
LEADING FROM ABUNDANCE

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Abstract

This article proposes a biblical and theological framework for sustainable, life-giving leadership in the context of crisis, challenge, and unprecedented change in North American ecclesial life. It argues that leading ought to flow from a spirituality of abundance in contrast to problem-saturated orientations and scarcity mentalities. This spirituality, as demonstrated in the Gospel of John, is characterized by acceptance of paradox, trust, and contemplation in community. Mindfulness, active mourning, and listening circles enable us to lead from abundance, as illustrated by a congregational case study and insights from interpersonal neurobiology and Nonviolent Communication.

Abundant Community

Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church (LNPC) is one of those mainline Protestant city congregations that were thriving in the mid-twentieth century.¹ It was five hundred members strong with a growing endowment, young families from the neighborhood worshipping together, and vibrant, civic-minded programming. At the turn of the twenty-first century, membership had dwindled to sixty; thirty people, mostly post-retirement, sat in the few front pews. The church council struggled to discern whether or not to call a full-time pastor to lead them. Rather boldly they asked, Is God done with us? Is there more for this congregation to do in its service of God and neighbor? Or is it time for hospice-care; that is, time to acknowledge the impending death of this congregation as it currently exists and to care for those

¹ I am grateful to the pastor, Kara K. Root, and session of Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church for granting me permission to share their story and even more so for inviting me to serve as their parish associate for three years. The interpretation of LNPC set forth in this paper comes from my life together with them.

who are left? Perhaps these questions sound fear-filled, but in fact they were faith-based, born of trust in the providence of God.

Deciding that God's work among them was not yet finished, LNPC called a full-time pastor to lead them into new mission. Wisely, this pastor spent her first year leading the congregation in a process of further discernment. If indeed God was not yet finished with them, then what was God's ministry in their midst? What was God up to at LNPC? And how might they participate in that? At one level, this explicit focus on God's ministry (in contrast to their own activities and practices) was new to LNPC. No pastor had asked the missional question in quite this way. But at another level, the members of LNPC knew that they depended upon God for their very sustenance.

Church members gathered in small groups in order to answer these questions. They studied the changing shape and function of congregations in the contemporary religious ecology. They prayed and listened to one another. As they asked questions about God's ministry in their midst, they also wondered, What are we good at? What makes us who we are? What have we been doing for decades that sustains us and contributes to life? Essentially, they were undertaking an appreciative inquiry and focusing on their assets rather than deficits.²

Three words emerged throughout this year-long process: *worship*, *Sabbath*, and *hospitality*. LNPC's communal life flowed from worship, Sabbath, and hospitality, yet not entirely in ways that resonated with younger generations. So they committed to living into and innovating these core practices. The most significant change was worship, though this was intricately related, of course, to how they entered

² LNPC engaged two basic pastoral theological tasks in this discernment process. As Andrew Purves writes, "Pastoral theology is understood first of all as a theology of the care of God for us in Jesus Christ. . . . Only secondarily, derivatively, and above all, participatively, as we shall see, is pastoral theology an account of the pastoral work of the church." *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004), xviii.

into God's rest and how they cultivated space for newcomers who were quite different from themselves. Rather than their regular worship structure, they agreed to gather for worship two Sunday mornings with Presbyterian liturgy and two Saturday evenings with contemplative music, prayer, and a fellowship supper. On fifth Sundays, they would leave their building and take worship to a residential treatment program for children and adolescents located down the street from them. Consequently, kids who had been in trouble with the law were invited to encounter a God who desires them.

For the past five years, LNPC has lived into this change and others like it. At times, members and leaders have disagreed with one another outright. An early conflict threatened to undo their growth, but listening, creativity, and clarity of mission prevailed. LNPC has attracted a small but statistically significant group of new members: a handful of LGBT persons who had been previously wounded by the church, a few Evangelical Christians seeking greater spiritual freedom, and a high-level CEO and his family who longed for more intimacy and less comfort than that offered in their previous large, well-to-do church. Two of these new members have gone on to seminary, and one is now an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The congregation became an online destination of sorts for post-Evangelical and Presbytermergent ministry,³ though the congregation itself doesn't self-identify in these ways. It has contributed to ministry in the presbytery, offering Sabbath workshops and Nonviolent Communication training for transforming conflict.

³ Post-evangelicals tend to reject certain beliefs and characteristics associated broadly with Evangelicalism, such as biblical inerrancy, social conservatism, and modernist epistemologies. Post-evangelicals may associate with the emergent church movement in the United States. Presbytermergent was a movement in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) from 2007 to 2014 that sought to bring about creative reform from within the denomination, akin to approaches advocated by the emerging church movement. Its presence in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was short-lived, with other ecclesial networks recently taking its place.

At the same time, LNPC continues to face difficulties that are not easily resolved. Their endowment is in decline. The clerk of session position (arguably the most influential position on the church council) has remained open for more than a year. The fact that people have learned not to volunteer for church activities that deplete their energy is a happy yet challenging shift; previously, over-worked members left the church for extended periods of time in order to reenergize. The leaders and members of LNPC continue on. When discouraged, they place their attention on signs of Christ's ministry among them. They remind themselves of the promises of God, while recognizing that they do not control how and when those promises come to pass.

Interpreted at one level, LNPC depicts in bold colors the numerical decline of the mainline Protestant church in North America. It appears to be one more part of a dying institution. Its resources, if defined solely by numbers, are diminishing. Anxious foreboding about this kind of decline echoes throughout Protestant denominations, seminaries, and their accrediting agencies. In some denominations, church planting and revitalization programs become desperate attempts to reverse this tide. In this regard, LNPC is distinct. It embodies a particular spirituality and leadership dynamic devoid of anxious foreboding. Their leaders haven't enacted desperation-filled stewardship drives. Their witness in the world points, paradoxically, to a God of abundance. They lead, at least implicitly, from participation in life. As the rest of this article explores, such leading from abundance resonates with the God of the Gospel of John. Put another way, LNPC leaders implicitly demonstrate a Johannine hermeneutic and a corresponding spirituality of abundance. When placed in conversation with insights from the social sciences, this spirituality suggests habits and practices for leading from abundance.

The God of Abundant Life: A Johannine Hermeneutic

"I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). These words appear near the mid-

point of John's Gospel in Jesus' discourse about the good shepherd. Thieves, bandits, and wolves threaten the sheep. Hired hands abandon them. Jesus, by contrast, not only protects the sheep but also gives them abundant life. Following this discourse, John presents what might be considered the controlling center of his Gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus.⁴ Here Jesus astonishingly claims, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (11:25–26). Jesus gives abundant life because he *is* life, and he *is* life because of his intimate union and communion with God the Father, the creator of life.

Abundant life is a defining thread running throughout John's Gospel, evident at its center, yet also at its beginning and end. In the prologue, John introduces Jesus as the creative word of life who fills all things with light, grace, and truth (1:1–18). In the second-to-last chapter, John reveals his reason for writing this Gospel account: "that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing *you may have life* in his name" (20:31; emphasis mine). Add to this some of Jesus' miracles and self-declarations unique to this Gospel: he turns water into an abundance of fine wine (2:1–12); he is the bread of life (6:35); he gives living water, an eternal spring that gushes up to eternal life (4:10, 14); he is the way, truth, and the life (14:6). In brief, *life* expresses the fullness of God in Jesus Christ and therefore the fullness of God's gift to humanity. As one commentator put it, "life is the comprehensive concept of salvation which contains everything that the Savior of the world, sent by God, brings to man [sic]."⁵

⁴ For a brief summary of the scholarly assessment of John 11 as the "zenith" of the Gospel, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 149–51.

⁵ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), quoting Mussner, 13. Similarly, Marianne Meye Thompson writes, "The God of the Gospel of

John's portrayal of the God of abundant life is thoroughly Trinitarian, and as such, depicts a particular understanding of relationality. Father, Son, and Spirit exist in a life-giving and life-sharing union and communion of the greatest possible intimacy and integrity. It is a *koinonia* relationship. Here *koinonia* conveys far more than its typical English translation, "fellowship." *Koinonia* refers to an ontological relationship of indwelling, coexistence, co-inherence, participation, and partaking in the life of another.⁶ Father and Son indwell one another through the Spirit. Theirs is a love relationship marked by mutual knowing, giving, communicating, animating, and sending.⁷ Believers participate in this very life. They exist in and with Christ and therefore in and with one another for the sake of love. This multidimensional *koinonia* is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Jesus' high priestly prayer:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (17:20–23).

Jesus dwells in the life of God, and through the Spirit, believers dwell in the life of Jesus and therefore in the fullness of divine life. As Sandra Schneiders, professor

John is the God of life." *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 230.

⁶ For a definition of *koinonia*, see George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 257. For an ecclesiology of *koinonia*, see Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small-Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), chapters 4–5.

⁷ While these qualities of Trinitarian life appear throughout John's Gospel, see especially the passion discourses in chapters 14–17.

emerita of New Testament and Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology in the Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley, California), writes, “In this passage is summed up the whole message of the Gospel. Its point is to bring those who contemplate the Gospel into a union with Jesus which will plunge them into the depths of God’s very life, the life Jesus shares with his Father.”⁸

Participation in life abundant is not a static reality but rather a dynamic existence. It occurs once and for all (by virtue of Jesus’ cross and resurrection), and it occurs again and again in the here and now (by virtue of the Spirit’s continuation of Christ’s work). In other words, we do not possess life abundant like we possess some external object, position, or title. We depend upon it, accompany it, discern it, join it, share in it, and wait upon it. We indwell this abundant life of God and are indwelt by it. Jesus’ ministry is predicated upon this kind of dynamic union and communion with God; hence, his words and deeds are determined by an ongoing discernment of divine action. Note this refrain throughout the entire Gospel of John: Jesus does what he sees God doing; he speaks what he hears God saying; he goes where he sees God going.⁹ Likewise, so it will be for the Holy Spirit, who, as Jesus says, “will speak whatever he hears” (15:13). The same is true for believers who participate in divine life; Jesus will send them, just as God sent him (20:21).

This means that participation in abundant life is a gift. It is received from God through Christ by the Spirit. Human beings cannot control life, in spite of all our attempts to do so. Our best congregational practices do not guarantee the flourishing of life in the here and now, though they might position us to receive it. As discussed in the next section, such reception of this gift often occurs in the context of its opposite.

⁸ Schneiders, 15.

⁹ See John 3:32–34; 5:19–21, 30; 7:16; 8:16; 8:38; 12:49–50; 14:10, 31; 17:8.

A Spirituality of Abundance

The Gospel of John presents a particular spirituality, elements of which are present in the leading of Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church and which are particularly relevant to ministry in the midst of change, conflict, and crisis.¹⁰ In short, this spirituality incorporates the reality of death and expresses itself in trust and contemplative receptivity.

The Paradox of Abundant Life

Jesus' promise of abundant life is surrounded by an acknowledgement of much that negates life. Powerful forces—symbolized by thieves, bandits, wolves, and hired hands—seek to return God's good creation to nothing. To drive home this point, the Gospel follows this discourse with the untimely death of Lazarus. His life is snuffed out too soon. To make matters worse, Jesus is physically absent when Lazarus dies, and quite intentionally, for upon hearing about Lazarus's illness, Jesus stays put (11:6). Consequently, Mary's grief is doubled. She mourns her brother's passing and her Lord's absence (11:32). Moreover, Lazarus will one day die again. Even Jesus, the one who is life, will die.¹¹ As Jesus weeps with Mary, so he will wrestle with his own impending death (12:27). For death is no friend.

At the same time, death is not the definitive reality. Rather union and communion with God, and therefore participation in life, is the definitive reality in spite of all signs to the contrary. Jesus is painfully absent and eternally present at the same time. Both the absence and the presence are real, though the latter ultimately redefines the former. Those who embody a spirituality of abundance live from this recognition. They do not deny, minimize, or trivialize suffering and death—whether that is the death of a loved

¹⁰ Schneiders distinguishes among the “history [that] lies behind the text,” the “theology [that] is expressed in the text,” and “the spirituality [that] is called forth by the text as it engages the reader” (151). I am following her interpretive move here by delineating the theology of abundance and the spirituality of abundance.

¹¹ Schneiders, 159.

one or a congregation. They mourn but not as those who have no hope, because they see and name life planted in the center of death. As Schneiders explains, “Jesus’ delay, like his physical absence before the *parousia*, is real; and the suffering it causes is real. Jesus does not rebuke the sisters for their reproaches, either at their brother’s death or at Jesus’ absence. What he demands is that they, and all the disciples, realize and believe in his intimate real presence even in and through his physical absence.”¹²

Trusting in Abundant Life

Trust is the cornerstone of a spirituality of abundance. Martha trusts that Jesus will raise her brother on the last day (11:24). She grasps the future moment of abundant life. Then Jesus, through his words (“I am the resurrection and the life”) and deeds (the raising of Lazarus), reveals that this future breaks into the present. Like Martha, Jesus trusts in God as well. He believes that God protects all those whom God loves. None are forsaken; none are annihilated. “I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one” (10:28–30).

Trust, therefore, is the sure knowledge of being held in the love of God. When we trust, we know that we are not alone at an existential level. It is true: we are but dust and to dust we shall return. However, we come from the dust of the cosmos, which unites us with all creation, and that dust is animated by the breath of God, which unites us with eternal life. We exist in multidimensional *koinonia*, an interlocking series of intimate life-giving relations with God, all humanity, indeed all creation. Nothing—not our mistakes, our imperfections, our failures, our brokenness, or our sin—can tear us away from this union and communion. Consequently, we can accept our finitude whenever we bump up against it. Those who trust in God lead by taking risks, innovating, and sharing power. Craig Dykstra, former

¹² Schneiders, 156.

vice president for religion at Lilly Endowment, puts it this way:

Faith involves accepting and receiving a liberating grace that truly frees us from every enemy to abundant life. Faith means freedom, freedom at last to give up the anxious and impossible task of keeping oneself from falling. It means freedom to turn from oneself as the source of one's own life and hope, freedom to give up the struggle to control everything by one's own power. It means freedom to be at home in the presence of a loving God.¹³

Abiding in God cultivates trust. Jesus said to his disciples:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. . . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love (John 15:4, 9–10).

To abide in Christ is to dwell in him, to cling to him, and to obey him. We abide in God by remembering God's promises; by digesting scripture—chewing on it over and over so that it nourishes us; by immersing ourselves in God's story. And we abide in God by contemplating God's truth, beauty, and goodness.

Contemplating Abundant Life

Contemplation places us in a posture of receptivity—a kind of surrender to life, a dependence upon its presence, and a waiting for its emergence. It calms our jittery minds and attunes us to God's still small voice. It creates the inner quiet necessary for noticing, naming, and participating in abundant life, even in the context of its opposite.

¹³ Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 21.

In the Gospel of John, the beloved disciple exemplifies this “contemplative receptivity.” He appears three times in the text (chapters 13, 20, 21). On the night before Jesus’ arrest, the beloved disciple reclines near Jesus, leaning on him literally and figuratively. Intimacy, tenderness, and trust mark his connection to Jesus, not unlike Jesus’ relationship with God. As Schneiders argues, “The Beloved Disciple, who rested on the bosom of Jesus (13:23 and 21:20), is the Fourth Gospel’s paradigmatic embodiment of contemplative openness to the revelation of Jesus, just as the Word made flesh who dwelt in the bosom of God was the incarnation of God’s self-revelation to the world (see 1:1, 18).”¹⁴

The beloved disciple knows the heart of God. He senses Jesus’ struggle, lament, and longing, because he abides near Jesus. Noticing that Jesus is “troubled in spirit,” this disciple asks who will betray Jesus, and Jesus responds honestly (13:21). Contemplative receptivity fosters the capacity to hear the cries of God and to know the heart of God. This knowledge, which comes from deep listening, guides mission.

Contemplation and action are twin moments in ministry. The Gospel of John prioritizes the former over the latter. The beloved disciple and Peter respectively represent contemplation and action. In chapter 20, they run to Jesus’ tomb after hearing from Mary Magdalene that it was empty. The beloved disciple outruns Peter and arrives first (20:3). He is the one who, upon seeing the unwrapped linen cloths, believes (20:8). Peter, too, sees these cloths, but he is not the one identified as having faith (20:6–7).¹⁵ The Gospel of John makes it clear that this is not yet belief in Jesus’ resurrection, begging the question: What is this faith? Schneiders explains, “Believe is used in the absolute in v. 8b. The absolute use of ‘believe’ suggests primarily an active spiritual state of personal adherence to Jesus the revealer and readiness for

¹⁴ Schneiders, 205.

¹⁵ Schneiders, 181–188.

whatever he will do.”¹⁶ In other words, contemplative receptivity entails a readiness to see and hear Jesus as the living, dynamic minister. It eschews any tendency to determine ahead of time what Jesus will or will not do in the here and now. Thus, static principles of ministry are ruled out, as are flat applications of church programs from one context to another.

Chapter 21 solidifies the Gospel’s emphasis on the contemplative moment in leadership. Here again the beloved disciple first identifies Jesus, declaring to Peter, “It is the Lord!” (21:7) He gives the definitive witness, because knowing God flows from loving God. Schneiders concludes:

Contemplative receptivity to the life-giving revelation in Jesus is the source of the church’s proclamation, which grounds both the faith of the disciples and the church’s mission to the world. In this final chapter, the evangelist reaffirms the priority of love as the basis of spiritual insight that has been assigned to the Beloved Disciple throughout the Gospel but now clarifies the relationship of church leadership, recognized in Peter, to this primacy of revelatory contemplation.¹⁷

Communal Spirituality of Abundance

Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church embodies this spirituality of abundance. Most noticeably, their Saturday evening worship services foster contemplative receptivity. Harp music, extended silence, group *lectio divina*, inclusion of a labyrinth, artists painting on a canvas backdrop during the sermon: these kinds of activities encourage imaginative engagement with Scripture and patient waiting upon God.

Decision-making and relational habits emerge from trust at LNPC (though trust does not mean the absence of doubt, as the Gospel’s inclusion of Thomas also attests). A small

¹⁶ Schneiders, 187. In making this argument, Schneiders draws upon Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1972), 602.

¹⁷ Schneiders, 205.

group of congregants threatened to leave the church in response to the changes in worship. They had signed on, literally, to a covenant asserting their intention to live into new patterns of worship, Sabbath, and hospitality. Saying “yes” and living into that yes, however, were two different matters. Conflict arose. In response, the church council established listening circles (described below) so that unhappy members could share their concerns fully, and happy members could express their appreciation of the same changes. At the end of this process, a couple of people still decided to leave the congregation. Others threatened to leave. (It is important to recognize that with such a small congregation, a loss of only a few members would be statistically significant.) The leaders did not become reactive. They did not expend energy trying to persuade or compel members to stay. Instead, the pastor offered to assist these members in finding a community of faith where they could worship God and have fellowship with others in ways consonant with their deepest values. If these members rested securely in God’s hand, then surely the church could bless them as they departed. Besides, God’s life flourishes in many places.

Implicit in this approach to the departure of members is an awareness of the simultaneity of presence and absence. Presence and absence are bound together in our experience of God and one another in the here and now. Jesus’ departure is real. His absence is keenly felt. Yet his presence is mediated to us through word, sacraments, and fellowship with each other. In an analogous way, Christians from all times and places belong to one another and participate in one another’s lives even though they are physically separated from each other. This is the mystery of the communion of saints. Thus, when church members leave due to conflict or changes in life circumstances, those who remain can trust that they still belong to and with these people. They might mourn the loss of proximity but still celebrate the reality and gift of connection.

Practicing Abundance in Leading

The spirituality of abundance present in John's Gospel has been lived out implicitly at Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church through a number of practices intended to contribute to the flourishing of human life, particularly mindfulness, mourning, and attunement. Emphasized in social neuroscience, interpersonal neurobiology, and Nonviolent Communication, these practices enhance the capacity to lead from abundance. They support present-moment discernment of and participation in life. Mindfulness and attunement especially position us to receive contemplatively the cries of God and our fellow human beings. They nurture the *koinonia* from which abundance springs. Mourning supports the capacity to live with the paradox of abundance.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the capacity to place our attention on some aspect of experience in the present moment.¹⁸ We choose to notice that which has been outside of our conscious awareness. Mindfulness, therefore, is purposeful. It does not entail an "emptying of the mind," though it may involve a relinquishing of certain habitual patterns of thought. When we are mindful, we notice (at a meta-level) the thoughts, reactions, feelings, and so forth motivating our actions. We notice nonjudgmentally, which creates the inner spaciousness to choose differently. Such noticing also shifts our inner experience, for instance, so that calm begins to assuage fretful ruminating. The practice of mindfulness, in this sense, might be critical to leading in the midst of perplexity and pain. When our best ideas fall short and the situation calls for unimagined change, we need serenity and focus.

Likewise, mindfulness can direct our attention externally. What do we pay attention to outside of ourselves? Too often, leaders notice that which is problematic, missing, or

¹⁸ See John Kabat Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

wrong. They expend energy on fixing problems, filling gaps, and righting the world around them. Theologically speaking, this is a focus on death rather than life. And death begets death, often in the form of depleted energy, depression, and burnout—symptoms that are all too prevalent among clergy. As Gary Gunderson, professor and senior-level health-care administrator, writes, “Our imagination is so filled with resisting death that we hardly know what else to think about. Fear crowds everything else, leaving no room in our imagination, no logic other than simple resistance, and no virtue other than tenacity.”¹⁹

The Gospel of John repeatedly places attention on life, abundant life to be precise. When Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman at the well, she, as well as the disciples who stumble upon this interaction, is focused on that which divides and destroys: religious, ethnic, and gender bias. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (4:9). Jesus encourages her to place her attention elsewhere, that is, on the gift of abundant life: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is saying to you ‘Give me a drink’, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (4:10). Still, death claims her imagination. She focuses on what is lacking, on the impossible rather than the possible: “you have no bucket and the well is deep” (4:11). Jesus persists until she begins to desire life, even in nascent form: “give me this water” (4:15). Attuned to life, she can finally hear Jesus’ self-revelation: “I am he [the Messiah]” (4:26). Her reception of Christ reorients her life and her place in her community. She becomes the witness to the one who is abundant life, and it has a ripple effect: “Many Samaritans believed in him because of the woman’s testimony . . .” (4:39).

At Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church, leaders and members together have practiced mindfulness by asking new questions, questions that are saturated with life rather than

¹⁹ Gary Gunderson with Larry Pray, *Leading Causes of Life: Five Fundamentals to Change the Way You Live Your Life* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2009), 26.

death, possibility rather than impossibility. They have sought to discern signs of life in their community of faith by asking: What do we do well? What gives us joy? How have we been contributing to the world? Where is life springing up in our midst? This curiosity about life even has enabled them to interpret the open clerk of session position as more a cause for celebration than consternation.

Mourning

Abundant life often emerges in the context of its opposite (that is, death), and a spirituality of abundance includes mourning. Communities of faith experience many losses, especially when facing adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges call for radical change in ecclesial life. Unlike technical challenges, for which we know the answers, adaptive challenges tend to elude us. They require “experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community” along with changes in “attitudes, values, and behaviors.”²⁰ These kinds of changes bring loss, and as Ronald Heifetz and Marty Lansky suggest, “people do not resist change per se. People resist loss.”²¹

Today’s leaders need to be able to mourn and to support their communities of faith in doing the same. Leading from abundance, however, calls for a particular type of mourning that emerges from Nonviolent Communication, called “transforming the pain of unmet needs into the beauty of needs.”²² In this practice, persons clearly identify specific actions, behaviors, or systemic changes over which they are grieving. They experience the accompanying anger, fear, sorrow, perplexity, and so forth. They may lament before

²⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business Press, 2002), 13.

²¹ Heifetz and Linsky, quoted in Jaco Hamman, *When Steeples Cry: Leading Congregations Through Loss and Change* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 35.

²² For more detail, see Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 136–153.

God and one another. They fully grieve any unmet needs, such as needs for security, belonging, meaning, inspiration, continuity, and so forth. Then they place their attention on the presence rather than absence of these needs. (Here again is the paradoxical interplay between presence and absence related to the hermeneutic of abundance.)

This practice of mourning requires a significant shift, from a scarcity mentality to an abundance mentality. Needs are not perceived as deficits but rather as qualities that contribute to the flourishing of life. All human beings have physical, emotional, and spiritual needs that serve life. Understood in this way, needs are gifts more than sources of pain and frustration.²³ Needs also are rich, multivalent, and full of meaning. Though we hold them in common—that is, we all need peace, health, order, reliability, purpose, understanding, and so forth—we experience needs in light of our own experiences, personalities, and cultural backgrounds. Finally, needs, in this mindset, are not attached to any one person, group, decision, action, or strategy. Needs ultimately exist independent of those and, at least theoretically, can be met in a variety of ways.

When conflict arose at LNPC, the leaders practiced precisely this kind of mourning. They identified multiple stimuli of their grief: (1) multiple congregants did not share their complaints publicly; (2) some congregants publicly equated the new worship format with a lack of care for children in the congregation in spite of the fact that an actual creative worship space had been established in the sanctuary so that children could worship alongside their parents and grandparents; and, (3) some repeatedly claimed that the church was no longer home to long-time members. Church leaders took time to vent their own frustration and disappointment. They mourned the fact that many of their needs were unmet: needs for open communication, collaboration, accurate representation, trust and belonging, to name a few. Then they focused their attention on the ways in which these needs contribute to life-giving

²³ Hunsinger and Latini, 28.

community. They experienced gladness for their commitment to these qualities. They recognized the inherent beauty of these needs. And they remembered that these life-giving qualities have been fulfilled already in Christ, the source of life. Being connected to Christ and to the life-giving power of these qualities shifted their focus. Consequently, they could listen with new ears to those who were disgruntled.

Attunement and Listening Circles

Attunement is a bedrock of life-giving relationships. It includes listening, but it goes beyond that. It is the alignment of mental states through emotional communication.²⁴ It creates connection and a sense of knowing and being known. When we are attuned to others, they “feel felt.” They know that they exist in our mental world, because we share in their emotional state.²⁵ Attuned communication is dynamic. We participate in its flow. We do not control it. We open ourselves to being changed by it. For these reasons, collaboration and community formation require attunement.

Listening circles provide structure for attuned communication in congregations. Listening circles emphasize interdependence, connectivity, and consensus decision-making. They can serve a variety of purposes, such

²⁴ Recent discoveries in neuroscience, particularly the role of mirror neurons and empathy in human health and well-being, emphasize the importance of attunement in interpersonal and communal connections. See Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2012); *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007).

²⁵ Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, 94. Siegel goes on to explain the importance of feeling felt: “Feeling felt may be an essential ingredient in attachment relationships. Having the sense that someone else feels one’s feelings and is able to respond contingently to one’s communication may be vital to close relationships of all sorts throughout the lifespan. Such attachments foster the interactive sharing of states, which facilitates the amplification of positive, enjoyable emotions and the diminution of negative, uncomfortable emotions,” 272.

as mutual understanding, conflict resolution, and discernment in times of transition. Circle participants aim to hear and speak to one another fully with the support of a facilitator, who uses structured questions to guide their conversation. Agendas are dropped (at least ideally) in order to foster connection, collaboration, and the adoption of new ideas. Agreed-upon actions emerge organically from the attunement that occurs in and through structured storytelling. Participants relinquish attempts to persuade, win, and debate and instead adopt a posture of exploration and curiosity. They trust life to emerge on account of the One who is both the source of life and the mediator of their relationships.

LNPC's pastors commissioned a group of elders to facilitate listening circles in response to their congregational conflict. The goal of the circles was to increase mutual understanding and to discern God's ministry at LNPC. The circles progressed through three phases: listening, clarifying, visioning. The first phase provided an opportunity for congregants to listen to each other and for the elders to listen to each of them about recent changes in worship. The second phase provided an opportunity to raise questions about these changes and for the elders to respond, if able, with clarifying information. The third phase focused on the relationship of these changes to the vision of the church.

The first two phases included an opening question followed by empathy. This empathy helped circle participants and facilitators attune to each other. In the first phase, the facilitator asked, "What has been your experience of worship since we switched to a schedule of two Saturday night services and two Sunday morning services each month and fifth Sunday services at St. Joe's?" After each person answered this question, the facilitator (elder) responded by saying, "So what I have heard you say is _____. Is that accurate?" In the second phase, the facilitator (elder) asked, "What questions do you have about the changes that have been made?" In this phase, the facilitator answered questions and then asked, "How do you feel now that you have heard me share this new information?" In the third

phase, the facilitator (elder) began by sharing how recent changes were connected to the vision of the church. Then the other participants were asked, “Can you share with me what you heard me say about this?”

During each circle, the facilitators (elders) took notes and then reported what they had heard at the next church council meeting. Members of the pastoral staff helped translate these reports into needs (again, understood as qualities that contribute to the flourishing of life). They discovered, not surprisingly, that the changes in worship contributed to spiritual inspiration, rest, and beauty for most congregants. For a handful of others, the lack of a Sunday morning worship service twice each month meant an inability to worship (due to Saturday work schedules) and a loss of continuity and fellowship for others. As a result of this attunement, elders who had previously been irritated with the latter group of “complainers” now interpreted them with greater compassion and understanding. They gladly added a Sunday morning educational hour to be led by those who missed it. Then a final step solidified this attunement. Church leaders reported back to the congregation what they had heard in the listening circles, reiterated the reasons for changing the worship service structure, and announced the new Sunday morning educational hour.

In conclusion, mainline Protestant congregations in the United States today face a plethora of challenges: changing demographics, competing plausibility structures, and loss of financial and social capital, to name a few. The future seems uncertain, and anxious attempts to reverse this so-called decline and to handle its inherent ambiguity abound. Leaders, however, have options other than fretful, controlling management of these changes. One of these options is leading from abundance—discerning the presence of God’s life in unexpected places, mourning its absence, cultivating trust, becoming mindful, and practicing attunement. Perhaps as a result, like the Samaritan woman, we will drink deeply again and again from that perpetual wellspring of life, who is Christ, and find ourselves buoyed up by his abundance.

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