



Little Did We Know: A Leadership Fable

TERRI MARTINSON ELTON AND LIZ EIDE

It was a snowy Sunday morning in February 2020. Anxious for my first day of internship, I, Terri, was up early when my supervisor texted me. Pastor Liz was sick, but the morning would continue as planned. Pastor Jodi Houge would preach and do the baptism and the internship committee would install me. With that unexpected news, I made my way to Lutheran Church of Peace (LCP) in Maplewood, Minnesota.

Jerry Johnson, a long-term member, greeted me with a hearty welcome and the key to my office. I explored the building and found people everywhere: people preparing the meal for the annual meeting, organizing books for the Foundation fundraiser, assisting the baptismal family, welcoming people into the building, and shoveling the sidewalks. No one missed a beat with Pastor Liz sick. There was a buzz in the building as Pastor Jodi arrived. We connected briefly, and soon it was time for worship.

After worship, people headed to brunch in Montgomery Hall, the large gathering space across from the sanctuary. You could feel the energy as people greeted each other and shared stories. After getting food, each took a seat at one of the round tables. I followed the crowd and sat at a table near the front. It was not long before our table conversations quieted and our attention was drawn to a calm

Times of crisis and change can provide fundamental lessons in the nature and purpose of Christian communities. Two Christian leaders provide a reflection on the leadership lessons they and their parish community learned together during this year of pandemic.

young woman at the podium. Melissa, the council president, called the annual meeting to order. As the budget was approved, new council members elected, and the congregation updated on their renewal process, Kathryn, Melissa's two-year-old daughter, moved freely around the room. Several times Kathryn got a bird's-eye view from up in her mother's arms. It was clear LCP respected Melissa's leadership *and* loved Kathryn.

My heart was full as I drove home. Their spirit was warm and inviting, their energy contagious, their ministry humble, their eyes set on the future. This congregation was actively discerning God's leading. They had asked hard questions and were ready to change. Grateful for their past, they knew the future would be different. It was a memorable, and odd, morning. Little did we know what the coming months would bring.

A CALL TO RENEWAL

For two-and-a-half years I, Pastor Liz, have served LCP as a redevelopment pastor. When I came to LCP in February of 2018, they were one-quarter of the size they had been ten years before. Acknowledging that they could no longer be who they had been, they found themselves without a direction and with a decision to make: *Was LCP a viable ministry or was it time to close?*

The church council had launched a team in summer 2017 to explore two questions: *Is LCP vital?* and *Is LCP viable?* Vitality was about their feasibility as a ministry and viability, about their ability to resource the ministry. They conducted a study in partnership with the wider church and local synod that reviewed financial reports, analyzed demographics and the community, talked with people in the congregation, and held a stewardship campaign. The study revealed they were vital, but not viable in their current state. With the assistance of a skilled interim pastor, they applied for and received grants from the ELCA national office and the Saint Paul Area Synod. This support and encouragement was invaluable, and soon I was called as their redevelopment pastor.

I love being a redevelopment pastor. Renewal ministry fits my gifts, passions, and relational style of ministry. I have been ordained for nineteen years, and have served as solo pastor in a small congregation and on a multi-pastor staff in a megachurch. I loved the people and embraced the joys and challenges of each congregation. It was clear from the minute we met that LCP had incredible clarity around the challenge they were facing. They had tried every strategy available to make confirmation better, grow VBS, and improve worship. But doing things *better* wasn't solving their problem. It was time to do something *different*, something *new*. And while they hoped the "new thing" would come alongside the old, they were determined to do whatever was needed to be vibrant again. Who would not want to be pastor to such a congregation?

Before my arrival, LCP's leadership signed on to the Year of Renewal, a process led by Director of Evangelical Mission, Rev. Justin Grimm. It convenes congregations who have committed to a process of listening for and acting on God's

direction for God's church. It starts with three great listenings that inform and shape everything: listening to *God, to the internal community, and to the greater community*. LCP's council embraced these listenings by spending thirty minutes of each meeting reading through the book of Acts, praying together, sharing faith stories, and inviting the Holy Spirit to lead our process. That time transformed us and became the foundation for our renewal.

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LCP also did a listening campaign, making listening our 2018 Lenten practice. The synod provided the framework and training for twenty listeners, who conducted eighty-five one-on-one listening sessions (in a congregation with an average of seventy-five people worshipping each week). Bob Traun, the head of the renewal team, said this about the campaign: "Listening is hard work. Not only is it administrative, training people and dividing up names among the listeners; it also includes bringing the listeners back together and sorting out what you heard." He's right. The happy remnant, as the congregation referred to themselves, believed they knew everything about each other. Yet as we engaged this listening practice, we learned there were deep wells in each other's lives that listening allowed to bubble to the surface. Not only did these sessions foster deeper relationships; they also named what mattered. It was amazing.

After the listening sessions, we harvested the learnings. The concerns people named were placed on sticky notes on the wall in Montgomery Hall. What emerged was a picture of people's longings. People cared about their adult children who no longer were involved in church. They wanted a church community where people were welcome and felt they belonged. They wanted this congregation to be a place where doubts and questions were welcome. They cared about the greater community—the neighbors they knew and the ones they did not yet know. And they wanted faith to matter outside the walls of the church. These sticky notes paved a path to our future.

The learnings were distilled into LCP's values, ministry priorities, and vision, which we claimed and celebrated as a congregation in the fall of 2019. The vision of LCP today is to "Build a brave community that includes the sure and the searching and the skeptical, spills outside the walls of church, and shares the joy of Christ." Every word was carefully chosen and became vitally important as 2020 unfolded. The values of Boundless Joy, Engaging Community, Radical Hospitality, Bold Innovation, and Faith-Centered Lives describe the character and aspirations of LCP's community.

Listening continues today as an ongoing spiritual discipline. Learning to listen and receive what another has to say is radically different from trying to recreate church from fifty years ago or imagine a new program. Listening in this way was transformational and refocused our attention on people, not programs and worship style; it allowed us to see renewal as *being* church in a different way and not *doing* church in a different way.

THE FIRST TEST

Winter 2020 brought the first test. Music is critical to LCP's identity. Singing is a way LCP proclaims their faith. Twenty-two years ago, they invested in a used electronic organ, and now that organ needed repair. Jennifer Parker, our amazing staff musician, came to LCP shortly after I, Pastor Liz, arrived. Her leadership is amazing. Her gracious spirit, compassionate heart, and talent as a jazz musician have expanded the music ministry and grown the choir and band to the point that they no longer fit in the choir space. *And* Jen does not play the organ, so the organ was sitting idle. Our leaders started wondering: *What would happen if we removed the organ from the choir space? Could the additional space be used differently for this growing ministry? Is spending money on repairing the organ the most faithful and brave step?*

Bob Traun recalled how the decision unfolded. He said, "There are people, myself included, who think the organ is part of what we think about when we think about church on Sunday, particularly in a Lutheran church. It is our tradition. But as we think of the generation that we're trying to attract, or rather generations, the organ isn't going to bring them here." Deciding what to do with the organ "was a test of our willingness to change . . . we said we want to renew, but are we willing to change?" The organ, he admitted, is not our future. Therefore, after prayer and conversation with the council and key stakeholders, we announced our decision to decommission the organ in worship one week, and it was gone the next. No one missed a beat.

I credit the community for moving forward with this decision. After understanding our *why* for removing the organ, there was no need for further discussion. In fact, once the organ was removed, people were excited about how this newfound space might serve our growing music ministry. This decision signaled that we had gotten somewhere in the renewal process. Little did we know what challenges we were about to face.

BECOMING A BRAVE COMMUNITY

I, Pastor Liz, had felt an urgency in finalizing our vision, values, and ministry priorities. In March 2020, as the pandemic began, I realized why. The first six weeks of the pandemic were a blur. The environment was so fluid, with daily press conferences unveiling new realities, and there were so many decisions to make. Some

decisions, like closing the building, were made for us. Other decisions, like how to worship, were messy and left up to us. It was unclear how long this disruption would last, and there were no agreed-upon best practices. As a small congregation with limited resources, we were imagining and testing ideas on the fly. Our newly discerned identity became the compass that guided us. It provided a framework for making decisions that best suited us. *Brave* was a word we kept coming back to. As one unprecedented decision led to another, we just kept asking, “Is this the brave next step for us or not?”

When it was clear the pandemic would not be over by summer and congregations started opening their doors, our leadership felt pressure to do the same. Yet we worried about the safety of our community. What if the brave next step was to stay closed? At a staff meeting, Jen, our musician, made a profound statement about worship. She said, “I sort of like the facade of being together live on Zoom.” That struck a chord. Seeing each other on Zoom was a start at Engaging Community, one of our core values, but we knew we could do better. Her statement challenged our leadership teams to take the braver step of staying closed and going smaller. That pivot birthed the Small Church Big Heart experiment. In June, LCP started seven small church communities (five on Zoom and two in person). Hosts gathered no more than ten households to check in and pray for each other, worship together, and share fellowship and conversation. Ironically, we found deeper community in these small-church communities (on Zoom) than we had known when we gathered in person.

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To aspire to be brave is one thing; to *be* brave is another. LCP is not the first community God has called to be brave and do hard things. The Bible is filled with stories where God’s people were asked to step out in faith and be brave. Noah was brave to build an ark without any threat of rain. Abraham and Sarah were brave to leave their homeland with only a promised future. Paul was brave as he allowed Gentiles to be part of the new Jesus way. What does being brave look like today?

A SUMMER OF UNREST

As the nation tried to flatten the curve and political rhetoric exposed national fault lines, a Black man named George Floyd died at the hands of police officers at the corner of 38th and Chicago in Minneapolis. It was Memorial Day. The next day his death became national news as a video went viral. Another Black man brutally killed. His death hit a nerve, and within twenty-four hours Minnesotans came out

of isolation and began filling the streets. Protesters marched, and soon violence erupted. Police precincts were mobbed and set on fire, stores were robbed and looted, and the greater Twin Cities was placed under curfew. Governor Walz called in the National Guard. Our vulnerabilities were revealed as our safety was called into question. In the midst of COVID-19, the deep roots and long history of racism in our country were illuminated. It was another call for change. What is a faithful and just response? What was LCP's brave next step?

Becoming brave involves grief and lament. Naming what's hard and grieving loss are both a human need and a faith practice. Trusting God with our concerns is part of being brave. Navigating ordinary life became so hard and complex that summer. Every decision had significant consequences. It was tempting to ignore the invisible chronic tension, but it just kept surfacing. Along with COVID-19 and racial concerns were other life stressors: balancing children's needs and working from home, caring for elderly parents, non-COVID-19 health issues, economic concerns, and losing loved ones. LCP's regular prayer practice revealed the weight people were carrying. This season reminded us that our hope is not found in this world. We are God's. Isaiah 43 reminds us that when we pass through the water, God will be with us. Rivers will not overwhelm us, and fire will not consume us. In those moments, we can know, "I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel your Savior. . . . you are precious in my sight . . . and I love you. . . . Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isa 43:1–5). What's more, says Isaiah, do not place your attention on the former things, for "I am about to do a new thing. . . . I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Isa 43:18–19). Could Isaiah's words hold us in this time?

LEADING IN DISRUPTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

As LCP focused more on God's calling and less on activities, we discovered a new freedom to reimagine our life together. Our call to be a brave community that spilled outside the walls of the church and shared the joy of Christ helped us discern what to do with the organ *and* gave us courage to be church when we could no longer gather in our building on Century Ave.

The word *church* has many dimensions. Craig Van Gelder differentiates three: the church's nature, ministry, and organizational structure.¹ Most congregations focus on church structures and ministry programs, assuming people have a shared understanding of their nature or calling. This is not surprising because church leaders know how difficult it is for the structures that congregations have inherited to adapt to today's dynamic environment. What is less apparent, however, is congregations' lack of shared understanding around their calling or nature. The disruptions of 2020 have placed a spotlight on this reality. Most ministry models were designed for stable environments where church and society were partners.

¹ "The church is. The church does what it is. The church organizes what it does." Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 37.

Within this mindset was an assumption that society had a Christian ethos that congregations nurtured by teaching the Christian faith. This *de facto* church/state mindset distorted the church's understanding of itself and diminished its ability to adapt to environmental changes.

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, environmental changes have been taking place at an accelerated rate. Now every aspect of society has been forced to adapt to what researchers call a *paradigm shift*. Qualitatively different from other types of change, paradigm shifts displace the status quo, interrupt previous patterns, and shift values. During such periods, stability and direction are difficult to establish. Innovation theory asserts that during paradigm shifts organizations get out of sync with the people they serve, and as a result, the principles that allowed organizations to thrive in stable times are the same ones that cause them to fail in disruptive times.²

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Five years ago, Rabbi Hayim Herring and I, Terri, studied congregations and faith-based nonprofits thriving in the midst of today's paradigm shift. We wondered what leadership looked like in environments where disruptive change was the norm.³ We discovered four things. The first is recognizing *the need for a compass*. In disruptive environments, congregations face unprecedented circumstances that force them to make decisions unlike anything they have known before. A compass, or clear identity and purpose, allows congregations to make decisions and organize around their essential duties by working *with* the environment. Clarity on identity reduces a congregation's tendency to become distracted by secondary or tertiary issues and enhances their ability to make decisions based on their purpose. Because norms and patterns are being reconfigured, problems are complex and solutions are multi-faceted. Addressing complex challenges requires a stalwart focus on what's core, holding assumptions and previous patterns loosely, and facing each decision with curiosity and a growth mindset. Disruptive environments, like the pandemic and social unrest, challenge the basic assumptions of inherited structures and force leaders to rediscover their calling. In other words, inherited structures cannot be relied on to navigate disruptive change and solve complex problems. Discerning God's calling for a congregation is how

² Hayim Herring and Terri Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 48.

³ Herring and Elton, *Leading Congregations*, 48.

congregations reimagine their ministry and organizational structures. Having a compass prepared LCP to be self-organizing in the midst of a pandemic and time of social unrest.

EMPOWERING PEOPLE

I, Pastor Liz, left for vacation the day after we made the call to close the building. In my absence our staff and lay leaders led our first online worship and launched our calling-ministry experiment, a team of fifteen people who called six other people each week during the first three months of the pandemic. It was a simple ministry that touched the whole congregation. It also empowered people and cultivated shared leadership.

The second thing Hayim and I, Terri, discovered in our research was *the importance of cultivating community*. Margaret Wheatley notes that relationships are the building blocks of life, so strengthening and diversifying relational ties is critical for organizations to flourish, especially in stressful times. LCP's listening campaign provided a great relational foundation, but in 2020 LCP needed new avenues for tending their relational ties. The calling ministry and Small Church communities were two vital avenues.

The third thing we found was that *strategic, participatory decision-making generates momentum*. Connecting daily work and decision-making to the bigger picture orients leaders to the future, at the same time as it creates energy and shared ownership. Decision-making is where the rubber hits the road, the vision is tested, and the trustworthiness of leadership is witnessed. When done well, it creates the energy, direction, and ownership needed to embody what a community aspires to be.

After the listening campaign, the council had researched congregational leadership structures and discerned that a smaller, strategic council accompanied by active ministry teams would be the best way to carry out their vision. The transition to this strategic, participatory leadership model was completed a month before LCP closed the building.⁴ In fact, the newly elected council met for the first time face-to-face four days before the building was closed, and the council and ministry team leaders met for the first time three months later via Zoom. While the freedom for imagining our life together was there, we needed a process. As decisions about fall loomed on the horizon, our leadership used the "How will we gather?" planning exercise developed by Rooted Good,⁵ to collaboratively dis-

⁴ The decision was made to reduce the council from twelve to seven members and to change their role from being a team of committee chairs to a 30,000-foot, strategic-leadership team. Committees changed to ministry teams that were empowered to live out their vision within their ministry area. This move pushed the oversight and decision-making of ministry to teams and created a smaller, more focused leadership team focused on core issues.

⁵ See "How Will We Gather? Planning Exercises," *Rooted Good*, June 12, 2020, <https://rootedgood.org/resource/how-will-we-gather-planning-exercise/>.

cover the next brave step. That gathering launched a new pathway to participatory decision-making and empowered people to lead in different ways.

STEWARDED THE FUTURE WITNESS OF THE GOSPEL

Congregations are particular, historic, tradition-bearing communities where faith is expressed, lives are transformed, and people make meaning. God uses the congregation's unique location and calling as a foretaste of God's love. By placing our current challenges in dialogue with the Christian story and God's promised future, people of faith experience an alternative way of living. The peculiar story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection forms us as we are drawn into God's unfolding story. Accompanying each other in loving as God does takes us to places we had not predicted and challenges us in ways we never anticipated. How do congregations steward the future witness of the gospel?⁶

The final thing Hayim and I, Terri, learned was *the importance of becoming a learning community*. Intentional experiments combined with a learner's posture allow organizations to adapt and pivot. It is hard and scary to lead as paradigms shift. It takes a lot of energy and a humble spirit to try new things and learn from both failures and successes. Leaders who are not driven by efficiency and can let go of an "expert mentality" are better positioned to welcome the emerging future. Leading is easier when we recognize that "we no longer are where we once were but we are not yet where we will be."⁷ Followers of Jesus are curious learners. They are disciples touched by the transformative love of God compelled to share God's love with others. Stewarding the gospel witness is future oriented, and this orientation requires agility so each generation can know God's reconciling love.

Congregations steward their future witness as they rediscover their compass and use it to navigate the dynamic environment. The church's thriving is not about institutional flourishing, but about the ways it shares the joy of Christ with others. There is no guarantee the church as we know it will continue. In fact, the church's witness is always one generation away from being extinct. Without each generation discerning God's calling, the story of God is at risk of being lost. COVID-19 has disrupted current ministry models and patterns of faith. Social unrest has exposed assumptions and pressure points in current institutional church structures. And 2020 has also sparked a spirit of innovation and urgency for sharing the joy of Christ. In the months ahead, as a new normal emerges and a vaccine is distributed, it will be easy to place our attention on reviving the institutional church. But is that what God's future church needs? Perhaps it is time to decommission the organ and make room for what is emerging.

LCP entered 2020 with a slight advantage. They had asked hard questions and discovered their compass. A renewal process formed them into a learning

⁶ Terri Martinson Elton, *Journeying in the Wilderness: Forming Faith in the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020), 20.

⁷ Herring and Elton, *Leading Congregations*, 69.

community. Led by the Holy Spirit, the disruptions of 2020 provided the opportunity to experiment and become brave. But if God is always making all things new (Isa 43:19), are not all congregations being renewed? As we set our eyes on God's promised future, we join God in co-creating the future.

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As internship ended in August 2020, I had one last gathering—a drive-by reception in LCP's parking lot. Joy filled my heart as I saw people face-to-face for the first time in almost five months. It was remarkable how our lives had woven together through virtual worship, Zoom meetings, and phone calls. The joy of Christ had left its mark on me through their witness. Little did I know how this internship would transform me. As I drove home, a bit of my heart stayed at LCP. As I returned to full-time teaching, their witness to the gospel began flowing through me.

It is our hope—both Terri's and Pastor Liz's—not only that LCP's story inspires others to be brave, but that other congregations might also discover how God is calling them to witness to the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of today's paradigm shift. ☩

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