

“Leading Church Change with End and Means Integrity: Three Turns Toward the Reign of God”

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For me as a pastor, what keeps me going, through really tough times, is that we’re doing real, real ministry. We have the opportunity to do that, to really make a significant witness for Christ in this community.”

- Sheila Smith-Dugan, Hilltown Christian Church

This paper derives from practical theological research in three congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), ones that observers identified to me as having made significant progress in “congregational transformation,”¹ that is, in turning from their self-preoccupation and decline, toward outward-reaching change, giving them a new lease on life as church. The practical theological research goals of the project were: (1) to learn from the pastors, church members, and associated denominational leaders what had actually changed within the lived ecclesiologies of these congregations, or to clarify: what had changed about their on-the-ground, everyday practices and beliefs about church, from *before* their transformation efforts to the present, (2) to more clearly define congregational transformation and the end to which it ought to be carried out, plus (3) how to optimally practice it.

As part of its five years of intentional transformation, River Ridge Christian Church, located in a small midwestern city, left their downtown location to become nomadic,² renting space in the surrounding neighborhoods and communities, as would a new church just getting started. Among other steps, changing its worship style to an

¹In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), this phrase denotes the work of congregational revitalization or redevelopment, and is one of four objectives of the denomination’s vision for the year 2020.

²Bill Easum and Pete Theodore, *The Nomadic Church: Grow Your Congregation Without Owning the Building* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

entirely contemporary one has turned its demographics younger, increased worship attendance, and diversified the congregation economically. It remains predominately Caucasian. Its statement of vocation is: “Praise God, Serve Others, Grow in Christ.”

Across eleven years of transformation efforts, Cityside Christian Church has remained in its low-income inner city neighborhood, within a major metropolitan area of the Midwest. The predominately African American congregation took extraordinary measures to heal its internal relationships, turned from protecting itself to reaching out to its troubled neighborhood as its “heart,” and increased from 20 to 130 in worship. They, too, have become somewhat younger and more diverse economically. As vocation statement, Cityside recites: “We are Disciples of Christ, preaching, teaching, and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.”

Hilltown Christian Church has been in transformation for twenty years. Located within a struggling urban village, next to a major metropolitan city of the Northeast, this predominately Caucasian congregation decided to remain in place and become interracial, more mirroring its surrounding community. In so doing, it has also responded with multiple out-reaching projects to the increasing youth violence in its town. The ratio of people of color to Caucasian in the congregation has grown to 40/60, reaching 50/50 in its leadership. It has held its own financially, but average attendance numbers have decreased slightly. There are three marks in its vocational statement: “Interracial, Intergenerational, and Into Jesus.”

All three pastors are seasoned clergy in their fifties. Dave Hartley at River Ridge would call himself and the congregation theologically “Evangelical to Moderate.” John Curtis at Cityside thinks of himself and his congregation as “Conservative or Evangelical

- leaning.” Sheila Smith-Dugan at Hilltown considers herself and the congregation theologically “Moderate to Liberal.”

Despite their marked diversity, before transformation, *all* of these local churches were struggling with severe numerical and spiritual decline, suffering from varied forms and degrees of conflict and angst, and demonstrating very precarious states of institutional viability. As *different* as these clergy leaders are from each other, all three employed the exact same language to describe their pastoral vocations and longings; they said that they had wanted to do “real ministry.” This was their motivation and the magnet that drew and attached them to their respective congregational sites, as compromised and confused about church as these congregations had become.

When I probed, the River Ridge pastor said that “real ministry” meant being able to assist in the transformation of individuals – “changing lives” – and growing the congregation. The Cityside minister commented that his heart’s desire was to do “real ministry, where people’s lives were changed” and for the congregation to become “a change agent” in this community. Pastor Smith-Dugan’s definition is “really meeting peoples’ needs, where they’re really hurting,” to which she added provoking a change of life for individuals. “Real ministry” also connotes the high value that these pastors put on authenticity and the integrity of belief and practice. They were looking to enact coherence between the gospel, ministry, and being church.

I resided with church members in each locale and conducted ethnographic observation in these congregations, in the end discovering “leadership” to be the most prominent theme in the transcribed interviews and focus groups.³ Similarly, when people

³In the project’s master code list, “leadership” ranked number one, used to describe text 504 times. This header code was augmented by 443 related, subsidiary codes.

hear their transformation stories, they frequently ask me *who* are the leaders and *how* did they go about leading this change. Upon analyzing the changes that these three congregations accomplished, I indeed discovered more about the leaders and how to lead this change than I knew before. However, as I reflected ecclesialogically upon these same findings, an even more basic compound question emerged: *What is* congregational transformation, *why* ought congregations attempt revitalization, and to what end?

This paper for the Academy of Religious Leadership does take up *who* the leaders were and *how* their transformation efforts to new life unfolded, but argues that the desired telos of revitalization efforts (the “to what end” question), ought to be the fulcrum for and definition of faithfulness for the leadership of such change. My dissertation research discovered this end embedded, even though below conscious awareness, in the changes enacted and the leadership exercised in each place, and concluded that the reason to work at transformation should be *ecclesiological*. More precisely, *what* occurs through the “dance” of an ecclesial renewal process is that these practicing, local circles of faith become faithful as church, a result that also fills out the concept of “real ministry.” This paper will name this ecclesial target and propose a coherent process of change. It will also profile a few of the practices of transformative leadership lived out in these sites, which enabled congregational culture to shift from an ecclesial identity before transformation in which the church was an end in itself, created primarily for the members and their needs, to an ecclesial identity of outward-reach, through which lives are changed, community needs met, and the good news of the reign of God manifested.

Who Were the Leaders of Congregational Transformation?

Not surprisingly, I found that the clergy were powerful and essential leaders for church change in these case study congregations. Their own respective ecclesiological visions inspired and infused the unfolding cultural change in each place, and congregational morale relied heavily upon the minister's willingness to serve this local church through extremely challenging times, and upon his or her confidence concerning the potential future of the congregation. One of the five surfacing themes concerning leadership was the need for "strong clergy leadership." Unpacked, this designation referred to marks such as: a called leadership with authority, commitment for the long haul, being innovative, motivational, contextually astute, patient, strategic, willing to learn, and spiritually anchored in God. The preferred style of ministerial leadership for achieving revitalization was directive and collaborative at the same time,⁴ with the clergy person exercising good judgment as to when to step forward and step back, to press people and to allow circumstances to play out on their own. Thus, as Swidler and others have concluded, the pastor needs improvisational skills to lead church change.⁵

In conjunction with this first finding was the second theme of "strong *lay* leadership," encompassing a variety of lay roles in the congregation, from elders and deacons, to teachers and small group leaders. Their strength as lay leaders showed forth in multiple traits, including a sense of their giftedness and their call to ministry, a willingness to nurture other leaders, the ability to listen and cultivate communication in the congregation, and trusting and keeping in tune with God. Integral to lay strength was the third theme of developing and educating those leaders, especially when, prior to transformation, the laity had complained of being weary, few in number, and no longer

⁴This finding corroborates Jackson W. Carroll's in *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 131-140.

⁵Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51:273-286.

fulfilled in their duties, rendering the recruitment process a chore. Equipping lay leadership entailed uncovering and nurturing their spiritual gifts, finding ways for the laity to exercise these gifts in real ministry inside and outside the congregation, and changing to a gift-based nomination process. Still other strategies involved creating multiple, small learning groups for adults, and teaching corporate discernment practices within regular meetings.

The fourth ideal, consistent with the Disciples' emphasis upon the ministry of all the baptized, was clergy and laity working together cooperatively, as a "team." All three congregations reported that, before transformation, they had been plagued by ongoing, significant tensions, if not out-right conflict between lay and pastoral leaders. During transformation, by comparison, they had learned to work in partnership, negotiating leadership in a kind of a dance with each other. Reflecting upon how this relationship is lived out at Hilltown, Belinda, a licensed minister there, summarized: "The leadership works together; we're not insecure in terms of our ministry and our callings; we don't compete; we complete." These transforming congregations consider leadership to be a shared activity,⁶ exercised in respectful relationship between lay and clergy members, and aimed at reaching consensus, "alignment," or "being in one accord" on their way to the congregation's aspirational vocation statement. Leadership is relational to these congregations, and their transformation comes about in relationship. Mark, the board chair at Cityside described it thus:

There was a period when we, as a body, were scattered. Everybody was doing what they wanted to, when they wanted to, and we've come to work as one body. We're all trying to meet on one accord. We accept people as they are for whatever opinions they have. We are all individuals with different ways of doing things. We come together, and

⁶Nancy Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 326, and Jackson Carroll, *God's Potters*, 129.

we try to reason things out to work for the benefit of this church, of the body. We've learned to deal with each other's emotions, each other's hang-ups, each other's habits, and I think that's where the transformation came in.

The fifth surfacing theme is these congregations' affirmation that God/the Divine is leading their changing life and witness as church. Participants called this loving Transformer, "God," "Jesus Christ" or "Holy Spirit," mixing these names freely, and implying that all three holy manifestations were in relationship, even dancing with each other, guiding the congregational bodies into the future. In contrast to their secularized style of being and practicing church before, they now believe that God very actively gifts, calls, and equips all Christians and each congregation into service toward God's purpose. Plus, they now practice spiritual disciplines in order to connect to and corporately discern the divine direction. While human leaders did indeed lead in these congregations, it was understood that the clergy and laity together were living into the experience of God as the *actual* leader of the ecclesial dance and as the agent of transformation.

Why and to What End Ought Congregations Carry Out Congregational Transformation?

When I asked parishioners the question, "Why should congregations do transformation?" the diverse answers clustered into five reasons, which also amount to five, often overlapping, *telo*i: (1) to be what God wants us to be as *church*, (2) to grow numerically in order to *survive*, (3) to serve *God's mission*, (4) to *change lives* and make disciples, and (5) to change because the *context* is changing. There are many nuances to this data point, but to be faithful *church* took the top spot across the totals. Looking more closely at each site, comparing and tracking on this ecclesial motive according to the number of years that each has been laboring at transformation, I found that the longer the congregation was actively engaged in this change process, the more likely their members

were to identify their motive and goal ecclesially. Conversely, the *survival* motive declined the longer the congregation was moving along a trajectory of transformation. In other words, this finding supports the larger argument of the dissertation that what changes about congregational culture is ecclesial in nature, that the ministry of congregational transformation needs a telos and this ought to be ecclesiological. This finding on motive, along with other evidence in the study, also suggests that members become more ecclesially self-conscious and motivated the longer they are in the process of transforming; their understanding of what church is supposed to be becomes less preoccupied with just “us” and meeting our needs, and more about bearing outward-reaching witness. As Janet, a former board chair at River Ridge put it: “*Then*, we were like, ‘Hey! We have our community and this is all we really need,’ but *now* it’s like, ‘No! This isn’t really what God has put us on this earth for.’” Thus, I labeled the transformation of lived ecclesial identity that occurs over time in such congregations as one from “Church for Us” to “Church for Witness.”

Of course, this major change in congregational self-understanding begs further theological reflection: for instance, witness to what? I put the details of what actually changed in their corporate beliefs and practices into conversation with biblical texts that participants themselves cited and with documents from Disciples tradition concerning the church.⁷ Parishioners across all three agreed that one of the beliefs that had changed from their earlier secularized way of living church was that now they perceive God actively involved in their ministry, working out a purpose and plan through them – calling,

⁷ Isaiah 43-44, Acts 1:1-14, and Revelation 1-3. The primary documents consulted were: *The Christian System* (1835, revised 1839) by Alexander Campbell, *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (1969), a collective of *Words to the Church on Ecclesiology* (1979), on *Witness, Mission and Unity* (1981), and *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today* (1998), *The 2020 Vision* (2001), and *The Disciples of Christ Identity Statement* (2009).

pointing, empowering, and leading through the Holy Spirit into the future, and they have begun to change their practices, adopting spiritual disciplines and varied forms of prayer, in order to seek this divine leadership. This, their new reality fits with the biblical theme of the countercultural, reigning God, doing “a new thing” within the three texts, which is also the gospel message *of* Jesus Christ, that is, what *he* preached, the gospel *about* Jesus Christ, and the gospel *in* Jesus Christ. According to the three biblical passages and the *2020 Vision* of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the church is to be witness in word and deed to this good news in each new time, an end goal that is always in process as the church apprentices through the Holy Spirit. To encapsulate, I concluded that the theological reality to which the church bears witness in word and deed is *the reign of God happening: the good news of Jesus Christ*.

When leadership for change, then, is equated to doing “real ministry,” and the end of this ministry is ecclesial faithfulness, in other words, becoming a Church for Witness, and this, in turn, is defined as bearing witness to the reign of God, which is the good news of Jesus Christ happening now, the corollary is that congregational leaders should allow themselves to be led by the Divine in order to inspire and instill the same into congregational culture. Expressed differently, as leaders follow the lead of God, practice this reign (verb), and even dance to God’s leadership, they show forth the very good news of the living, loving, leading God that the church is called to embody. I offer that witness to the reign of God was the theological and ecclesiological rationale that anchored and directed, even subconsciously, the change of church that these three bodies of believers experienced, and that the change that the leaders wanted to bring about in the church matched the manner in which they led the change, giving a satisfying end and

means integrity to their leadership and coherence for the real ministry of congregational transformation. Finally, transformative leaders do well by leading with this “What” and “Why” in their “How.”

How can Church Leaders Practice Congregational
Transformation with End and Means Integrity –
Becoming Witnesses to the Reign of God?

The selected scripture passages and the denominational documents certainly reiterate the idea that the nature of transformation and its leadership is relational. It is a relationship with God/Jesus Christ/Holy Spirit that transforms leaders and churches into faithful witness-bearers in their respective contexts. But these theological resources do not offer more detail than this, nor give a full theological account of *how* this dance-like relationship brings about such change.

I turned to the process-relational theology of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki for help to this end, as hers is a contemporary and feminist voice, sufficiently compatible with the guiding framework of the countercultural nature of the reign of God as a verb, and of the church in process of becoming what it is called to be. Indeed, the metaphysical philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, from which Suchocki does her constructive work, puts forward the process of “becoming,” also known as “concrecence,” as explanation of how change takes place in relationship to God’s “primordial vision.” He posits that the process unfolds in four stages: prehension, selection, satisfaction, and superjectivity. To over-simplify: creation’s basic units, which he called “actual occasions,” first of all lean in to “feel” the aim coming from God, next sift and sort through its past realities and future possibilities to select an option, the aim of God among them. It then incorporates

this chosen aim into itself, thereby becoming a *new* actual occasion that organically thrusts itself into the immediate future to influence the next cycle of becoming.

Suchocki condenses Whitehead's rhythmic stages to three and gives them more accessible labels: receive, integrate, and give.⁸ To more closely correspond to what I observed in the case studies, and to better match the nuances of transforming congregational life along an ecclesiological telos, I renamed the three to discern, integrate, and bear witness. To put it in more concrete terms, these transforming congregations started changing in the right direction by: (1) discerning the lead of God for their specific vocational call in the world, (2) an ecclesial vocation into which they lived over time, intentionally changing and integrating their beliefs and practices in relationship to the surrounding context, thereby becoming a new ecclesial culture, and (3) organically giving witness in word and deed to this active leadership of God in the here and now. More succinctly, congregations change into witness-bearers to the reign or lead of God happening in the present by *discerning* God's lead, *integrating* it, and *bearing witness* to their experienced good news of God's leadership.

Three Turns Toward the Reign of God

During my research sojourn in each of the three congregations, I noticed occasions at which virtually the whole congregation, or a significant group within it, would collectively pause, pay attention, and then shift their shared direction, a behavior in meetings or worship that resembled the amazing synchronized movement of a flock of flying birds. I attached the tag "turning" to this phenomenon, later connecting this practice to that of repentance in the bible. In addition, I saw that these transforming

⁸Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 41, 82, and *The Fall to Violence*, (New York: Continuum, 1994), 55.

congregations practiced “turning” to the lead of God upon at least four kinds of occasions, around four types of ecclesial tables.

The first is learning tables. Guided by equipped leaders, congregants would gather to learn more about the faith and share wisdom about living with faith in the real world, sometimes turning together to a consensus of insight and action. The second occasion is around decision-making tables. The leaders of all three congregations worked to shape their board and committee meetings into experiences of “worshipful work,”⁹ to collectively discern God’s guidance on various matters, as contrasted with their prior pattern of voting up or down on personal preferences, and sometimes falling into division and destructive forms of conflict. The third is community tables. The congregation would send representatives to the tables where the concerns of the wider community, its needs, aspirations, and decisions, were the agenda, and/or host events to which the community was invited, in order to nurture a relationship with its “neighbors” and to offer itself in solidarity or assistance. The fourth is the Lord’s Table. In weekly worship, these congregations gathered around the Lord’s Table, turning to each other and its Host in order to share communion in Christ, to align with, and abide in the reigning One.

Turning to Discern

Many questions call for spiritual discernment during the early stages of a congregation’s transformation from “Church for Us” decline to “Church for Witness” revival. Leaders of change usually take up goals such as coming to terms with the past, healing from conflict, redeveloping lay leadership, including spirituality and giftedness, raising awareness about the surrounding context, and discerning the particular vocational

⁹Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1995), Chapter 1.

call of God to the congregation for its future. In each case the clergy leaders called together and nurtured a small steering group of lay leaders for transformational oversight and “deep listening,” as the practice was called at Hilltown. Eventually, the pastor and this group spearheaded the discernment by different methods of what would become the guiding congregational statement of identity and mission. In the case of River Ridge, the pastor took initiative. Building upon former congregational statements of purpose and condensing them, he cast the new vision to the congregation’s acclamation. The minister at Cityside involved the entire worshipping congregation over the course of several Sundays in crafting its consensus statement of identity. At Hilltown, a visiting consultant projected two of its three marks of vocational vision based upon what he saw the congregation being and doing, and the pastor, along with the lay elders, added the Christological rationale, “into Jesus.” In all cases the congregation’s adopted vocational vision served as the ‘north star’ to their on-going transformation.

Turning to Integrate

“Living into” God’s vocational vision was the next major turn for the three congregations. It was crucial that this statement be understood and woven into all aspects of church life, including the congregation’s missional relationship with the wider community, so that they were *practicing* this vocation and sponsoring an enduring change of culture. The clergy and lay leaders shepherded numerous changes within twelve areas of church life,¹⁰ helping the congregation to integrate new beliefs and

¹⁰The twelve areas are, in alphabetical order: (1) the congregation’s attitude toward change; (2) its identity, purpose, mission, and vision – vocation; (3) institutional viability and numerical growth; (4) leadership; (5) quality of congregational life and interpersonal relationships; (6) relationship to God – practice of spirituality; (7) relationship to the church beyond the congregation; (8) relationship to the context; (9) structures of organization and decision-making; (10) teaching and learning; (11) welcome, hospitality, and diversity; (12) worship, music, and preaching.

behaviors, and to let go of others over time, until this new “theopraxis”¹¹ took hold and became second nature. One of the key leadership practices during this phase was “defining for” and “against” different features of congregational identity and practice. The pastor was the primary framer of whether a church practice or belief was in keeping with the congregation’s vocational vision or not. He or she might initiate a change in culture toward becoming more welcoming, for example, by defining *for* welcome as a theological value through sermons and/or by actual practices of greeting before and/or after the worship service. Reinforcement *for* welcome might also come as the leaders defined *against* exclusionary beliefs and behaviors toward visitors. This defining for and against was another example of congregational turning, turning *away* from one mode of identity and action, and *toward* God’s leading as they had discerned it.

Turning to Bear Witness

Two kinds of witness to the leading of God emits from a transforming congregation: that which is intrinsic to its new theopraxis and that which is intentionally out-reaching and amplified. In the first case, as congregational culture shifts from decline into new life, observers can notice the changes and the overall difference, interpreting it however they will. An example of this at Cityside was that the pastor brokered reconciliation meetings between the congregation and its former ministers with whom there had been unresolved ill will. When these meetings resulted in mutual forgiveness, the word spread in the larger community and the congregation’s reputation greatly improved.

¹¹I have constructed the term “theopraxis” to point to the manner in which theology and practice combines in a congregation. Corporate beliefs and ecclesial practices, like strands, weave together in a congregational culture, creating a unique and hopefully integrated cultural whole. I found that during the course of intentional transformation, a congregation’s theopraxis changes, producing an overall cultural shift from “Church for Us” to “Church for Witness.”

In the second case, the congregation takes special steps to engage the context in a manner that coheres with its statement of vocation. For instance, toward its vision of “serve others,” River Ridge reached out to the women’s shelter nearby. Church volunteers made repairs to its facility, eventually offered transportation to residents that wanted to attend worship, and later invited them into the women’s small group ministry. All three sites also gave more time and attention to getting the word out through new technologies and networks about who they are and what they are about, amplifying their witness abroad. Another related trait of transformative leaders is that they keep abreast of the changing landscape and continually ask after the needs of the surrounding community. Sheila Smith-Dugan described with pride that Hilltown’s leaders now come to this congregation in order to do significant ministry in the life of this community, seeing their church as a “Mission Church/Mission Outpost,” and in a further example of “turning,” she periodically asks: “Are we still doing the things that this community needs us to do the most, and that the Lord needs us to do the most in Hilltown?”

The continual turns of congregational transformation, in its three-fold, repeating rhythm, take on the character of a congregational dance with the Divine, the members with each other, and the congregation with the world around. “Real ministry,” then, is a group dance, and while the leaders cannot control it, with the cooperation of the dancers, they can *all* be led, experience the transformation of the reign of God first hand, and become its living testimony.