

**Communal Resilience: Reimagining Mission As Empowered Leaders**

**by**

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## **Context**

The congregation I serve as Associate Pastor recently passed the one year anniversary of significant loss and trauma (See Addendum – Annual Pastoral Report February 8, 2004). On January 5, 2003 the Senior Pastor who had served the congregation for twenty-two years officiated at his last service of worship due to the sudden emergence of a debilitating illness. On February 20, 2003 he died of the rare neurological illness Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. On February 23, 2003 the community gathered to keep vigil together at his visitation and on February 24, 2003 a funeral service was held with over one thousand people in attendance.

The feelings of grief and loss turned messy when on March 12, 2003 the Bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod disclosed credible allegations of clergy sexual misconduct to the widow of the Senior Pastor, to the church staff and to the church council of the congregation. On March 13, 2003 a letter of public disclosure of the credible allegations of clergy sexual misconduct was mailed to every household of the congregation. On March 16, 2003 the Bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod held a public forum for the congregation to hear and respond to the allegations of the boundary violations that had surfaced before the Senior Pastor had died. On March 18, 2003 the Bishop met with rostered leaders of the North Conference of the Saint Paul Area Synod to disclose and discuss this matter and that same week mailed the letter of public disclosure to all rostered leaders in the Saint Paul Area Synod of the ELCA. The anniversary of these events has recently come to pass as well as a full year of worship and life together as a congregation.

The following paper is a concept paper that will reflect upon what has been learned about corporate grief, communal resilience, the afterpastor's role as a toxic handler, the redefining of the office of pastor, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the faith community as the congregation rediscovers and restructures its communal nature through the work of discernment. The final outcome of this project will be the design of a spiritual practices template as well as presentation material that when implemented and used will strategically foster resiliency in the congregation by creating processes as well as collective awareness that invites shared leadership, shared power and shared ministry within the congregation.

### **Corporate Grief and Communal Resilience**

2003 will be remembered in the Trinity faith community as a year of disorientation and confusion. It has been a year when many hearts have cried out in denial and disbelief, sadness and anger, shame and betrayal, and profound loss. As troubling as this past year has been to the faith community it must be said that it is natural for organizations and congregations to experience bereavement. There are occasions and circumstances that call forth seasons of grieving in the life of every faith community. Effectively and thoroughly grieving what has been lost is what eventually opens a vision and path toward the future. Gerald A. Arbuckle writes, "As long as communities and individuals refuse to grieve over that which is lost or is now apostolically irrelevant, they will not let go of the past."<sup>1</sup> The Trinity faith community not only lost a person who had been their pastoral leader for over two decades but also lost a style of leadership that is no longer apostolically relevant. The style of leadership I am referring to is the pastor-

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald A. Arbuckle *The Hidden Spirit*, James F. Cobble, Jr. and Charles M. Elliott, Editors (Matthews: CMR Press, 1999) 63.

centered approach to ministry that has an unhealthy focus on the role of clergy (See Addendum – Clergy-Focused Congregations versus Mission-Focused Congregations). The Holy Spirit in this year of interim ministry continues to make known and reveal the communal nature of God’s community. It has been a year of sifting through the emotional aftermath of the trauma in an effort to identify what it means to be a healthy and missional church (See Addendum – Newsletter Article - Listening to the Heart).

The chaos of this past year has ordered itself in such a way that the congregation is now poised to transition from being a pastor-centered church to a team-based mission driven faith community (See Addendum – Newsletter Article - Easter Dreams). The trauma and loss of this past year has created an opportunity for the congregation to consider a new vision for leadership. However, the transition between the known and the unknown is very overwhelming. Gerald A. Arbuckle urges congregations in this critical period of transition to cope positively through the use of available spiritual resources. He writes,

The temptation is to be so overwhelmed by these losses that our communities become numb and our energies drained by the struggle, either to restore that which has been irretrievably lost, or deny that these losses have occurred at all. Hence, the need for a spirituality to help us both to cope positively with the death of irrelevant structures and pastoral methods and to move forward with risk and hope into the future.<sup>2</sup>

2003 has been a year when the congregation grieved the death of the former Senior Pastor. However, what is equally important to realize is that many individuals in the congregation are also grieving a certain way of doing church that originated from the former Senior Pastor’s charisma. A congregation that has centered its life on one charismatic leader flails about reactively when they experience the sudden loss of this

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 64.

person. The death or resignation of this person fractures a whole set of social relationships, and a new pattern of relationships must be established if the community is to hold together and survive. Preferably this new emerging pattern of relationships is more interdependent and mutual than the pastor-centered approach they've know in the past.

The transformation from being a pastor-centered church to a team-based mission driven church reimagines the missionary nature of God's community where everyone in the faith community has something to offer. Pastor-centered congregations are susceptible to what is called hero worship of the pastor. The opposite of hero worship in pastor-centered congregations would be to unfairly make the pastor the scapegoat in regard to problems in the congregation. A team-based mission driven congregation shares the responsibility of mission and ministry with the whole baptized community. Congregations who have suffered the realities of clergy sexual misconduct are challenged to rethink their baptismal theology and in so doing reimagine the office of pastor and the ministry of the laity. These roles are clearly defined in healthy congregations.

In healthy churches roles are clearly defined, people accept certain responsibilities, and no one is made to be the hero – either all the time or vicariously for others. Even though a pastor and other church leaders accept responsibilities, all people are saints in the sight of God and all share in the division of labor. This means that there are no father or mother figures that people look up to with childlike trust. People's faith is placed with childlike trust in the hands of God. Work is shared, not dominated by a few religious workaholics.<sup>3</sup>

Congregations who've experienced clergy sexual misconduct can choose to recover and reconstruct a style of governance that equally values the role of laity and clergy. There

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Lasser. *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995) 247.

are individuals in the faith community who will resist and grieve the loss of the pastor-centered church. It is important to face this grief so that God can call forth new patterns, styles and ways of being church that call the whole baptized community to discover their missionary nature.

It is important to note that this public grieving is necessary and healthy. Grief work helps a congregation let go of the past and empowers an intentional move toward the future. One of the tasks of afterpastors is to look for opportunities that invite the congregation to publicly express their grief through storytelling and rituals. Even secular profit driven organizations have discovered the benefits of creating opportunities for people to publicly grieve and let go of the past through the use of rituals.

For instance, when a Canadian company was acquired and folded into a former competitor from France, managers from the acquired business invited employees to a church-like ceremony where the company was eulogized by executives and hourly workers alike. Afterward, people went outside and, one by one, threw their old business cards in a coffin shaped hole in the ground, which was then covered by dirt as a dirge played on the bagpipe. The event may sound ridiculous, but it did serve a healing purpose. Employees said later that they had buried their old company and were ready to embrace the new one.<sup>4</sup>

As the congregation acknowledges the one year anniversary of the traumatic events of 2003 they are also experiencing the culmination of an important period of interim ministry which will end with the calling of a new Senior Pastor. A ritual that would symbolically ends this period of mourning would be appropriate and healthy (See Addendum – Leadership and Congregational Stories and Congregational Grief and Newness).

The Holy Spirit is working to bring the faith community to the point of surrender or letting go of what has been lost so that new life can be called forth. Grief work is a

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<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Frost and Sandra Robinson *Harvard Business Review: The Toxic Handler: Organizational Hero – and Casualty* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation 2003) 106.

blessing in this regard as the community relearns the art of letting go.<sup>5</sup> Letting go is a spiritual practice in which the faith community turns over its communal will to God. The process of surrender and letting go of the past ultimately is a gift of God that leads us toward aligning ourselves to God's will.<sup>6</sup> Debra K. Farrington writes, "The process of aligning our will with God's will is gradual, brought about through our deepening love of God, our growing ability to pay attention, and, finally, our desire to live as God has called us to do."<sup>7</sup> A congregation that chooses to recover from clergy sexual misconduct has the opportunity to embrace the reality that it is God's will that the whole baptized community take responsibility for the mission of Jesus Christ. A faith community that has seen the dark side of a pastor-centered approach to ministry grieves not only the loss of a charismatic leader, but also grieves the loss of a way of being and doing church.

Resilient faith communities face hardships. The important work of grieving and bringing closure to a season of grief is essential to the well-being of a faith community. Diane L. Coudu writes, "Resilient people possess three characteristics: a staunch acceptance of reality; a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, that life is meaningful; and an uncanny ability to improvise."<sup>8</sup> Resilient faith communities bounce back by entering into the grief process and by choosing to heal and recover from extraordinary hardships. It is easy to slip into denial as a coping mechanism. However, resilient organizations, including congregations, stare down reality and move from crying out in despair to meaning-making and constructing bridges to the future. Resilient faith

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald A. Arbuckle *The Hidden Spirit*, James F. Cobble, Jr. and Charles M. Elliott, Editors (Matthews: CMR Press, 1999) 63.

<sup>6</sup> Debra K. Farrington, *Hearing with the Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2003) 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 32.

<sup>8</sup> Diane L. Coudu, *Harvard Business Review: How Resilience Works* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation 2003) 6.

communities have a sense that they are on a journey and that God is a major player in their lives individually and corporately.<sup>9</sup>

Congregations by their very nature are resilient when they function as the spiritual communities God made them to be. Resilient faith communities can do more than survive. They can plan for the future that God is calling them into as a missional community. One of the most significant movements of the Holy Spirit is deliverance from distress. The Holy Spirit works in the midst of shattered lives to restore life and identity as God's people. The Holy Spirit creates hope for the future. Gary Hamel and Liisa Valikangas call this anticipation of the future strategic resilience. They write, "Strategic resilience is not about responding to a onetime crisis. It's not about rebounding from a setback. It's about having the capacity to change before the case for change becomes desperately obvious."<sup>10</sup> Congregations that have been through the hard realities of clergy sexual misconduct come to a threshold where change is a work of the Holy Spirit. The loss and trauma naturally raises question like "*What does it mean to be the church?*" and "*Whose church is this anyway?*" and "*How do we lead and organize in the aftermath of this crisis?*" and "*What is God up to amid all of this turmoil?*" The crisis brings forth an opportunity to enter into God's future with a renewed sense of identity and mission. George Cladis writes,

Churches need to change to be effective in the twenty-first century. Traditional methods of doing ministry, in most cases, simply do not communicate across the chasm that has opened between the modern world in which traditional churches have thrived and the postmodern world in which leaders and organizations are required to do something entirely new. Although this causes much stress and strain for the traditional churches, the good news is that in many areas the changes

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<sup>9</sup> Charles M. Olsen, *The Hidden Spirit*, James F. Cobble, Jr. and Charles M. Elliott, Editors (Matthews: CMR Press, 1999) 34.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Hamel and Liisa Valikangas, *Harvard Business Review: The Quest for Resilience*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, September 2003) 2. Reprint of the article R0309C.

required to work to reform the church to a more biblical model. And one of those areas is leadership, where we must attend to the higher value placed today on participatory, collaborative, team leadership.<sup>11</sup>

Congregations recovering from clergy sexual misconduct come to the threshold of change as they choose to recover and heal. The Holy Spirit calls forth participatory, collaborative, team leadership that stirs the congregation to move beyond a pastor-centered approach to ministry to a team-based mission driven style of ministry.

Grief work has the potential to bring about renewal in the faith community. As more and more people move beyond denial the congregation begins to envision a new future. The temptation can be the desire to defend the past rather than live into the future. The Holy Spirit calls God's people into the future. God's community is called to die to the old and risk becoming the new creation God is calling the church to be. Gary Hamel and Liisa Valikangas from a secular corporate perspective speak of renewal in this way.

Renewal must be the natural consequence of an organizations innate resiliency. The goal is an organization that is constantly making its future rather than defending its past. Denial puts the work of renewal on hold, and with each passing month, the cost goes up. To be resilient, an organization must dramatically reduce the time it takes to go from "that can't be true" to "we must face the world as it is."<sup>12</sup>

Breaking through denial is essential in the process of healing. It is natural for God's community to sorrow over what has been destroyed or broken. However, denial is not a long term option. Rather, we grieve knowing that no matter how chaotic and disorienting life can be that the Holy Spirit can and does call forth and order new life. Resilience is both innate and strategic. God's community, the church, discovers that a work of the Holy Spirit is a communal resiliency that becomes evident through new forms of

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<sup>11</sup> George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers 1999) 29.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Hammel and Liisa Valikangas, *Harvard Business Review: The Quest for Resilience*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, September 2003) 2,5. Reprint of the article R0309C.

participatory, collaborative, team leadership in the congregation. As the congregation is tempted to defend its past it is essential to affirm that the Holy Spirit has been at work throughout their history. The Holy Spirit's work is not dependent upon the morality or personal character of one individual. God is always at work causing life to flourish. The congregation must be assured that despite all that has occurred that the Holy Spirit has been active in the past and will continue to draw the congregation into the future.

It is in this sacred in-between time of interim ministry that the Holy Spirit's work is so powerfully evident. A community that has been deconstructed by trauma is in the process of being reconstructed by the life-giving power of God through the gentle work of the Holy Spirit. This sacred in-between time of interim ministry is a time of liminality. "Liminality, according to Turner, is a threshold experience; a paradoxical state of both death and renewal, confusion and opportunity. Liminality also offers an opportunity for creativity and transformation."<sup>13</sup> It is important to trust that the Holy Spirit is deeply at work in the soil of the congregation during this in-between time. It is in brokenness and distress that we come to a threshold of hearing God's voice anew. Alan J. Roxburgh describes the pastor's role in this journey.

The pastor weaves together the people's voices so that the story of who they are and what they actually experience is articulated, called forth, and owned. In this process the tapestry of their lives is made visible. This is, in part, what scripture means about speaking the truth in love. As we are brought to the truth about ourselves, we are opened to hear the gospel anew. Such poetry writing begins the process of calling out an alternative vision for God's people. But the pastor cannot be the poet without reflecting upon his or her own experience as a person of faith in modernity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, Editors (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996) 330.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 330.

A communally resilient church reflects together upon the gentle work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. It is in this process of reflection and storytelling that we hear the gospel anew and are called to participate in God's mission to live purposefully for the sake of the world. Times of liminality are when the Holy Spirit does for us what only God can do.

### **Overfunctioning and Underfunctioning**

The task of redefining the office of pastor in a congregation that has experienced clergy sexual misconduct has to look seriously at the dynamics of overfunctioning and underfunctioning. Clergy and other religious workers are particularly susceptible to overfunctioning (See Addendum – Overfunctioning and Underfunctioning).

Overfunctioning can be like an insidious illness in a congregation that can go undetected for a significant amount of time. "Overfunctioning happens when one person takes increasing amounts of responsibility for the functioning of one or more other people."<sup>15</sup> Clergy and other religious workers easily take too much responsibility in the congregations they serve. An overfunctioning pastor can be perceived by a congregation as being a very committed and caring leader. However, "the more people overfunction in the church the more all suffer from the issues of confused responsibility."<sup>16</sup>

When a pastor consistently overfunctions the faith community begins underfunctioning. People stop taking responsibility for their own spiritual lives and for the mission and health of the congregation. When a pastor chronically overfunctions their spirituality begins to erode. The person who overfunctions attends so excessively to

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<sup>15</sup> Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1996) 133.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

others that they neglect to attend to the Holy Spirit's work in their own life through scripture reading, prayer, Sabbath rest, play, exercise, and other activities that are life-giving. Edwin Friedman writes "One of the subtlest and yet most fundamental effects of overfunctioning is spiritual. It destroys the spiritual quality of the overfunctioner."<sup>17</sup> The pastor-centered church can easily go down this road of overfunctioning/underfunctioning and in the end cause great harm to the pastor, the pastor's family, and the congregation.

The transformation from a pastor-centered church to a team-based mission driven congregation begins with the pastor. The transformation is not contingent on the pastor doing more, but upon his or her ability to define themselves and to take a leadership stance in the congregational system. The ability to take a stand is spiritual and it brings healthy definition to the faith community.

The basic concept of leadership through self-differentiation is this: If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as "head" and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism, there is a more than a reasonable chance that the body will follow. There may be initial resistance but, if the leader can stay in touch with the resisters, the body will usually go along.<sup>18</sup>

When a pastor takes responsibility for their own health and well-being the dependency created by the dynamic of overfunctioning/underfunctioning begins to be converted into a healthy mutuality that fosters shared power, shared leadership, and shared ministry. A pastor or leader who can define themselves and curb their overfunctioning no longer perceives themselves as stuck with the entire responsibility of an organization.

In many cases pastors who violate boundaries are chronic overfunctioners. They are anxiously determined to please everyone and often take on other peoples problems as

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<sup>17</sup> Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press 1985) 212.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 229.

if they were their own. Often chronic overfunctioning of this nature causes a pastor to either burnout or act out. Obviously this is a leadership flaw that leaves a pastor vulnerable. What often complicates this scenario is that congregations or organizations often expect and demand that their leaders overfunction. In this way a congregation recovering from clergy sexual misconduct bears some responsibility for changing what they expect of their pastor. Frank A. Thomas writes,

As a result of structural defects in the spiritual, physical, and emotional makeup of some organizations, overfunctioning is the standard expectation for leadership. In those organizations, the corporate ethos requires leaders to overfunction. The organization desires that the leader take spiritual, physical, and emotional responsibility for its well-being. The organization places itself in the subordinate role, or what could be called underfunctioning, and forces the leader to be dominant. Overfunctioning is a flaw in the person of the leader joined with an underfunctioning weakness in the structure of the organization. Overfunctioning and underfunctioning create a partnership between a flawed leader and a flawed organization. This partnership has devastating consequences for both.<sup>19</sup>

Maintaining appropriate relationships and staying healthy is the leader's ethical responsibility. However, a congregation recovering from clergy sexual misconduct discovers that it is wise and prudent to review their congregational system to see if it is healthy. Many congregations find that they have an unhealthy focus upon clergy and need to move to a more mission focused system.

A mission focused congregation values and utilizes the gifts and resourcefulness of the whole baptized community. Rather, than hero worship where congregational identity is formed around one leader a mission focused congregation forms their life together around a shared and common vision for ministry. Frank A. Thomas calls a congregation that is fixated on one leader a cult of personality. He writes,

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<sup>19</sup> Frank A. Thomas, *Spiritual Maturity: Preserving Congregational Health and Balance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2002) 31.

The cult of personality is closely related to overfunctioning and underfunctioning because it makes those behaviors necessary. The pastor, operating from within the framework of the cult of personality, is afforded strict, solo leadership with unquestionable authority and responsibility. Because all authority and responsibility is held by the leader, the success or failure of the organization is attributed to the leader. Invariably, in this framework the pastor overfunctions and the congregation underfunctions. The cult of personality is operative when a key individual or individuals shoulder the unquestioned authority and responsibility for the well-being of the organization or family, and everyone works to support this person in upholding the weight of the group. The family or organization responds to the agenda of this one person or one group of people. Often there are boards and committees, but none of them set the agenda – they respond to the agenda set by the personality. Boards, councils, or committees can be in the position of sanctioning or not sanctioning the agenda of the personality or personalities, but they have no independent agenda of their own to act on.<sup>20</sup>

Team-based mission driven congregations create processes where God's people build shared agendas. They work together. Meetings freely happen without the pastor present within the leadership structure of the church. The congregation becomes a permission giving organization that celebrates and experiences the reality that every member of a faith community is a minister. Shared agenda building values equality, invites participation, and expects commitment from the body of Christ (See Addendum – Spiritual Practices Template). A team-based mission driven congregation lives into a new vision of the church where “Our goal should not be that a few make decisions on behalf of all, even if the decisions are good ones, but rather that all might become reacquainted with gospel, with scripture, with the tradition, and with one another.”<sup>21</sup>

Church members in team-based mission driven congregations become ministers and participants. They are no longer passive and dependent. They are no longer consumers of religious goods and services. They are disciples of Jesus Christ who are living out their life in Christ. They no longer have church done to them but they do

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>21</sup> E. Dixon Junkin, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, Editors. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996) 312.

church themselves as they discover that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies and sends them. E. Dixon Junkin writes,

However, all too often the members of our churches are primarily the objects of ministries of others. Others pray over them. Others tell them what scripture says. Others tell them to what obedience they are called. And others engage in ministry on their behalf. But this means that many of our church members never learn how to pray, never become skilled in using their gifts in the interpretation of scripture or of their own experience. They remain children in faith, dependent upon others, and such dependency breeds voicelessness, powerlessness, apathy, or even anger.<sup>22</sup>

A team-based mission driven congregation discovers that everyone has something to offer. Underfunctioning is no longer acceptable or appropriate because all the baptized are invited into the privilege of participation. A congregation that rises from the trauma and losses of clergy sexual misconduct lives out the conviction that it is a privilege and responsibility to be church.

Congregations that are no longer powerless soon become joyful and energetic faith communities. They are free to organize in mission. They see each other as equals and they believe the efforts of every person in the faith community matters. They've left behind old way of doing church that had so many negative consequences. Those who are tempted to hang on to the pastor-centered approach to ministry need to look at the hard realities of such a system when it goes bad.

The problem with the cult of personality is that it overuses and burns out the leader, and it fails to develop the rest of the people who could participate more. Over time, the one who over functions often becomes angry, hurt, and bitter about congregational dependency and the tremendous weight and load of ministry. At the same time, the underfunctioning ones are angry, hurt, and bitter because of their dependency and the fact that they do not get the chance to make a full contribution or have the privilege to participate as equals. The cult of personality leads to anger and frustration on both sides that will sooner or later erupt with devastating consequences. Sometimes it explodes in the spiritual, physical, and emotional health of the leader, in the health of the leader's family, in the health of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 313.

others in the congregation, or in the congregational health itself, creating conflicts, such as power plays, church fights, splits and court fights.<sup>23</sup>

A congregation recovering from clergy sexual misconduct has the opportunity to enter into a new vision of leadership that is collaborative and participatory. Pastors and religious workers within this new leadership vision are leaders who share in a covenantal relationship of mutuality, accountability, interdependence and interconnectedness with the congregation.

### **The Afterpastor as Toxic Handler**

The term afterpastor refers to a pastor who serves a congregation following the devastating impact of clergy sexual misconduct. The afterpastor provides calm steady leadership in a congregation where those impacted by the crisis express sadness, frustration, bitterness and anger. Often this anger is displaced anger. Rather, than appropriately expressing anger towards the perpetrator and abuser. People often express anger towards synod staff or afterpastors. Human resource specialists call the person who manages emotions like these in the corporate world a toxic handler. Toxic handlers help organizations process pain. A toxic handler can be at risk in an organization when they move from helping others process pain to becoming the person in the system that is absorbing the pain. Peter Frost and Sandra Robinson write,

Managing organizational pain is vital to the health of the enterprise – but at great cost to the health of the toxic handlers themselves. The negative repercussions of toxic handling are particularly high when the role is played for too long or when there is no let up in the stream of emotional problems to which they are exposed, as is the case in companies with chronic toxicity. The most common toll of toxic handling – whatever its cause – is burnout, both psychological and professional.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Frank A. Thomas, *Spiritual Maturity: Preserving Congregational Health and Balance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2002) 32.

<sup>24</sup> Peter J. Frost and Sandra Robinson *Harvard Business Review: The Toxic Handler: Organizational Hero – and Casualty* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation 2003) 95.

Congregations recovering from clergy sexual misconduct must realize that the pastors and other religious workers who serve them are working in a toxic environment. When organizational toxicity is identified its affects can be managed through many forms of self-care. One form of denial is to choose not to acknowledge or discuss organizational pain. Trustees and executives in organizations that are recovering from trauma must intentionally foster an environment that supports their workers. “Organizations must recognize the toxic handlers in their midst so that their important work can be supported before a crisis strikes.<sup>25</sup> The toxic handler might help save the organization from self-destructing. However, such efforts might come at a costly price - professionally, psychologically and sometimes physically.<sup>26</sup> Self-care and defined leadership can proactively curb such a negative outcome.

After pastors acknowledge that they are toxic handlers and as they live with this reality and calling they seek to intentionally be healthy leaders. Rather, than absorb the pain of the organization they choose to be leaders who create opportunities for the pain to be processed. Toxic handlers are healthy leaders when they do not jump into another person’s pain.

Instead of impulsively jumping in to take over another person’s pain, for example, employees are taught to catch their breath, collect their thoughts, connect with their emotions, and then ask the other person to analyze his or her own unhappiness. Returning a problem to its sender may seem like a minor change, but for toxic handlers, it is a radical departure from standard operating procedure.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 108-109.

Toxic handlers are healthy leaders when they do not overfunction in another person's emotional space. Rather, they create and welcome space within organizations for people to process what they are feeling. Toxic handlers who are healthy leaders do not attempt to rescue others from their emotional discomfort or anxiety. Healthy leaders are mindful that "it is not our job to take responsibility for other's feelings – it is only our job to show our concern for and connection with them in the midst of their unhappiness."<sup>28</sup>

Afterpastors seek their own personal wholeness. Rather, than be swallowed up by the congregation's toxic environment they seek above all to be healthy. As the afterpastor attends to his or her own well-being the congregation slowly seeks out its own health. Darlene A. Haskin in her research of afterpastors came across this interesting discovery.

In the area of health there were some remarkable outcomes, both positive and negative. For some the wounds of the congregation forced them to confront their own woundedness. They could not begin the healing process with the congregation until they had begun their own journey toward wholeness. A number of afterpastors entered chemical dependency treatment. Others sought therapy or counseling. One began a better regimen to control his diabetes. Another began a regular exercise program to manage stress. They learned to ask for what they needed in order to take care of themselves. Only then could they begin to help the congregation focus on its need to be healed.<sup>29</sup>

It is critical that a toxic handler appropriately take care of their needs and to protect their healthy sense of self. As the afterpastors takes responsibility for themselves the congregation will slowly take responsibility for its own health. The afterpastors' calling is to faithfully attend to his or her own spiritual, emotional, and physical health.

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<sup>28</sup> Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1996) 136.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Lasser. *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995) 158-159.

The afterpastor's work begins with his or her own spirituality and well-being. The afterpastor must decisively come to the conclusion that they are responsible for themselves. The afterpastor must choose to model healthy toxic handling.

The task becomes one of teaching oneself to be responsible for self and only for self. That means, for the overfunctioner, thinking, planning, and being concerned more of the time with self and management of self than with the management of the other. Also, it rules out taking responsibility for doing for someone else anything they can easily do for self.<sup>30</sup>

As the afterpastor attends consistently to his or her own self-definition the congregation will slowly come out of its pattern of dependency and become the church God is calling it to be.

A healthy leader can redefine the office of pastor in a traumatized congregation. They do this by valuing the gifts and resources of God's people. They allow the faith community they serve to feel its own anxiety. Rather, than trying to rescue the congregation from its pain and discomfort the afterpastor is faithful in attending to the Word and Sacrament ministry that grounds God's community in the richness of biblical and theological reflection and imagination. As the community breaks open the scriptures together they enter into a visionary space where they rediscover their missional imagination. The afterpastor becomes a steward of this visionary space through faithful proclamation, teaching, and collaborative leadership. Communal resilience is born through the work of discernment in this visionary space. It is in this creative space that new dreams are dreamed and God's will for the community is uncovered. The Holy Spirit gently delivers the community out of its distressing toxicity. The faith community is

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<sup>30</sup> Roberta M. Gilbert, M.D. *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1992) 72.

renewed and is surprised that they are full of life and vitality. The Holy Spirit empowers the church to be the priesthood of believers that they are called to be. Kelly Fryer outlines the role of pastor and the congregation in this way.

This great Lutheran idea that every Christian belongs to a “priesthood of all believers” is critical to the health, vitality, and renewal of our churches. It is our safeguard against ever thinking that any one of us is the only one who matters. It is a challenge to create communities of faith where people are responsible for their own spiritual lives; and where we care for and pray for one another. It is an invitation to be God’s people in the world, making a difference everywhere we go. We each have been given gifts to share. We each have been given a job to do. A pastor’s job is to lead God’s people into the freedom Christ died for ... to spark our imaginations that we might be able to get a glimpse of what God is up to in this world ... to call us into the future God has in store for us ... to challenge us to follow wherever the Spirit leads ... and to equip us to do what God calls us to do. A pastor’s job, in a word, is to help us become who we are: members of a priesthood of all believers. And our job, as the baptized people of God, is to get busy ... at church, at home, at work, in the community, and wherever God sends us ... being God’s people and doing what God leads us to do.<sup>31</sup>

Healthy self-definition by the afterpastor empowers the congregation to clearly see what God calls them to be about. It is in this clearly defined life together that the Holy Spirit creates communal resilience that is evident through empowered leadership and empowered participation. It is in healthy congregations that we see that resiliency is both innate and strategic. Strategic resiliency is fostered in the faith community as God’s people intentionally enter the visionary space of biblical and theological reflection. Both forms of resiliency are a work of the Holy Spirit in the life of God’s people. Pastor’s are privileged and defined calling of being stewards of this visionary space that explores the reign of God. It is in this space that God’s people rediscover their missionary nature and hear the voice of God anew. It is true that a communally resilient church reimagines mission as empowered leader.

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<sup>31</sup> Kelly A. Fryer, *Reclaiming the “L” Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress 2003) 73.

**Pastor Loren D. Mellum**  
**Annual Report**  
**February 8, 2004**

*“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:19*

We learn a great deal about life through hardships of various kinds. I remember one summer on the farm out in the Dakotas our crop was hailed out. Harvest had just started to head into full gear when on a hot-humid summer day the temperature suddenly plummeted. First came the hard driving rain and then came pelting marble and golf ball size hail. The farm equipment raced into the yard as young and old ran for shelter. I did not realize the significance of what was unfolding until the storm had stopped and all had come to rest. I noticed my Dad standing in the dining room window with his body slumped against the wall looking out over the farm yard that had been stripped by hail. I knew at that moment something had gone very wrong. What had come to pass could not be undone. The storm brought significant loss that remains part of the memory of my family.

2003 will be remembered as year when a storm came out of nowhere and caused significant loss to the Trinity faith community. We’ve walked through heavy days grieving the death of Pastor Rudolph from the rare illness Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. These feelings of grief and loss turned messy when the Bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod disclosed credible allegations of clergy sexual misconduct in regard to Pastor Rudolph. Our hearts cried out in denial and disbelief, sadness and anger, shame and betrayal, and profound loss. We learned together about the complexity of the human journey as we lived through several months of disorientation. What has come to pass cannot be undone nor can it be erased or edited from the history and memory of the Trinity faith community. It is now part of the narrative of the Trinity faith community.

The next year after that summer hail storm out on the Dakota Prairie the farmers went out trusting in God’s good creation as they tilled the soil and prepared the land for new life. Somehow we made it through the losses of that year. When the warm winds of spring pulled back the blanket of snow, seeds were pushed into the earth with the expectation that harvest would come. God called forth the new life from seed and soil. The new life did not erase or edit the memories from the past losses. In fact, my gut becomes a bit squeamish even remembering that hail storm years later. However, such losses remind us of our dependency on God when traveling through hardships of various kinds. What incredible faith it takes to prepare the land for new life after the experience of loss. I suspect we are about this task now at Trinity. We are preparing the soil of this congregation for new life. We do this work with the conviction that God will call forth new life.

As I look back on 2003 I am filled with profound thanks to God for sustaining the Trinity faith community through this season of loss. As 2004 begins we go out into the fields trusting that God will call forth abundant life from the soil of this congregation. We continue to pray for those who were devastated by all that unfolded this past year. We pray for healing. We pray for compassion and sensitivity to the human journey. We pray for an authentic Spirit-led community that can live with circumstances that cannot be easily or fully understood. We also continue to pray for the courage to speak the truth in love as we invite the Holy Spirit to do the work of God in us and among us. If 2003 was a year of disorientation, 2004 will be a year of reorientation as we continue to ask the question “What is God up to at Trinity, North Branch?”

The past year I've thoroughly enjoyed beginning study in the Doctor of Ministry program in leadership and mission at Luther Seminary. I've worked hard on two projects called *Spiritual Resilience: Reimagining Mission as Wounded Healers* and *Communal Resilience: Reimagining Mission as Empowered Leaders*. I hope there is an opportunity to share some of my work with you in the coming months. I've also been deeply satisfied that we've celebrated Holy Communion weekly at Trinity this year and feel that this sharing of meal together has sustained us through a difficult time. A mark of a healthy faith community is a church that shares meal together regularly both in the sanctuary and in the fellowship hall. I give God thanks for the staff at Trinity who served the faith community in ways that are beyond words. Each staff person is a great asset to the mission of God as it is expressed through the Trinity faith community. I stood back observing each of them this year wondering how they carried out the tasks of ministry amid such a challenging year. It is a God thing.

Where have we seen sprouts of new life from the soils of Trinity Lutheran Church in 2003? The youth ministry continues to flourish and mature as youth and adults partner together in ministry. The adult education task force has done excellent work and we are now experiencing the benefit of their efforts. The mission profile task force gathered the thoughts and feelings of the faith community and prepared the guiding document for Senior Pastor call process. The executive committee worked on many projects that will benefit the faith community. We welcomed many new members. We continued to carry out the on-going mission and ministry that God has called us to participate in. We worshiped our way through a wilderness year as we gathered around Word and Sacrament. I invite you to look closely at the many reports from leaders in the church. They offer a glimpse of the new life God continues to call forth at Trinity, North Branch.

As this coming summer marks my sixth year serving the Trinity faith community, I continue to feel more than ever that being a pastor and leader in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Trinity faith community is a special privilege. I pray that as the coming year begins you will see your belonging and participation in God's community as a high priority. I pray that as the coming months unfold the Trinity faith community would intentionally create and foster a learning culture where God grants us new insights about what it means to be church together. It is a little easier to share words and reflection together a year after such loss. No doubt there is some collective wisdom to be gleaned from each other. I give God thanks for all of you who continue to express a commitment to Jesus Christ and to the body of Christ of which we are all an integral part.

We can be assured as 2004 begins that God is at work in the soil of this congregation calling forth new life. The experience of new life after significant loss is an act of God. May we go forth with the conviction that new life is in us and among us at Trinity Lutheran Church. God is at work in the soil of this faith community. May we each do our part to enrich and make the soil of the congregation healthy and ready for the seeds of mission and ministry that will be planted this year.

Peace Be With You,

Pastor Loren D. Mellum

### **Clergy Focused Congregation**

1. Excessive focus on clergy (difficult to think of the rest of the system); overinvested in clergy (“hero or goat”); clergy primarily responsible for what happens
2. Dependency encouraged (parent/child arrangement); no activity without clergy present
3. Neediness is enabled
4. Clergy expected to motivate, uplift, or rescue people
5. Inflexible roles (survival depends on a prescribed way of functioning)
6. Cycle of emotional fusion (lack of “distance”; clergy not seen as separate individuals; clergy are “owned”)
7. “We” (very few speak for themselves); allow inappropriate behavior to exist, no one confronts or speaks up
8. “Consensus sensitive” (difference is seen as attack, can’t survive if we don’t agree); clergy is the hub of harmony
9. Disagreement is dangerous (calm surface)
10. Closed system (lack of “oxygen,” no corrective feedback, novelty is not entertained)

### **Mission-Focused Congregation**

1. A clear focus on identity and destiny
2. Stewardship emphasized; responsibility is distributed; interdependence
3. Needs are met without promoting dependency
4. Clergy expected to organize people toward mission
5. Resiliency in functioning
6. Clergy are separate selves; clergy set goals and take stands
7. “I” positions are respected; lots of dialogue (physicist David Bohm says, “Dialogue means not winning points”)
8. Vision sensitive (differences are tolerated because vision guides and solidifies people)
9. Conflict is normal, essential, and managed
10. Open system (lots of information, new ideas, feedback loops)

## Overfunctioning and Underfunctioning

If overfunctioning is present, one might see:

- advice-giving
- doing things for others that they could do for themselves
- worrying about other people
- feeling responsible for others, knowing what is best for them
- talking more than listening
- having goals for others that they don't have for themselves
- experiencing periodic, sudden "burnouts"

If underfunctioning is present, one might see:

- asking for advice when what is needed is to think things out independently
- getting others to help when help really is not needed
- acting irresponsibly
- listening more than talking
- floating without goals much of the time
- setting goals but not following through with them
- becoming mentally or physically ill frequently
- tending to become addicted to substances

Roberta M. Gilbert, M.D. *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1992) 67-68.

## Leadership and Congregational Stories

This module is based on Charles Olsen's chapter, *Spirituality and Decision and Making: A Structure for Congregational Stories*. The focus is to encourage story telling as a way to promote corporate identity. Share the introductory material with the entire group.

### *Introduction*

In his chapter, *Spirituality and Decision Making: A Structure for Congregational Stories*, Charles Olsen makes the following observation about churches:

Congregations which have a sense of story or journey and an awareness that God is a player with a role in the story tend to be congregations of vital faith. New people who visit them immediately pick that up and are attracted to it. They observe a natural witness that grows out of the church's life and reflections about their story. Conversely, congregations which have no sense of story or journey and no awareness of God being a player with a role in their stories, tend to be congregations of lethargic faith. New people who visit them pick that up as well and are not attracted.

According to Olsen, leaders should fulfill four responsibilities with respect to congregational stories:

1. Leaders are stewards of the stories of their congregations. Thus it is important for leaders to hear and share stories.
2. Leaders are prompters for the formation of stories. Leaders should encourage and assist the storytelling process.
3. Leaders are reflectors on the meaning and significance of stories. As a result, leaders need to take time to discuss stories and to examine the theological dimensions of congregational stories.
4. Leaders are scriptors of the ways stories can be ritualized within the life of the church. One role of leadership is to integrate stories into the life of the congregation through worship and other shared experiences in the life of the congregation.

Olsen recommends incorporating story telling as a normal part of the board meeting. One device to promote corporate stories is what Olsen calls "and then ... but before that ...". He explains the process as follows:

Once gathered together, a facilitator helps the group identify a starting place for the story. Each participant is invited to provide the next brief part of the story, introducing it with “and then ...” or “but before that ...” The second lead in usually relieves the tension and often provides a note of humor.

Olsen warns, however, to stick to storytelling in the initial phase and to avoid engaging in spin or interpretation. Allow the story to emerge. The danger in this process lies in the introduction of a spin or the interpretation of the emerging story. After the story is complete, time should be spent reflecting on its meaning and significance for the church and the leaders. This can include making connections with biblical passages, theological concerns, or social or historical issues.

### *Story Telling Exercise*

Try this process at a board meeting. Select a starting place for a story that has happened recently within your church. Ask each leader to contribute to the story. Provide simply ground rules. Once the story has been shared reflect on its meaning. Discuss how the themes illuminate the congregation’s journey and the implications for leadership.

James F. Cobble, Jr. and Charles M. Elliott, Editors (Matthews: CMR Press, 1999) 148-150.

## Congregational Grief and Newness

This exercise is based on Gerald Arbuckle's chapter, *Gospel Communities in Rapid Change: A Spirituality of Grieving into Newness*. This module can be used to assist leaders in addressing corporate grief and move towards spiritual renewal. Share the introductory material with the entire group.

### *Introduction*

In his chapter, *Gospel Communities in Rapid Change: A Spirituality of Grieving into Newness*, Gerald Arbuckle, points out that grief is not only experienced by individuals, but by entire communities. Churches can experience loss in many ways. Sometimes churches close because they dwindle in size or can no longer sustain a financial burden. The traditions of the church may change leaving some with the feeling that cherished religious practices are disappearing. A leader may become ill. A building may be lost due to fire or a natural disaster. A tragedy may occur that takes a toll on the entire membership. Corporate loss can occur in many ways.

Arbuckle suggests that to respond to congregational grief we need a spirituality that helps us to cope with the death of irrelevant structures and pastoral methods and to move forward with risk and hope into the future. Part of the problem, he maintains, is a cultural one. Many cultures have rituals that enable them to engage in corporate grieving and letting go while at the same time they initiate a process of new life. Often, though, within Western cultures such rituals are absent. Arbuckle draws upon biblical traditions as one way to establish corporate grieving processes back into the life of the church. One source for this is the Psalms.

### *Group Exercise*

Divide your leadership board into two groups and provide each member with a copy of Psalm 137. Read the Psalm responsively; have one group read the odd and the other the even verses. When you are finished continue with a moment of silence reflection.

As leader, use Psalm 137 as a jumping off point to share a story about your church. When you are finished, ask for a volunteer to continue the story using the guidelines found in Module 4 above. When everyone who desires to share is finished, provide each leader with a copy of Psalm 138. Also read it responsively. Close with a prayer that emphasizes the theme of grieving into new life.

Arbuckle notes that this lament Psalm helps to articulate and legitimize the grief feelings of the community or of the individual. He comments:

The people feel deep in their hearts the loneliness and oppression that comes from being in a foreign and hostile land. The psalm allows them to articulate this pain over and over again, reassuring them that it is quite fitting to do so publicly. However, the ritual structure or form of the lament psalm also prescribes the way in which people must mourn to achieve a new relationship with Yahweh. They must struggle to let the loss go and to be open in hope to a vision of newness beyond all human comprehension.

In brief, the Hebrew scriptures are filled with calls to sorrow over what has been destroyed or broken down, if there is to be new life; through the lamentation psalms we are even taught how to grieve. We are constantly reminded that no matter how chaotic our condition may be, God has the power to do the humanly impossible – to lift us out of “the seething chasm, from the mud and mire.” He can “set my feet on rock” and make “my footsteps firm ... a fresh song in my mouth” (Ps. 40: 2,3).

James F. Cobble, Jr. and Charles M. Elliott, Editors (Matthews: CMR Press, 1999) 151-152.

### *Ritual*

Invite each participant to write down what they feel they've lost this year personally and as a faith community. Allow them the opportunity to write down as little or as much as they desire. Invite those who are willing to verbalize some of these losses so others can share in the lament. Gather the group together in the church yard around a fire. Invite people to place what they've written in the fire as a way of symbolically letting go of the past. Invite the Church Council President and Vice President to gather the ashes and bury them. Close the gathering time with a prayer, sharing of the peace, song and benediction.

## Listening to the Heart

*“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.” Ephesians 1:17-18a*

During these months of interim ministry we have occasionally used the word *discern*. What I’ve discovered during these months is that discernment is a patient process that cannot be rushed or hurried along. How does a person discern God’s dreams and God’s purposes for their life? There are specific tools that help us discern. These tools are worship, scripture, questions, silence, reason, dreams, prayer, images, storytelling and respectful listening. The Mission Profile Task force is guiding us through the patient process of discernment. They are appointed by the Church Council and called by God to keep us in the process of discernment until the will of God surfaces in the corporate consciousness of the congregation. They are like a team of archaeologists working together as they lead us in a process of sifting through the history, conflicts, challenges, opportunities, hopes, strengths, growth areas, disappointments and dreams of this body of Christ. Our job is to carefully sift through this stuff until we can see what God is up to and what God is calling the congregation to be and to do.

The Mission Profile Task Force has requested that each person in the faith community complete a questionnaire/survey. Your responsiveness to this request will provide the opportunity for the Mission Profile Task Force to listen to the heart of the congregation. As they sift through all of these responses they will be searching for God’s will, God’s purposes, God’s dreams, and God’s decisions that are resting deep within the collective soul of this body of Christ. Debra Farrington in her book *Hearing with the Heart* writes, “To discern means more than to understand or to make a decision. Discern comes from the Latin *discernere*; *dis* means apart, and *cernere* means to separate. Thus, from all the options before us, we *separate apart* those that seem uniquely suited to us. We do that when making a decision as well, but discernment, at least in Christian spirituality, implies that we take God’s will for us into account rather than simply our own desires.” The process of discernment seeks to go beyond all of our individual preferences and desires to the flowing Spirit of God in the heart of the Trinity congregation. My counsel to you and to myself as we continue through this interim journey is to be patient and to be responsive to the work of the Holy Spirit among us during these months.

*Let us pray ... Loving God, You are the Sacred Ground of all that we are and all that we do.  
Help us to bring to fulfillment your most wonderful dream for us.*

In Christ,

Pastor Mellum

## **Spiritual Practices Template**

The following is a spiritual practices template that aims to foster shared agenda building. It is to be used as tool to guide committees, task forces and teams in the church practice round table leadership.

- Chairperson and meeting facilitator is a lay person.
- The pastor and group affirm what Frank A. Thomas refers to as a “functional hierarchy of equality”. The pastor and group affirms round table leadership where people come to the table as the Holy Spirit calls them as elected leaders, appointed leaders, and invited leaders. Together we form a Spirit-led community. All are equally valued. All are equally called in baptism and believe they have something to offer. The pastor listens as much or more than he or she speaks.
- If it is an on-going team meeting that meets regularly the community takes responsibility for intentionally entering into biblical and theological reflection. A schedule is created where a member of the team prepares to share a prayer, scripture, and/or devotional. The facilitator intentionally leaves time for silence, storytelling and reflection among group members. If it is not a regularly schedule meeting the meeting facilitator takes the responsibility for leading this time of biblical and theological reflection. The weekly Sunday lectionary for the upcoming Sunday could be a faithful form of entering the biblical story. Our intent is to let the scriptures speak to us as we desire to hear God’s voice anew.
- The team practices round table leadership by building a shared agenda. The facilitator invites each person in the group to bring forth what they see as a topic for the agenda. The talkers do not define the meeting or its agenda. All people are invited to share what they are thinking and feeling. The facilitator simply goes around the table one person at a time inviting and expecting the good gifts that people have to offer. The facilitator then suggests an order of discussion that is approved or amended by the group. Each person also has the opportunity simply to share information about life or the ministry of the church that they feel they would like to share. These items might not be agenda items but are simply and opportunity for communication and fellowship.
- The pastor is welcome at these team gatherings but his or her presence is not contingent upon the meeting occurring. The team leader and facilitator take responsibility for communicating with the pastor if the pastor does not attend the meeting.
- The team seeks to be permission giving, process oriented, and patient in decision making. They allow time in meetings for feedback and brainstorming ideas. The decisions of the group are made in light of the mission, vision and core values of the congregation.
- The team takes responsibility for the decisions that they make together as a group and plan accordingly to carry out their decisions. The team takes responsibility for setting their meeting times. The team leader takes responsibility for making sure the meetings are placed on the church calendar and that the pastor and other appropriate staff are aware of upcoming meetings.

- The team meetings end in the Lord's Prayer or with another prayer that is offered.

The teams keep this in mind ... "The privilege of participation is agreeing that we will not function based on the cult of personality. It is the spiritual commitment to the standard of equality for each member of the body. We will not require one person to overfunction while most of us underfunction. We will grace each other with the status of equals and extend to each other the privilege to participate. We all need to give to each other the gift of letting information flow such that we can all make the best choices for our lives. The church hierarchy functions to disseminate information so that as many members as possible have the awesome privilege to participate, the privilege to make a meaningful contribution, the privilege to find fellowship and equal relationship, the privilege to have their gifts affirmed and respected, and the privilege to grow and develop by gaining new skills and experiences."

Frank A. Thomas, *Spiritual Maturity: Preserving Congregational Health and Balance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2002) 28, 33.

## Easter Dreams

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

*1 Corinthians 12:4-7*

What a compelling phrase the Apostle Paul chose as he taught the church at Corinth about what it means to be church. He taught them something simple and profound when he said, “*To each is given*”. We each are called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are gifted and Spirit-led people. “*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” When we are baptized into Christ we become part of a community that is bold to believe that everyone has something to offer. We are not spiritual spectators and anonymous pew sitters. We are ministers who desire to live for Jesus.

When I dream about the future of the church I envision a church that moves from being pastor-centered to team-based and mission driven. I long for a church where laity and clergy learn from each other, because together we are uniquely gifted. I dream about a church that understands itself as “an equipping place” where we are sent into the world to share God’s love. I dream about a church where each person in the community takes responsibility for his or her own spiritual life and chooses to struggle and grow as a follower of Jesus. These are dreams grounded in the conviction that “*to each is given*” a gift or service that longs to be set free.

As spring comes upon us I am noticing that my toddler twins Liam and Annika are discovering what many congregations would do well to discover. They’ve discovered that they can do more together than they can do alone. This discovery is scary, messy, adventurous, and fun. I dream of a church that lives in this same dynamic synergy where sisters and brothers in Christ discover God is up to something in their lives. We can do more together than we can do alone.

What dreams do you have for the church this year as we celebrate Easter? The Easter story proclaims that God has the power to roll away big stones and bring forth life out of death. What life is God calling forth? How do we participate in this new life? What gifts of the Holy Spirit has God activated in you for the common good? The Easter witness is that God can roll away whatever is holding you back from living for Jesus.

*Let us pray ... O God, help us dream new dreams and imagine new ways of being church together. Give us courage to go where we have not gone before. Give us eyes to see what you see in us. Fill us with energy and enthusiasm for the work that is set before us. Make us willing to follow you wherever you lead. Amen.*

Be God’s,

Pastor Mellum

