inspired him to more strongly connect with the church’s values, for the good of the entire church.³⁶ According to the social identity theory of leadership, this congregant’s transformation strengthened TGC’s identity, which in turn reinforced Matthews’s prototypicality as a leader.

Complexity leadership theory has emerged in the past decade as scholars have sought to develop a leadership model that reflects the “dynamic, distributed, and contextual nature of leadership” in post-industrial, knowledge-based organizations.³⁷ In contrast to a top-down, bureaucratic approach, complexity leadership theory “frames leadership as a complex interactive dynamic from which adaptive outcomes (e.g., learning, innovation, and adaptability) emerge.”³⁸ The complexity leadership model incorporates three distinct functions: *administrative leadership*, which is concerned with planning and coordination of organizational tasks, such as establishing vision, setting goals, and managing conflicts; *adaptive leadership*, which is an informal “collaborative change movement” that produces new, creative knowledge and ideas; and *enabling leadership*, which serves as a bridge between the administrative and adaptive functions, allowing both to flourish.³⁹ In such a model, leadership takes place at all levels of an organization and is not confined to those in specific positions or with particular titles. Additionally, multiple people within an organization can exhibit “any or all” of the three leadership functions.⁴⁰ When viewed through the lens of complexity leadership theory, this case study demonstrates The Growing Church’s reliance on administrative leadership, adaptive leadership, and enabling leadership, and an equal reliance on multiple people to fulfill these roles. Matthews demonstrated an administrative leadership function when preaching the three-year series of sermons that explored TGC’s fourfold vision. The Deacons continually provide administrative leadership by managing the church’s physical property and assets. The church’s collective response to the many seeds that eventually yielded The Growing Church are examples of the adaptive leadership function. Matthews, too, engaged in adaptive leadership when addressing the needs of the LGBT community, first by starting a downtown worship service for that community and then by rescinding Fairview’s implicit “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Burke fulfilled an enabling leadership function by locating a property that would allow the church’s desire for environmental stewardship to become a reality. The Elders exhibit ongoing enabling leadership as they empower ideas and move them to action. The three distinct functions in complexity leadership theory, and the many people who fulfill them, together have allowed The Growing Church to adapt to a changing context and remain vibrant.

³⁶ Walumbwa, Avolio, and Harnell, 934; Phillip V. Lewis, *Transformational Leadership: A New Model for Total Church Involvement* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 6-7.

³⁷ Mary Uhl-Bien and Russ Marion, “Complexity Leadership in Bureaucratic Forms of Organizing: A Meso Model,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 20 (2009), 631.

³⁸ Mary Uhl-Bien, Russ Marion, and Bill McKelvey, “Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting Leadership from the Industrial Age to the Knowledge Age,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 18 (2007), 298.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 306-309.

⁴⁰ Nooteboom, Sibout G. and Catrein J.A.M. Termeer, “Strategies of Complexity Leadership in Governance Systems,” *International Review of Public Administration* 18, no. 1 (2013), 26.

Missional church, learning organizations, social identity theory of leadership, transformational leadership, and complexity leadership theory are but five topics found in scholarly literature that relate to the case study's key themes. There are doubtless other ways in which the themes of identity and leadership connect to literature from the realms of theology, leadership studies, and organization development. A further exploration of those connections, however, is beyond the scope of this present undertaking. Nevertheless, this case study did yield some important lessons for leadership and change that could be of benefit in other church settings. These lessons will now be explored.

Harvesting: Lessons for Leadership and Change

Lessons for leadership and change within the context of the church can be found in the case study narrative, and in the discussion of the connection between the literature and the key themes. A vital lesson from the narrative itself is that an exodus of church members during a time of transition and transformation is not necessarily undesirable. When members who do not espouse the church's new direction voluntarily disassociate themselves, there is less division within the congregation, along with more support for and engagement in the change initiative. Less of the church's time, energy, and resources are diverted from the change initiative to conflict management. As a result, the change initiative may have a greater likelihood of success. Another lesson from the narrative is that transformation may not occur as the outcome of a single, discrete initiative, but may rather result from a series of "seeds," or smaller change initiatives that together, over time, lead to a new future.

Both the narrative and the discussion of the literature highlight the importance of a church understanding and embracing its particular identity. A church has a core identity that springs from its theology. A church also has an identity that encompasses its personality, culture, and norms. Churches that understand and embrace each of these identities have a stronger foundation from which to intentionally and constructively engage change.

The literature discussion demonstrates that a pastor can, and perhaps even should, draw from multiple leadership theories and approaches in the course of leading a congregation. Over the lifespan of a church and the tenure of a pastor, certain leadership theories may be more applicable or appropriate than others.⁴¹ An effective pastoral leader should not remain blindly beholden to one model or methodology, but should draw from different approaches based on her/his strengths, the leadership task at hand, and the congregational context. An effective pastoral leader should also recognize that she/he is not the only person who provides leadership within a church. A final, and crucial, lesson from the literature discussion is that church leadership is distributed among clergy and laypersons, and between formal structures and informal networks. A church that embraces this reality and learns to navigate its inherent complexity may be better poised to contend with the deep-seated resistance to change found in most congregations.⁴²

Gleaning: Benediction

Third Sunday of Easter, 2016: I exit my car, walk past the few smokers in the parking lot, and enter the building to receive warm welcomes from those gathered near the door. No one remembers my name, but they do all recall that I have worshiped with the church before. As I enter the sanctuary, the pianist is walking by. She stops to say hello and asks me to remind her of my name. I

⁴¹ This is not to imply that all leadership theories and approaches are applicable to pastoral leadership. On the contrary, there are some that would most certainly be inappropriate in a congregational setting or from a theological perspective.

⁴² I am indebted to The Growing Church, the Rev. Dr. Robin Matthews, Linda D. Burke, Esq., and Randy Horst for their participation in this case study, which made these lessons possible.

do, and silently wonder if she remembers the sandwich-on-the-shoe incident. I recognize several people from my Advent visit, though most names escape me as well. I notice that the chairs have been rearranged and the communion table is set for the Lord's Supper.

I am not early this time, and the service begins shortly after I take my seat. The band begins to play, the congregation stands, and, on the projector screen, the words to the first song appear. Today, I recognize most of the songs. After the music, the pastor offers a prayer, the offering is collected, and the ritual greeting is performed: hugs to five different people. I smile; I knew to expect it this time. Only six girls come forward for the children's message this week. They giggle and talk with the associate minister as he delivers the sermonette.

A member of the band reads the day's scriptures. The pastor steps into the pulpit and tells a joke. Then she begins her sermon. Her message centers on eternal life. She outlines four points, drawing from scriptures throughout the New Testament. The congregation is quiet and attentive. I am not the only person taking notes. As her sermon concludes, she invites those who are in need of prayer or who are uncertain about their salvation to join her at the front. She steps from the pulpit, off the stage, and kneels in front of the communion table. Her head is bowed, her eyes closed. One by one, half a dozen people, from among the day's congregation of forty or so, make their way to the front and kneel beside the pastor. The pianist begins to play and sing softly. After a short while, the pastor stands. The others who were kneeling follow her lead and do the same. The pastor hugs each person gathered at the front. Some from the pews step forward to also hug those who had been kneeling. There are a few faces with tears. As people make their way back to their seats, the pastor offers a prayer.

I am suddenly aware of the time. The service has gone longer than I anticipated, and I have a rapidly approaching ministry commitment in the city thirty miles away. As the prayer ends and the pastor transition the service to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, I slip out the door and toward the parking lot. A few other people are outside. They wave, say goodbye, and tell me to drive safely.

I imagine the remainder of the service as I begin to drive back to the city: The return of the children from children's church in the basement. The breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. The proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection until he comes again. The circle around the sanctuary. The song that closes each of the church's worship services.

We were made to love and be loved
 But the price this world demands
 Will cost you far too much
 I spent so many years just trying to fit in
 Now I've found a place in this circle of friends

In a circle of friends we have one Father
 In a circle of friends we share this prayer
 That every orphaned soul will know and all will enter in
 To the shelter of this circle of friends

If you weep, I will weep with you
 And if you sing for joy the rest of us will lift our voices too
 And no matter what you feel inside
 There's no need to pretend
 That's the way it is in this circle of friends

In a circle of friends, we have one Father

In a circle of friends we share this prayer
 That we'll gather together no matter how the highway bends
 I will not lose this circle of friends

This circle of friends...⁴³

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