

Leading Change in the Congregation

SPIRITUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL TOOLS FOR LEADERS

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CHAPTER 1

Getting There from Here: Leadership and Change

Change is inevitable.

Excerpt from a vending machine.

—bumper sticker wisdom

I had just finished delivering a written report to a congregation that had asked me to work with them because they were experiencing quite a bit of difficulty. I had interviewed most of the active members and had returned to talk with them about what I had learned and to suggest steps they might take to address their problems.

With a clearly pained expression, one woman stated, “What you’re saying, Gil, is that we old dogs are going to have to learn new tricks. Is that right” This was obviously not a comforting idea to her and her husband, who sat next to her. His questions suggested they were not pleased that I had not simply identified who the “guilty” parties were and told them how to return the situation to the way things used to be.

The meeting soon came to an end, and within minutes one of the members of the governing board walked up to me and quietly said, “Thank God, this report might finally get us unstuck and moving on the things we really need to be talking about.”

It is not unusual to have these two voices in one congregation (often on one board or committee). They live side by side in our congregations, and leaders are challenged to learn how to listen to both, learn from both, and manage change in a time and culture that demands it, without forcing anyone into win/lose positions.

This is not a book about where your congregation is going. It is a book about how leaders can help your congregation get there.

That is not at all a subtle distinction. Leaders of congregations today need to develop the calmness of spirit and the skills and tools that address the needs of the congregation in the midst of change. Often leaders will not be able to define clearly the end destination of the journey. William Bridges in his recent books *Transitions and Managing Transitions* makes the point convincingly that managing change is not just about finding the new spot where you and your congregation are supposed to end up. Rather, it is often more critical to attend to and understand the steps and stages of the transition period that will, in fact, get us to a destination.

It may be neither possible nor sufficient for our congregations today to focus clearly on the goals or destination of our ministry. The environment in which we do ministry is both complex and constantly changing, which does not permit a simple and straightforward movement toward goals. People need help with the change process itself. Although this is not a new idea to leaders who have been working with congregations for the past several years, it certainly is a challenge quite different from those that faced leaders a generation ago.

Yet as far back as 1960 Thomas Merton published a little book called *Bread for the Wilderness*. The title of the book came from the Gospel story in Mark 8 in which Jesus instructed the disciples to feed the great crowd of people who had gathered for three days to listen to him. The disciples asked, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the wilderness?” Merton’s response to that question was this book on the Psalms, which he offered as nourishment for the inner life of faith for those who deal with the mix and the mess of the journey. Merton observed that in truly creative times, which prompt new behaviors and new forms of ministry, what we often need from our God, and what our congregations often need from their leaders, is

not a quick map to the final destination, the promised land, but “bread for the wilderness”—sustenance and strategies to help us find our ways.

Change

We are in a time of great change. We are facing changes not only in our congregations, but in our families, our workplaces, our government, our schools—and the list goes on. We are told that this is a time of shifting “paradigms.” The dictionary defines “paradigm” as a pattern, an example, or a model. These paradigms are at the very heart of our understanding of life, and times of great change like we are going through test our very assumptions about life. (My wife, who works in a hospital that is being bought out by a much larger health care conglomerate and whose assumptions about work and career shift and shake as each piece of news comes in, has warned me that if she catches me using the “paradigm” word once again, I’ll be eating alone for a week!)

But we are experiencing such large and encompassing “paradigmatic” shifts that the very assumptions on which we base our daily behavior are changing in often confusing ways. Take a quick look at the depth of the change that we are currently living in:

The world of sciences: The very assumption that science would enable us to understand and control the world has been challenged. Fritjof Capra was one of the earlier voices who introduced the learnings of the new sciences, particularly quantum physics, and their new lenses for looking at the world. We used to think of science as mechanical and assumed that if you reduce everything to its component parts, you will be able to understand and “fix” it.¹ Our beliefs about the “mechanical” nature of

our universe have been the foundation of our sciences, and Capra is very willing to admit that they have been the basis on which we have sent people to the moon and made discoveries and advances in medicine and a multitude of other areas. To look at the world only as a “machine,” however, can lead us to false or incomplete conclusions as well. These old assumptions can be very limiting.

The older mechanical paradigm has implications much closer to home for those of us in congregations. When we use and look at our clergy as “interchangeable parts” in the “machine” of a congregation, we quite often end up changing the clergy but keeping whatever problems we might have. We live with repeat performances of a problem that is much more organic and integral to the very fabric of the congregation and that just gets played out in new versions as we move to the next priest, pastor, or rabbi—the next interchangeable part.

The world of institutions: The modern American army has been transformed because it has been forced to confront its no-longer workable assumptions about the possibilities of a “cold war.” That reality was changed in November 1989 as the Berlin Wall was torn down by crowds of civilians. Gordon Sullivan, 32nd Chief of Staff of the United States Army, and Michael Harper, director of the CSA Staff Group, describe the shift in paradigm that they faced as they moved from “a bureaucratic industrial society” to an “information society.”² Because it no longer needs to be staffed and structured to meet the threats of conventional or nuclear war that were possible consequences of the cold war standoff, the army needed to become much smaller and quicker in order to respond in an age that moves with the quickness of information technology.

Again, an example of a similar shift closer to home is that congregations with problems can no longer look outside themselves to the regional, synod, presbytery, or conference office to get a hierarchical, bureaucratic “answer” that will fit everyone. Instead, congregations need to learn how to assess their own situation and learn how to experiment in the uniqueness of their own setting. This is quite a significant shift in congregations so used to doing what all other congregations have been doing. How often do you and I still hear leaders (clergy and laity alike) trying to solve a problem in the current moment by starting their sentence saying, “Well in my last congregation. . . .”

It is no wonder that congregations often feel turned upside down as leaders and members search for personal meaning and a way to provide faithful leadership to congregations at a time when our problems are not well understood and the solutions are even more clouded. Loren Mead has pointed out that congregations are living between old and new assumptions. A wonderful and remarkable opportunity for congregational leaders is to read and discuss together Mead’s argument in *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier*.³ He sees that congregations are caught between the old assumptions of the paradigm of Christendom and the new paradigm of an emerging time.

The Shift from Sameness to Difference

We are in a cultural shift from a time of honoring “sameness” to a time of honoring “difference.” Many of us grew up in congregations during a time when we expected our congregation to behave the same way as other congregations of our faith tradition. Much of this expectation was

based on our experience of a culture that reinforced sameness. I ask congregational leaders who attend continuing education events I lead how many different types of telephones they could choose from in 1947 if they wanted to get an extra telephone in their house. (Of course, it did not usually occur to people in 1947 that they might need or want more than one phone in a house.) But if you needed a phone, you got a “standard issue” telephone which was black, heavy, with a rotary dial and a wire that attached it to your wall. You got what everybody else got because the assumption was that if you needed a telephone, you needed what everybody else needed. This culture of sameness applied to our homes, our appliances, our social groups, and our congregations. If you were Methodist, you worshipped like all other Methodist churches, using the same liturgy as all other Methodists at 11:00 A.M. on Sunday morning. You had the same administrative groups and meetings on weekday evenings. You had the same Christian education groups, the same Epworth League, the same Women’s Society of Christian Service, and you sent your mission dollars to the same denominationally sponsored missionaries. The assumption was that if you were Methodist you did what other Methodists did, and if you were looking for a church, you could (and should) pick from any of the “standard issue” Methodist congregations that were near your home. After all, they were all the same in a one-size-fits-all world.

This uniformity among congregations was the outgrowth of the Christendom paradigm that Mead talked about in the culture of sameness: Congregations were understood to be made up of similar people practicing faith in a similar manner. In fact, he speaks about the purpose of the congregation, in its larger social context, as making good citizens. Citizenship itself was supported by the sameness of congregations, which undergirded and underscored the need for people to behave alike. Being a good member of a congregation and being a good citizen or good community participant were understood to be similar, if not identical. The lessons from that time

were sufficiently strong that they continue to form many of our current congregational leaders' assumptions. They easily turn to reminiscing about the way things used to be when confronted with a difficult problem today.

We no longer live in a time of sameness, however. We live in a culture that embraces differences. Just as people expect to find telephones in a seemingly unending array of choices, people seeking a shared faith require that congregations offer paths and programs to meet their specific and unique needs and desires. Churches now need to offer worship services specifically designed for the worshippers they hope to attract, short-term task forces that will accommodate the busy lifestyle of members in ways that standing committees cannot, several women's groups that fit the age and interests of their participants, and ways to support mission programs and missionary personnel that have a specific appeal or relationship to this one congregation. We can no longer assume that one United Methodist church will look like or behave like a neighboring United Methodist church. In fact, it is important that each congregation of any faith tradition be able to differentiate itself from other congregations in order to speak to and welcome people who come to the congregation with their individual needs. We no longer believe that one size fits all but that everyone is encouraged to find his or her own size.

The driving assumption about congregations today is that they each have a unique call to ministry, a call very much determined by the congregation's location and ministry with a specific and unique group of individuals, who have specific and unique needs and interests within the greater framework of the faith tradition. Ministry is no longer a matter of doing what we know how to do best. Nor is it adequate for congregations to continue to do what they did last year. The time and the environment continue to change at a pace that requires us constantly to evaluate, to learn anew what our purpose of ministry is, and continually to reinvent the

congregation to meet the needs that face us. We need to learn more at every turn before discerning the appropriate next step to take. Can you imagine what this does to planning and budgeting in congregations that are used to just looking at last year and asking, “What next?”

This shift from honoring sameness to honoring difference is a change that is as much cultural as it is congregational. In today’s culture, which so consistently honors differences, even buying an appliance is not simple any more. Typically, if you go to a store to buy a refrigerator—and you happen to be in a store that actually still has salespeople—the salesperson will quite naturally want and need to learn about you before beginning the conversation about the kind of refrigerator you want to buy. By learning about you, the salesperson will then be able to educate you about what you need in refrigerators—the amount of storage area; top-and-bottom or side-by-side doors; water, juice, or ice access from the front door panel; and on and on. For those of us who do not always shop where there are salespeople, magazines and publications such as *Consumer Reports* educate us and help us through the complex choices available in our culture of differences.

If it takes such work to buy a refrigerator, which is a fairly basic and standard part of our homes, consider what it takes to understand a congregation and its specific call to ministry. In our time, people wonder about their specific faith and family needs, and they will expect congregations to honor these needs.

Because of the complexity of our lives, congregations will be traveling different directions and will experiment with new and different forms of congregational life and ministry as they seek to share faith with people in this time of changing assumptions and paradigms. Researcher Nancy Ammerman from Hartford Seminary believes there is a good measure of experimentation and adaptation going on already within congregations because of the new

realities.⁴ She indicates that congregations in which leaders know well the histories, stories, and myths of the congregations will be helped through the time of change by their sensitivity to their uniqueness. Congregations that are comfortable handling conflict (the differences brought to them by their members) will find this skill helps them to manage transition. (She has also found that not all congregations are able to manage transition; some will be caught in unchangeable decline and death.) But her research, along with the research and experience of the Alban Institute and research by a number of major mainline denominations, continues to underscore the reality that there will be lots of different ministry “destinations” for our congregations in the next chapter of our histories.

We can no longer assume that all (or many) congregations are heading in the same direction. And we can no longer hope that denominational or parachurch programs or solutions can be counted on to solve our congregational dilemmas. In fact, the major conclusion of extensive work that was done by three national Lutheran church bodies and Aid Association for Lutherans (the “Church Membership Initiative” project) highlights the uniqueness of each congregation and the need for a unique ministry response from each congregation. In a booklet summarizing the findings of primary research that was conducted over a period of six years, researchers concluded, “Solutions are found within *individual*, motivated congregations *taken one at a time*” (emphasis added).⁵

So congregational leaders need to accept that, while it may be possible to learn from other congregations and from the programs many congregational workers are developing, the path of ministry is necessarily one in which each congregation and its leaders are going to have to develop their own learnings and make their own decisions in this culture of differences. There are no magic or standard solutions available in this time of change that honors differences. As I

often tell congregations I am working with, there is no cookbook to follow, no established rules that will get us there. That is true of any organization, not just congregations. When talking about the redevelopment of the army, Sullivan and Harper said:

The challenge for the leader is not to get “it” exactly right, because there is not an “it.” The challenge is to become “good enough”: good enough to seize and exploit developing opportunities, good enough to deploy your forces more rapidly than competitors, good enough to get it “about right” in execution.⁶

Similarly, in an article about the 21st-century CEO, one major consulting group is very clear that the attribute that will make the difference in the corporate world is not the ability to come up with “the answer” but the ability to be *organizationally agile* enough to find the right next step. “Passion for the business, alertness to opportunity, focus on speed and responsiveness, willingness to experiment with things as fundamental as distributions channels—these are characteristics of an agile organization.”⁷

Of course, congregations are not the army. And congregations are not businesses. Despite the economic realities that must be attended to and the fiduciary responsibility of board members, the purpose of a congregation cannot be compared to the military or management. Nonetheless, the need to find our own path and the fact that we cannot lay claim to “the answer” that fits all congregations is a situation we share with other institutions, corporations, and systems in this time of great change.

What, then, is the role of congregational leaders? It is to be faithful to the journey-to the challenge, the experimentation, the trial and error of ministry in a culture of change. And it is to be responsive. In Matthew 4 we read that Jesus turned to potential followers and simply said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” and the potential disciples “immediately” left

their nets and followed him. There were no questions asked and no clear promises given about where the trip would take them.

We do not live in a time of clear answers; we live in a time when leaders will need to use discernment and experimentation to guide their congregations through changes. I am continually helped by one of my favorite definitions of discernment in a faith community: “Discernment can be like driving an automobile at night; the headlights cast only enough light for us to see the next small bit of road immediately in front of us. Ultimately discernment requires our willingness to act in faith on our sense of what God wants us to do.”⁸

Two Fears in Congregations

It has long been recognized that fear paralyzes organizations as much as it paralyzes individuals. If leaders of congregations are responsible for motivating and organizing a process of faithful discernment without being able to describe and define the results before the journey begins, the leaders need to understand and to cope with the fear that could paralyze the congregational system.

Two essential fears face our congregations:

the fear of too much change, and

the fear of too little change.

Too Much Change

The fear of too much change is the fear of being out of control. As congregations look ahead to a time when they may be worshipping with a different order of worship, a new style of music, or

leadership roles that do not follow clear and distinct clergy/laity divisions, the fear is that something important will be lost in the process. “Let’s not throw out the baby with the bath water!” is the cry frequently heard from those who fear that change will grow out of hand. Our fears, often shared by leaders and members alike, focus on the possibility that we will lose something important to us or that we will feel uncomfortable.

We should not be particularly surprised by this reaction against change. As we will discuss later, this frequently encountered reaction—efforts to slow down or to stop change—has natural and healthy roots, according to a systems understanding of a congregation. The effort to minimize change, or to keep it from going out of control, is not the product of mean-spirited and uncaring people (although sadly it can be experienced in mean-spirited and uncaring ways.) It is, in fact, often the effort of a congregational or institutional system trying to keep itself in balance.

When leaders are confronted with resistance to the change they are proposing, they often, quite naturally, take the opposition personally. The pastor worries about why some key people in the congregation “don’t like me any more.” Lay leaders worry that the reaction to their leadership may interrupt relationships they have come to trust and value. As difficult as it is, clergy and lay leaders alike need to separate their personal feelings from the experience of resistance to their efforts, and they need to realize that a natural, expected reaction of any system to the introduction of change or uncertainty is the fear that things will spin out of control and that something valuable will be lost.

It may be helpful for leaders to play a little game that reminds us that resistance is a natural response to change and that we need to work through this response to find the treasures that can await us on the other side. This game is an opportunity to play with an idea for a bit, without having to be overly serious or produce any wisdom. It frees us to look at our immediate

situation from a new perspective. Simply invite two or three other leaders in your congregation (perhaps from a planning team or a governing board) to join you in a 10-minute structured conversation like the following:

A Game

(10 minutes total)

“It is the nature of people as they grow older to protest against change, particularly change for the better.”

—John Steinbeck, author

1. Ask group members to read this quote. Then invite them to think of as many examples as possible of changes for the better in the following arenas that were initially protested by people. (four minutes)

in the workplace

in the field of entertainment

in the church

2. With the remaining time, discuss what values and contributions we would have missed if these changes had not been made. (six minutes)

Too Little Change

One fear is of too much change, and the matching counter-fear is of not enough change—or the inability to get change started. A consultant colleague of mine uses the wonderful expression, “You can’t steer a parked car!” Many leaders in congregations, and a good number of impatient members, are often very concerned that leaders will not be able to bring about change because of the deeply rooted traditions and long-practiced behaviors that guide many of our congregations.

The concern is legitimate. Traditions and practiced behavior are strong determinants of resistance to change in any organization.

Again, congregations are not alone in facing seemingly impossible change. At some level, it is simply the way of the world to resist change. Consider this curiosity: The standard U.S. railroad gauge, the distance between rails, is 4 ft. 8.5 in.—an exceedingly odd measurement for standardization. Tracing back, we find the measurement was brought to the United States by English expatriates, who built the American railroads the way they were built in England. And tracing that history, we find the same standard was copied by the English railroad people to match the prerailroad tramways. That standard, in turn, conforms to the jigs and tools for building wagons, which used the same wheel spacing. And that spacing conformed to the spacing of old wheel ruts on old long-distance roads, because wheels and axle would be broken if they did not ride smoothly in the well-established ruts. And the ruts were developed through the use of these long-distance roads, constructed by imperial Rome for their legions and war chariots, which were built to standard specifications. The conclusion is that the 1997 U.S. standard railroad gauge of 4 ft. 8.5 in. based on the original specifications of the imperial Roman army war chariot.⁹ Can you imagine trying to change that tradition!

Yet consider the effect in our own faith communities of not trying to change. In a presentation to a small group of clergy, Leonard Sweet, Dean of Drew University Theological School, talked about his young son, who would come home from school with a friend, turn on the TV in one room, turn music on in another room, flop down with his friend in front of the computer and, using their computer's joy sticks, in minutes become deeply involved in a CD-ROM game that explored the human body in great detail. Sweet paused to reflect that his son was living in a stimulus-rich world. The youngster was not bothered or confused by music and

TV programming overlapping while he and his friend were engaged in a third activity. In fact, if the telephone rang, the two young people would simply add the phone to the rest of the stimulation with which they were surrounded; they would not even think about turning anything off in order to have the conversation. Beyond that, Sweet noted, his son and his friend were engaged in a computer game that was as inviting as it was educational, and that learning was being done on a collaborative basis as the two friends worked together to find their way through the graphics and the detailed information about the body.

And then, noted Sweet, following congregational tradition, his son goes to Sunday school, where he is presented with a one-dimensional flannelgraph board and students are told to sit quietly in rows and not interact with one another or the teacher. A noninteractive Bible story is told, and he is supposed to simply remember the story and do little else with it. If some of the members of a congregation fear that change will happen too quickly, others fear that it is not happening fast enough to allow the faith to speak to people living in a culture that has rushed past the way many of our congregations share and practice their faith.

This counterpoint of change and nonchange in many of our congregations presents competing challenges, like the ancient Scylla and Charybdis of classical mythology—the rock and the whirlpool between which leaders certainly think they are going to lose their ship.

What's a Leader to Do?

The first thing leaders can do is to relieve themselves of the pressure to come up with the perfect “answer” to an uncertain future that will keep all parties in the congregation “happy.” I cannot stress this point too strongly.

Many congregational leaders will be surprised to hear that their task is not to focus on the “happiness” (satisfaction) of the members. They are aware that because congregations are volunteer organizations, members can either quietly slip away or leave under loud protest if their needs and interests are not satisfied by what they find there. Clergy who are financially and relationally dependent upon their congregation are naturally very sensitive to any voices of unhappiness that might threaten their security. Lay leaders, though feeling dependent in different ways from clergy, are also sensitive to unhappiness or dissatisfaction in the congregation that might disrupt their relationships, severely complicate the responsibilities they have assumed in their congregation, or interfere with their own spiritual needs, which brought them to the congregation in the first place. So it is not unnatural for leaders to be highly sensitive to happiness or satisfaction in the congregation and themselves to resist or avoid steps that might disrupt the happiness.

But in a time when the environment is changing rapidly both inside and outside the congregation—when the very makeup of the congregation as well as the surrounding community and culture are changing—the focus on happiness and satisfaction is insufficient and, in the end, damaging. Happiness and satisfaction are very often measures of the status quo. If we say change is the thing that makes the most people the most comfortable most of the time, then nonchange is the thing that would make most of the people most comfortable most of the time. Yet a posture of nonchange in an environment of great change is not a position of faithful leadership. It is a formula for disconnecting the congregation from the very culture or community it has been called to address—a formula for decline and eventual death. Leaders must learn new ways to understand their congregations. They must learn to lead change without subjecting every

decision and action to the evaluation based on whether people are pleased or happy with the results.

Leadership and Management

One of the helpful distinctions that seems new to many of the participants in continuing education events I lead is between “leadership” and “management.” Although both these functions are needed by the congregation, they are not the same and they are not needed in equal measure at all times and circumstances. It is helpful and healthy for clergy and laity who have accepted responsibility in congregations to be clear about when they need to *lead* and when they need to *manage*.

“Managers do things right. Leaders do the right things.”¹⁰ This distinction by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, well-known consultants and leaders in organizations, expresses well the difference between the two functions of management and leadership. Managers are largely responsible for the stability and the efficient and smooth working of an organization. In congregations, managers are responsible for setting the budget, maintaining and repairing the facilities, making sure volunteers are elected and prepared to fulfill their appointed tasks or roles, providing the necessary resources, and making sure events are scheduled so that committees and groups are not in conflict over space or time.

Leaders are quite different. They do not ask the management question, are we doing things right? They ask the more difficult question, are we doing the right things? Leaders step out into the future to discern what God is calling the congregation to do in the next chapter of its life. Managers are the voice of stability in the congregation (and therefore sensitive to measures

of happiness or satisfaction); leaders are the voice of change in the congregation (and more sensitive to measures of purpose and faithfulness).

Make no mistake. Congregations need and depend upon both good managers and good leaders. A congregation that overemphasizes management will be stuck in a status quo that will eventually strangle growth and development in a changing environment. A congregation that over-emphasizes leadership will alienate members, by damaging or even removing the trusted behaviors and principles that provide a stable base from which members might take new steps toward change. In large, multi-level, hierarchical organizations, it is very clear who has leadership responsibilities (upper management and CEOs) and who has management responsibilities (middle management and project managers). But in very complex but hierarchically flat organizations like congregations, which have significantly fewer levels of organizational structure, the responsibilities are not as clearly divided. Clergy are often seen as simultaneously responsible for vision (the leadership question: Where are we called to go?) and daily operation (the management question: How do we keep everything operating smoothly?). Governing boards in congregations and key lay leaders, who are looked to as the primary voices of the congregation, are also expected to play both roles.

The dilemma is that the voices of management and the voices of leadership in organizations do not always get along well, because they have different functions or purposes. Consider the vignette Stephen Covey tells about producers, managers, and leaders.

You can quickly grasp the difference between the two if you envision a group of producers cutting their way through the jungle with machetes. They're the producers, the problem solvers. They're cutting through the undergrowth clearing it out.

The managers are behind them, sharpening their machetes, writing policy and procedure manuals, holding muscle development programs, bringing in improved technologies and setting up working schedules and compensation programs for machete wielders.

The leader is the one who climbs the tallest tree, surveys the entire situation, and yells, “Wrong jungle!”

But how do the busy, efficient producers and managers often respond? “Shut up! We’re making progress.”¹¹

Can you see that in an era of “sameness” (when it could reasonably be assumed that all congregations of any given faith tradition would be relatively similar, if not resolutely the same, in worship, programs, and organization) people would largely depend upon the practice of management? Our congregational leaders over the past generations were asked to provide effective management. They asked, appropriately: Are we being effective stewards of our resources? Are we satisfying the basic needs of people who come to one of our churches? Are things going smoothly? In an era of “difference,” however, the greater need is for leadership. All congregations need a healthy and appropriate balance between management and leadership, but when congregations need to learn new things and confront new realities, they need a greater measure of leadership. Visioning questions need to be addressed: Who are we? What ministry are we called to give? These two questions are the congregational equivalents of the corporate questions: What business are we in? What do we need to learn in order to prepare ourselves for what we are called to do?

The criteria by which we measure management are satisfaction and happiness (Are things going smoothly? Are we covering the bases?). The criteria by which we measure leadership must be quite different. We need to ask different questions about our ministry, such as: Is it faithful to

our understanding of our purpose? Is it responsive to a viable future? Is it open to people who are not yet here and not yet part of our congregation? Is it consistent with our core values? Does the change we are considering help us to respond to the previous questions? Will change help us to overcome the barriers to a viable future that we have been seeking?

The fact that effective leadership is not measured by satisfaction and happiness is difficult for congregational leaders, who often want to deal with members' problems and make things go smoothly. That is why often the first step to leading change in the congregation is for the leaders themselves to understand this essential difference between management and leadership and to prepare themselves for the quite different and less immediately satisfying role of leader.

A Word about Leadership

In a time of great change, leaders' responsibilities and roles are not about providing the answers or solutions their organizations are seeking. Leadership does not mean a wise or powerful individual imposes on others a vision or an "answer." Our American cultural mythology is full of stories about strong and wise individuals who ride in to rescue the day in the style of John Wayne, the Lone Ranger, Lee Iacocca, or Jack Welch. Our love affair with American individualism supports our telling stories about lone rescuers, and we sometimes believe that is what true leaders do—despite the evidence. This myth makes leading even more difficult for congregational leaders, who often do not see themselves or their personalities in such a mold and who know that they do not have the magic answer in their back pocket.

In fact, leaders are not the ones with irrefutable answers but the ones who can support others and help them ask the right questions. Leaders do as much listening as they do talking. As

visions are sought, leaders are the ones who keep the conversation alive and active in the congregation, allowing the vision to be shaped by past history, current practice, and future opportunities and call. They do not announce the conclusions about the future that they have independently reached as much as they enable a responsible discernment of the future by the group.

Leadership is a hot topic today because people in corporations, institutions, and congregations are trying to figure out what their organizations need from them. And the research and anecdotes are getting more instructive all the time. Go browse the business section of your local neighborhood bookstore and you will discover that it is hard not to be rewarded with a good find.

One helpful insight comes from Craig Dykstra, Vice President for Religion with Lilly Endowment Inc., who points out that there are several meanings to the word *vision*.¹² The one we are most familiar with and the one we tend to think of first is “foresight”—the future-oriented capacity to perceive what is not. This is an essential ingredient for moving the congregation toward something to which God calls it. Foresight means being able to look responsibly into the future and to describe changes that would be faithful to the purpose and the call of a congregation.

Too often, however, we short-circuit our full understanding of vision by thinking of it *only* as forecasting. The other meaning Dykstra points to is vision as “perception”—the capacity to perceive realistically what is present. Vision is also the ability to see, and help others to see, the way things actually are. Referring to the writings of English moral philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, Dykstra points out that perceiving things clearly is not at all a simple or common task and writes: “We do not see very well . . . because deep (but usually unnamed) fears distort

our perception. Ordinary perception is filtered through anxiety-ridden imaginations, filled with caricatures, bias, conventionality, and wishful thinking. We see mostly what we want to see and are blind to what we are unable or unwilling to let affect us.”¹³

Often a cynical or questioning public was frustrated with former President George Bush when he talked about “the vision thing,” because what they heard seemed more focused on *foresight*, which sounded more like fantasy than vision. Leadership requires both senses of vision, both foresight and an accurate and a caring *perception* of the current reality. And the essential task of leaders in a time of change is to keep the conversation going between the voices of perception and the voices of foresight in the congregation.

Not long ago I was teaching a continuing education workshop in Wisconsin and experienced a marvelous serendipity that offered a deeper insight into this. I was teaching a course on the leadership and management of congregational revitalization, and in the same conference center another consultant was working on leadership issues with a group of superintendents and principals of public schools. Both groups had opportunity to wander around during breaks and free time. On the second day members of the group I was leading began to come back from visits with members of the other group carrying “purloined” handouts. Members of our group were fascinated that the superintendents and principals were wrestling with exactly the same issues we were working with as clergy and lay leaders of congregations. By the third day I had bumped into participants from the other group and kidded them that members of my group were scouting them out. “Don’t worry,” they laughed. “During our breaks some of us come and stand outside your door to listen to what your group is talking about, and at night we come in to copy from your newsprint.”

Apart from the fascination that what we are wrestling with as congregational leaders is both interdisciplinary and fundamental to all organizations, one of the gifts of that encounter was the definition of vision that the public school leaders were using. It began, “Vision is a continuous conversation to define clearly the results a group of people want to create.”¹⁴ The vision in congregations needs to be about more than the results a group of people want to create. It also has to reflect our discernment of the will of God for our future. But it must grow out of “a continuous conversation.” Leadership in our congregations today requires that clergy and lay leaders manage a continuous and healthy conversation between the reality of perception and the possibility of foresight that they keep the vision alive. Leadership is not about being able to announce the conclusions of the conversation to the congregation in ways that will convince and satisfy everyone. It is about “reading” the congregation and gaining some intuitive or reasoned understanding of how to continue the conversation.

At the heart of this book are tools—ideas, models, lenses to look through—you can use to understand how your congregation is responding or reacting to changes that face them. Based on your understanding of the congregation, you can then make decisions about the most helpful way to continue the conversation of faithful visioning of a yet unclear future. This book incorporates some of the tools I have used in my work with congregations.

A Few Assumptions

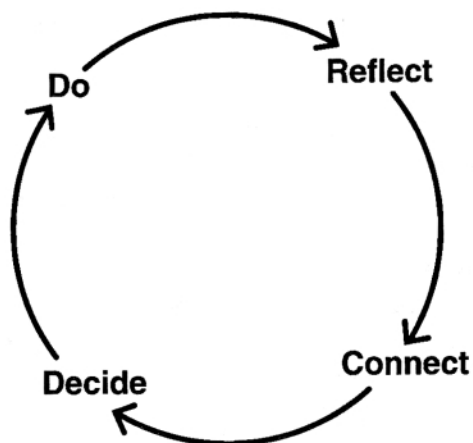
Before we look at the tools, however, I want to identify several assumptions or guidelines that need to be honored as we work with congregations facing change. I invite you to consider these assumptions and to explore your reaction to them as a leader who will undoubtedly face the

ongoing task of helping to negotiate changes facing your congregation in this time of wonderful opportunities.

1. We are seeking new learnings, not following old rules.

This assumption was explored a bit above, but it is worth repeating here because we need to pay as much, or more, attention to how we help our congregations negotiate the changes that face them than to our ability to “deliver them safely on the other side.” This is a time for you as a leader to support adult learning in the search for new ways.

The four components of the adult learning cycle are as follows:



Adults learn best when they pause after *doing* something to *reflect* on what they just did and what they learned from it. This new learning is enriched when they then *connect* their new learnings with previous experiences and insights that can help to inform their reflection on what they just did. Then with this new learning in place they make a *decision* about next steps and then implement (*do*) those steps.

The dilemma many of our congregations face is that we have been practicing management and seeking stability for so long that we spend almost all of our time on the left half

of the cycle, simply asking our leaders to do and decide over and over again without finding time and opportunity to reflect and connect. Board members often are asked to pack six or more decisions into one night and then to struggle to identify the person who will be the “doer” and make it happen before the next board meeting.

In a time of sameness, such strategies tend to work because the basic issue managers are trying to work with is how to make things go smoothly. And in stable periods, much of management centers on doing again what has been done in the past. Management requires little reflection or connecting in search of new learnings. But in times of great change, when leadership is needed and there are no ground rules about next steps, the left-hand side of the cycle must be informed by the right-hand half of reflecting and connecting. In fact, many congregations are experiencing so much change that their governing boards and leaders need to spend more of their time and energy on the right side of the cycle than on the left.

Because there is no recipe to get us through change, and our future faithfulness depends on new learnings, congregational leaders need to spend time “learning” about their perception and foresight without feeling disappointed if the meeting does not include decisions. Meeting in some space other than the board room to talk, study, and pray about the congregation and its future—without the visible reminders of the board room to make them feel guilty about not making decisions—can bear much fruit.

2. Change will produce conflict, which is good and not to be avoided.

Conflict is “two or more ideas in the same place at the same time.” Conflict is not necessarily a “fight.” But it is the engagement and working out of differences. Working with the different ideas that produce conflict is good in a time of change. If your congregation and the leaders of your

congregation have only *one* idea, you are probably in trouble if you are facing a time that requires adaptability and experimentation. An old truism says, “When we don’t know what else to do, we do what we know.” Too often “what we know” is the only idea a congregation has about its present and its future. But in a time of change, more than one idea is good. Out of the “conflict” of more than one idea comes energy, motivation, clarity, and direction. Without such conflict, which is the engagement of differences, it is very hard to responsibly meet a changing future.

Now this assumption suggests that our congregational leaders and members need to be better prepared to respond to more than one idea. All too often people have a very limited repertoire for dealing with differences. They center their efforts on persuasion and winning. In the final chapter of this book, I will offer some ideas about responsible behavior in congregations as communities of faith during times of change. Along with learning about conflict management, clergy and lay leaders need to be aware of their own comfort and personal preferences when dealing with two or more ideas in the congregation. This is a part of the larger need for congregational leaders to be informed about and trained in managing conflict.

3. We need to appreciate experimentation and failure.

Our congregational culture, learned in a time of stability and sameness, has trained us to assume that everything we try in our congregations must not “fail.” Far too often we evaluate efforts by counting the number of people involved or the dollars raised or spent. Far too often we fail to evaluate efforts by asking, What have we learned?

Learning requires the hard work of analysis, discussion, and discernment. This learning, often referred to as the “up-front” work, can lead to effective action later. The willingness to experiment with new programs or approaches will provide new information, which will in turn

support the learning necessary in a time of change. Using resources to experiment and to gather information is not wasted, it is not a failure, if the information is used for learning in order to further discern the future. Congregations need to be able to follow the lead of other organizations and institutions in valuing, and celebrating, experiments and failures in their ministry. In a time when the people and dollar resources available to congregations are increasingly shrinking, we need to help people understand that experimentation is not a waste of time and dollars.

Responsible experiments and valuable failures are those that lead to further insights about what God is asking of us.

4. Leadership is essentially a spiritual issue.

Congregations are faith communities. Their ongoing purpose is to introduce people to a relationship with God through the disciplines of their faith tradition, which can be life changing. Their corporate purpose is ultimately to be faithful to the call of God within the understanding of their faith tradition.

This book will try to blend the understandings of our faith traditions with the learnings of the human social sciences and the experience of leaders in corporations and institutional settings such as government, hospitals, and universities, as well as in congregations. Ours is a time in which people are seeking and learning across many of the fences and the barriers, such as the self-contained disciplines of the university or the divisions between the sacred and the secular, that we used to so willingly honor. This interdisciplinary effort is one of the richest gifts and opportunities of our age.

Nonetheless, the congregation is a *faith* community and will ultimately find its place by clearly shaping its spirit, not its structure or its programs. Leaders in congregations need to

remember that some of their most essential learnings will come from their Bible study and not from their budget reports. Leaders in congregations need to understand that the freedom they seek in order to move with confidence into the future will come from the strength of their spirit and not from their track record with attendance or financial giving.

In fact, while listed as the last of the assumptions to be honored by leaders in congregations, this assumption about the spiritual nature of the work of leaders is perhaps the most critical. In the next chapter we will explore this spiritual nature of leadership.

Exercises for Leaders

The following exercises can certainly be done by the reader alone. You will probably learn more, however, if you do the exercises with several other leaders and use your responses as a basis for further conversation about leadership in a time of change. Similar exercises are provided at the end of each chapter.

1. Discuss the following questions:

What excites you about being called to be a leader of your congregation in this time of change?

What frightens or concerns you about being called to be a leader of your congregation in this time of change?

What new behaviors or practices of leadership might you need to consider, and what old practices or behaviors might you need to reconsider so you can effectively lead your congregation into the future?

What might you have to learn in order to be a faithful leader of your congregation?

2.

A. Based on the four guiding assumptions at the end of this chapter, assess yourself on the following scales.

X Place an X on the scale to indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the assumption.

L Place an L on the scale to indicate how strongly you think the *core leaders* of your congregation agree or disagree with the assumption.

C Place a C on the scale to indicate how strongly you think the *members of your congregation* agree or disagree with the assumption.

1. We will need to commit time and energy to reflecting on and connecting with our experiences as a congregation as well as to deciding and doing.

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
Agree Disagree

2. Conflict (the presence of two or more ideas) is essential to our future.

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
Agree Disagree

3. We need to appreciate experimentation and failure as ways to learn more about our ministry.

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
Agree Disagree

4. We need to pay attention to and learn more about our spiritual lives if we are to provide leadership for our congregation.

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
Agree _____ Disagree

B. Draw the above four scales on a piece of newsprint and invite all participants to place their X's, L's, and C's on the appropriate scales. As a group, identify and discuss the patterns in your responses. What views do you share? Where do you differ?

NOTES

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3. Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1992).
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5. *Church Membership Initiative: Narrative Summary of Findings/Research Summary of Findings* (Appleton, Wis.: Aid Association for Lutherans, 1993), 3.
6. Sullivan and Harper, *Hope Is Not a Method*, xxi.

7. "The 21st-Century CEO: Senior Executive Insights for Now and the Future," *CSC Index* , 1 (El Segundo, Calif.: Computer Sciences Corporation, 1997).
8. Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 27.
9. "Caesar's Ghost," *Utne Reader* (August 1997), 32.
10. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategy for Taking Charge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 21.
11. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 101.
12. Craig Dykstra, "Vision and Leadership," *Initiatives in Religion* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 1–2.
13. *Ibid.*, 1.
14. From Charlotte Roberts, Sherrills Ford, N.C., June 25, 1997.