

Leading Missionally in Times of Change: Learnings and Unlearnings

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Opening

Maggie Brooks grew up in a small Native American reservation in which nearly everyone older than twelve drank alcohol. After sobering up in her twenties, she spent more than a decade leading her people toward health. Now a grandmother in her forties and a tribal elder, Maggie counsels a steady stream of visitors in her home throughout the day. One evening, she told her visitor about Lois, the woman who first inspired her to try to do something about the alcohol dependency among her people.

“Twenty years ago I used to baby-sit for Lois, who lived in a neighboring band within our tribe. Once a week I’d go the few miles to her community and take care of Lois’s little ones. But after about two months, I started to wonder, ‘What could Lois possibly be doing every Tuesday night? There’s not much to do around here in these villages.’ So one evening after Lois left to go to the meeting lodge, I packed up the children and went over to the lodge to find out what she was doing. We looked through a window into the lodge and saw a big circle of chairs, all neatly in place, with Lois sitting in a chair all by herself. The chairs in the circle were all empty.”

“I was really curious, you know, so when Lois came home that evening, I asked her, ‘Lois, what are you doing every Tuesday night?’ And she said, ‘I thought I told you weeks ago, I’ve been holding AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings.’ So I asked her back, ‘What do you mean you’re holding meetings? I went over there tonight with the children and looked through the window. We watched you sitting there in that circle of chairs, all alone.’

‘Lois got quiet – ‘I wasn’t alone,’ she said. ‘I was there with the spirit and the ancestors; and one day, our people will come.’”

Lois never gave up. “Every week Lois set up those chairs neatly in a circle, and for two hours, she just sat there,” Maggie recalled. “No one came to those meetings for a long time, and even after three years, there were only a few people in the room. But ten years later, the room filled with people. The community began turning around. People began ridding themselves of alcohol. I felt so inspired by Lois that I couldn’t sit still watching us poison ourselves.”

Lois and then Maggie worked on becoming sober themselves, and then challenged their friends, families, and neighbors to change and renew their lives, too. Leading these communities required extra ordinary self-examination, perseverance, and courage. Their native history was full of people, some of them with goodwill, who had forced tribes to give up familiar and reliable ways, and now these communities were being asked to change again, with no reason to think that things would get much better. Lois and Maggie were asking people to face the trade-offs

between the numbing solace of alcohol and the hard work of renewing their daily lives. There would be no progress until they had put alcohol dependency behind them. But people found it extremely difficult to give up their way of coping, particularly for some intangible idea about the future. They had fought back before when others had made them change their ways, and they fought Lois and Maggie.

The two women were mocked and marginalized. They spent years feeling out of place in their own communities, unwelcome at parties and gatherings where alcohol flowed, so ostracized that even holidays become lonely, solitary events. Indeed, for long stretches of time they spent weekends off the reservation to find people they could talk to. They had put themselves at risk, as well as key relationships with neighbors, friends, and family. Eventually, they succeeded and survived. But for a long time, they could not know. They could have lost everything. (Leadership on the Line, 9-11)ⁱ

Leadership is a dangerous endeavor. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky remind us of this in this the opening story in their book, *Leadership on the Line*. They assert that “Leadership would be a safe undertaking if your organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions.” (Leadership on the Line, 13) Leadership would be *less* risky if it did not require challenging people and organizations to change – to change their way of doing things, to change their way of seeing themselves, and to change their way of thinking. “To change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves,” Heifetz and Linksy say. (Leadership on the Line, 27) Leadership is a dangerous endeavor.

Leadership in the church is no different, especially in these times. The church is in the midst of major changes – radical, paradigm shifting changes. Christianity in the southern hemisphere is experiencing remarkable growth; Christianity in other parts of the world is struggling. Philip Jenkins offers some insights into these changes.

The growth in Africa is relentless. In 1900 Africa had just 10 million Christians out of a continental population of 107 million – about nine percent. Today the Christian total stands at 360 million out of 784 million, or 46 percent...Within the next twenty-five years the population of the world’s Christians is expected to grow to 2.6 billion (making Christianity by far the world’s largest faith). By 2025, 50 percent of the Christian population will be in Africa and Latin America, and another 17 percent will be in Asia...By about 2050 the United States will still have the largest single continent of Christians, but all the other leading nations will be Southern. (Jenkins, “The Next Christianity”)

This news is exciting and creating angst. While there seems like some good news here for Christians in the United States, most mainline denominations reflect less than good news. Church bodies that were once thriving, or at least holding steady, are now experiencing decline. For example, my denomination,

the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA,) has been experiencing a steady decline in membership since the mid-to-late 1960s. Specifically, in the period between 1991 and 2003, the ELCA's baptized membership dropped from 5,245,177 to 5,100,00, a loss of about 150,000 people. (Innskeep report) Today the ELCA reports 4,543,037 members (in 2009), a loss of another 556,963 persons. (ELCA website, accessed 9.23.2010) In this 18 year period, between 1991 and 2009, ELCA membership reports a 13% loss. (And these numbers do not take into account congregations/members that have or are currently in the process of leaving in light of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.) And the ELCA is not alone; Missouri Synod Lutherans, United Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians have similar stories to tell. Yet during this same period of time, Baptists and Roman Catholics experienced notable growth. Some of this can be explained by the changing face of immigration in the U.S., but what else needs to be taken into account? Something is going on in our time that needs to be unpacked. It's time for church leadership to not only receive such information, but also to engage it, to seek to understand it, so that we might faithful lead in the midst of it.

Today the church finds itself at a cross roads. Craig Van Gelder states it this way:

Just as the culture can be described in one sense as postmodern, and our approach to the Bible as postcritical, so also the relationship of the church to contemporary North American culture can be described as post-Christian...we are experiencing the end of our particular version of Christendom. The post-Christian reality of contemporary culture means that the church no longer has a privileged position and can no longer expect to receive preferential treatment. It is becoming just one more truth claim in the midst of a plurality of alternative truth claims, all of which are seen as relative. (Van Gelder, "Defining the Center," 41)

How the church responds to this reality will be largely dependent on leadership. Church leadership is at a cross roads.

Will church leaders continue to utilize past leadership patterns or will leadership break such patterns and discovering a new way? How will the church, as a whole and in particular the mainline church, find its way? Since the 4th century the Christian church in the Western world has been working toward being part of the establishment, the center of the community. Yet this era in which we are now living marks the end of this movement. Douglas John Hall says it this way, "What was born in that distant country, namely the imperial church, now comes to an end. That beginning and this ending are the two great social transitions in the course of Christianity in the world." (Hall, 1) If we, church leaders, are honest with ourselves, the imperial church, and the Christendom paradigm that resulted, offered opportunities, as well as great hindrances for sharing the gospel and helping Christians discover a

Christian way of life together. Taking time to critically reflect on those opportunity and hindrances is one aspect of the work of church leadership. Given the fact that this dramatic shift is taking place on our watch as leaders within the church, the call to take up the task of discovering a way forward is urgent and the responsibility great. We, church leaders, find ourselves at a cross roads and it's time to find our way.

One lens that might serve as helpful is a missiological one. Missiologist Ralph Winter suggests that for the church to fulfill its call to participate in God's creative and redemptive mission in the world it has to have two structures. These two structures date back to the New Testament church. The first structure was established along the lines of the Jewish synagogue. It was the local, intergenerational community, often consisting of the gathering of biological family units. (Winter, 122) The second structure was a missionary band, which replicated the evangelistic outreach that operated throughout the Roman Empire. (Winter, 122) The missionary band or outreach teams were sent out by communities; they were dependent upon the local community, as well as autonomous and self-sufficient. Neither of these structures were divinely appointed and both utilized current structures of their time.

The profound missiological implication of all of this is that the New Testament is trying to show us *how to borrow effective patterns*; it is trying to free all future missionaries from the need to follow the precise *forms* of the Jewish synagogue and Jewish missionary band, and yet to allow them to choose comparable indigenous structures in the countless new situations across history and around the world – structures which will correspond faithfully to the *function* of the patterns Paul employed, if not their *form*! (Winter, 123)

How might these two impulses shed light into our current situation?

These two structures are the foundation on which the church was built; one shaping the parish church or congregational setting and the other the monastic tradition or mission agency. These structures led to the growth of the church and created a tension within it. As the local expression of the church became ingrained in the culture, the missionary structure increased in significance, offering another expression. (Winter, 126) Winter names these structures modalities (synagogue and/or parish) and sodalities (missionary band/outreach teams). Modality is the "structured fellowship in which there is no distinction of sex or age, while a sodality is a structured fellowship in which membership involves an adult second decision beyond modality membership, and is limited by either age or sex or marital status." (Winter, 127)

Mission efforts across time have been deeply influenced by these two structures. Winter states that "Almost all mission effort in the Nineteenth Century...were substantially the work of initiatives that

were mainly independent of the ecclesiastical structures to which they were related.” (Winter, 133) In other words, during this time mission efforts became separated from the modality or local, intergenerational faith community. By World War 2, the two structures became more independent, as a whole new group of independent mission agencies were birthed. As a result, rather than creating a checks and balance system holding each other accountable to participating in God’s creative and redemptive mission in the world, there grew confusion about the relationship between the two structures. The result was blindness to the need and legitimating of both structures.

Today it is assumed that the modality structure is significant and essential to the church. (Winter, 136) Yet, it also recognizes that God, through the Holy Spirit, is at work within sodality structures as well, yet many are unsure of how these efforts relate to “church” overall. Hence I agree with Winter’s suggestion that it is time “to help church leadership and others to understand the legitimacy of *both* structures, and the necessity for both structures not only to exist but to work together harmoniously for the fulfillment of the Great Commission, and for the fulfillment of all that God desires for our time.” (Winter, 136)

We are living in a time of transition, a time when the church needs to express itself within local communities or modalities and missionary bands or sodalities. Without a sodality express, the church is hampering its participation in God’s work in the world and lessening its evangelical nature. This is a time when missional leadership is needed for God’s church to be vibrant in engaging God’s world.

As a leader living in a time between, a time between what has been and what will be, I sense many of us leading communities of faith can empathize with Lois. Leadership is a dangerous endeavor, and we know it. We’ve experienced it first hand, we’ve heard stories of the dangers other leaders have taken on, and we’ve witnessed what happens when public Christian leaders take risks. Yet, we also know that God has a mission, a promised and preferred future for God’s people and God’s world. So as the world continues to change, we accept the call to lead in this time, in this place. Leadership is a dangerous endeavor, especially in the midst of difficult and confusing times. Yet ignoring this reality doesn’t change anything. Reliving the past is not an option. A way forward is needed.

Today I join you as missional leaders living in between, seeking to find a way forward. As someone trying to honor the impulse of both the local, intergenerational faith community and the specialized missionary band, I have had to loosen my hold on past learnings and open myself to new ways of thinking and being. In that spirit, I bring two gifts. The first is some learnings, or bits of wisdom I have discovered living in between. The second is thoughts around what I have had to unlearn, or shifts

that have taken place in my own way of thinking as I have sought to lead missionally in the midst of this change.

Four Learnings:

1. As a public Christian leader, I've rooted my leadership perspective **theologically as well as theoretically**.

Leading God's church in this time and place, I have had to find a place to root my leadership perspective. As a public Christian leader, I've rooted my leadership *theologically first and theoretically second*. While this may sound obvious, leading in a congregational setting trying to address today's current demands of ministry, the tendency is, and the pressures are, to frame our work pragmatically and instrumentally. Don't get me wrong, I have my share of pragmatic tendencies...and I do believe that the church, and congregations in particular, need to care deep about their actions and reflect on what impact these actions have. Yet, missional leadership in these changing times cannot have pragmatism as its foundation, and theory as its primary conversation partner. This approach narrows our viewpoint and discounts our primary convictions, namely that public Christian leaders have particular commitments about God, humanity and the world and those commitments should lead, rather than follow, our actions. In other words, theology leads theory. The hard work in front of missional leaders is not making our way through the great abundance of theoretical resources available to us. The hard work ahead requires deep and critical engagement with our present situation using our primary discipline – theology. Within theology there is a wealth of resources available, resources that I would argue have been underutilized. Yet, the engagement with these resources will have to happen differently than in the past.

This is not the time or place to fully construct a missional theology around leading in the midst of change. But as a starting point, or at least as an example, let me share some particular theological ideas that may be fruitful. First, there is no greater paradox in the Christian life than that of discovering what it means for God's people to be *simultaneously saint and sinner*. The paradox here is that it's not an *either/or*, but an *and*. Being saint and sinner is evident in all areas of our life – in our relationship with God, in how we interact with others and the world, in our organizational life, and in our leadership. Perhaps because leadership is already such a dangerous endeavor or perhaps because we live in a society that strives to create polarities, God's people, in general, and leaders, in particular, have not fully embraced this theological convictions from a leadership perspective. In other words, public Christian leaders have not live into and out of this core theological commitment. As a leader, what does it mean

to be fully saint *and* fully sinner? What does it mean for all people within faith communities to freely acknowledge this paradox in their everyday life? What would change within faith communities if they were to acknowledge this conviction publically, naming both the sinner and saint aspects of their life?

Second, we are *people with a promise*. Christians live with the promise that it is by grace that we are saved, through faith and this is not based on anything we do, but is a gift from God. (Eph 2:8) This promise is radical, counter cultural, and unbelievable. And that is what grace is; a radical gift of unconditional love given to us by the God that creates, redeems and restores us and the world. It is a gift for all of the world, and it is a gift for me. It is a theological convictions and it is a personal testimony. It claims our lives in the here and now, and it reorients our future. Yet, do we live as people with a promise? And do we lead as people with a promise? And what does it mean to be people of promise in radically changing times? Do we move into leadership with the understanding that our life, leadership, and agency are only a response to what God has already done?

Third, we have *means of grace* – sacraments given to us, the body of Christ, to tangible participate in God's mystery. Underneath our church traditions and liturgies, before our church polity and governance, and in the midst of our daily living, God's people are invited into sacred practices, moments when the realities of time are reorder, when our sinful nature is transformed, and when the pain and brokenness of this world gives way to witnessing God's kingdom now. God is present in, with and under ordinary earthly elements. These means of grace are communal, and they are personal; they center and reform; they are earthly and heavenly. And while these means of grace are to be understood theologically, they are first and foremost intended to be experienced and to shape God's people as they discover a Christian way of life together. What would it means to loosen our hold on these means of grace, and open ourselves to letting these means transform us, as leaders, and as missional communities of faith? Do we trust in their power? Do we believe in their source? Can we live within the great sense of mystery that accompanies them? What changes might take place if the means of grace where the first move within a community in finding their way through complex and chaotic times?

Finally, God's people have a particular story that shapes their identity; Christians are a people centered on the *Living Word*. The Reformation believed in the power of Scripture and sought to make it accessible to all people. Just like the sacraments have the power to transform, Scripture also has such power. We are a people with a story and in that story God is revealed in the world. In the story we discover who God is and who God's people are; we learn about the nature of God and what it means to be named Christian. Leading missionally in changing times requires that God's people know their story,

can tell their story and can differentiate God's story from other stories. No longer can Christians rely on the cultural meta-narrative to tell the Christian story. Whether you see this as good or bad news, it is the new reality. So what if God's Word, God's living Word, centered faith communities and their leaders? How would an active engagement with Scripture shape our leadership?

These theological commitments are part of God's creative and redemptive work in the world. Actively engaging them in light of the current situations faith communities face informs how we, communally and personally, participate in God's mission in the world.

2. Seeing leading as both an **individual act, as well as a communal responsibility.**

A second learning is that *leadership is both an individual act, as well as a communal responsibility*. This may also seem like a given. Yet as I engage in leadership conversations with seminary students and congregational leaders, the primary orientation for leadership is the self. While I would agree that our individual actions matter, and that we, as leaders, should be attentive to our gifts for, role as, and work in leadership, the self is not the overarching umbrella for understanding leadership. Leadership is a communal affair, and a communal responsibility.

One can come at this understanding from two different angles, theoretical and theological. For example, Heifetz and Linsky remind us that leadership is a dance between one's individual actions in leading change and the communal or shared ownership needed to make change happen. Hence, a shift has taken place within organizational and leadership theory from seeing leadership as a trait, personality, or particular skill-set to viewing leadership as the interactions between leaders and followers, the ability for a group of people to accomplish something, and/or how a vision has the power to move people to realize something beyond what they could have done on their own. These ideas represent the theoretical angle around communal leadership.

But there is also a theological angle for framing leadership communally. In baptism, Christians profess that the Christian way of life is a shared life, life lived in community. Our triune God is communal in nature. God is God's self only in relationship with God's self and the world. We, as God's people, have the same identity. We are who we are in relationship to one another and the world. In fact, we discover who and who's we are in the face of the other. We are persons with particularity and uniqueness, at the same time when we are only persons in relation to another.

Given that this is who God is, and who we are in relation to God, leadership must follow suit. Leading, then, is inherently communal. Relationships are core, and it is this commitment that provides the overarching umbrella for leadership. The person is not disregarded here, or enveloped into the whole. The person, the leader, has agency, their own contribution, role, gifts to offer. Yet individuals do not bear the weight or responsibility of leadership alone.

This perspective turns many traditional views of congregational leadership on its head. And while the church as a whole has not adopted this point of view, new questions are being raised about leadership, especially pastoral leadership. Jackson Carroll in *God's Potters*, a book laying out findings on the current state of pastoral leadership in the United States, both Catholic and Protestant, addresses some of these issues.ⁱⁱ One of its claims is that pastoral leadership is in a state of flux.ⁱⁱⁱ In an effort to define pastoral leadership as an occupation, he puts forth three “models of ministry.” These models are not mutually exclusive, but rather highlight a primary or defining characteristic. The three models are pastoral leadership as an office, ordained ministry as a profession, and ministry as a calling. (Carroll, 16-25) Personally, public Christian leaders have an active role in leading and any one of these three may be the primary influencer of one’s leadership at any given time. Yet leadership in this time of flux and public Christian leaders need to be attentive to all three, not only within their own life, but also within the lives of those whom they are leading with. Leadership is a sacred trust given to a community. Attending and stewarding that trust is the work of not only the pastoral leadership, but of the community as a whole.

3. Knowing the difference between **adaptive and technical change** matters.

A third learning has to do with the ability to identify *different types of change*. Change is a broad term used to talk about many different things. Change can mean transition, it can mean a one-time event, and it can refer to shifts in worldviews. Change can be continuous and progressive, or it can be disruptive and discontinuous. One key differentiation of change comes from Heifetz and Linsky’s identification of *adaptive and technical situations*. They say that “the single most common source of leadership failure we’ve (Heifetz and Linsky) been able to identify – in politics, community life, business, or the nonprofit sector – is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.” (Leadership on the Line, 14)

So, what are adaptive and technical situations? Technical change situations are “problems for which they [people] do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures.” Technical problems are situations that have been encountered before. Based on what has been done in the past, leaders apply

those learnings to current situations to resolve technical situations. But not all situations can be resolved that way. There are other problems as well, problems that “are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high.” These are adaptive changes “because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community.” Without learning new ways, people dealing with adaptive challenges cannot find a way forward. For an adaptive situation, “The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.” (Leadership on the Line, 13) In technical situations, the people look to the leader, the authority, or the professional for the solutions to problems. Yet, “when people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction.” (Leadership on the Line, 14) For adaptive challenges do not have simple instrumental responses. Such challenges require leadership, not just the leader, to go deeper, getting to what lies beneath. This means identifying and addressing the very things that frame one’s way of being. It’s naming what has often been left unnamed. It’s recognizing assumptions and operating commitments. This is hard work and takes time; the deeper the challenge, the greater the need for excavating one’s paradigm. This work requires people to be open to examine and rethinking given values and assumptions. Such work puts the leader at great risk, for in adaptive work, “you have to engage people in adjusting their unrealistic expectations, rather than try to satisfy them as if the situation were amenable primarily to a technical remedy. You have to counteract their exaggerated dependency and promote their resourcefulness.” (Leadership on the Line, 15)

What’s the work?	Who does the work?
T: apply current know-how	T:authorities
A: learn new ways	A: The people with the problem

Much of the work that the church is facing these days is adaptive. It requires digging deeply into operating assumptions, and messing with people’s assumptions challenges their very identity (one good reason for keeping God’s people connected to God’s living Word). Yet without personally and communally getting to the root of these assumptions, two things happen. First, the work of handling the situation (or situations) gets placed on the wrong party. Technical situations are reconciled by looking toward people that have the solutions, the “experts” or people that have particular knowledge or experience. Many of our congregations treat all situations in this manner. Any situation or problem is to be solved by the pastor, the committee, or an expert in the field. Treating all situations this way creates

a posture that transfers responsibility for the problem *from* the people experiencing the problem *to* others. The irony here is that in doing so, people create a treadmill of busyness that leads only to disappointment. The cycle looks something like this – the community puts pressure on a select few, often the pastor, to solve a problem. When the problem doesn't get reconciled, the blame game begins. Often this results in replacing the leader, or the committee or the expert, and then transferring responsibility to them, setting the cycle in motion again. What is needed is communal responsibility, together seeking to discover not only the problem, but also pathways toward solutions.

Second, the reality is that adaptive issues will not be solved through technical approaches. It's not only the posture of leadership that is, it's the issue itself. It usually takes a while to identify adaptive issues, not only because people are bent toward seeing things technically, but also because communities have to peel back the many layers in order to discover the source of the situation. These layers usually surface as technical problems. Discovering adaptive issues are similar to trying to identify the culture around us – we know it's there, we rely on it every day, and yet we cannot exactly see it or describe it. It's so "normal" to us that we think everyone sees things the way we do. So time, patience, and a willingness to ask hard questions are needed.

Leading missionally in these changing times, means learning to identify the difference between technical and adaptive situations *and* learning how to lead the adaptive change process. It's learning NOT to take on the responsibility of solving the situation, and instead help a community continue to hold on to their responsibility of working through the situation. It's learning to NOT have all the answers, and instead ask probing questions that delve into the consciousness of a community's shared practices and identity. It's learning to NOT only listen to the community, but to also be open to hearing other voices and perspectives that might help give insight into what's actually happening.

4. Understanding **universal claims, as well as contextual realities.**

Finally, leading missionally in these times of change means expanding one's theological frame. As a theologian trained in the confessional tradition of the Lutheran church, I developed a particular theological foundation and gained a deep respect for robust and refined systematic theology. Particular theologians and streams of theological thought have shaped me and the ecclesial tradition that I'm a part of. This emphasis in my education offered a particular theological hermeneutic which served as a foundation for my congregational leadership. Yet, embedded in this education was the assumption that deep knowing of a particular theological hermeneutic would not only make one an orthodox, in this case

Lutheran, theologian, but that is would also equip one to be a good pastoral or congregational leader. This bend of theology, if you will, was on “rightness” to certain theological claims, not on the particulars of ministry settings and of engaging God’s people in their everyday lives.

While I value this confessional training, and am still a proponent for including those aspects in our seminary education, I have also witnessed its limitations, particularly evidenced in these changing times. These limitations are exposed as we, church leaders, take universal theological claims and unilaterally apply them to all people and in all situations, ignoring other voices that might given insights into more fully understanding what God is up to *in this* time and place. Yes, there are universal claims that Christian have about God, but these claims *must* be put into conversation with contextual realities, the particularities of living a Christian way of life in any particular geography and historical location. The Christian faith is an incarnate faith. God came to earth embodied, in the flesh. God not only loves all of creation, but God also limited God’s self in order to become part of that very world. In order for us to lead missionally in these times of change we must attend to the contextual realities in front of us and engage in the messiness of everyday life.

Richard Bliese, in his essay “Lutheran Missiology: Struggling to move from Reactive Reform to Innovative Initiative” says:

the need for a fundamental evaluation of our European theological foundation for doing mission in a changing North American context seems long overdue. This evaluation needs to be conducted by practical *and* systematic theologians. If a body of theology does not or cannot clarify the church’s witness within a particular context, fundamental questions must be ventured. (Bliese, 217)

So just as the two structures best serve the church when in dialogue, so too do universal claims about God serve the church most faithful when they are put into conversation with specific contextual realities. Bliese challenges the Lutheran church to get out ahead of ourselves and proactively seek to construct a frame for such engagements. Lutherans, Bliese claims, have tended toward a missiological posture of “reactive reform,” rather than an “innovative initiative.” (Bliese, 216) “[R]eform’ as a permanent theological posture is insufficient for mission vitality. Every church must discover, finally, some basis for its own tradition’s missiological genius... Does Lutheran theology lend itself to the creativity and innovation needed to think missiologically in our changing environment?” (Bliese, 217) I believe it can, but to do so will require missional Lutheran leadership to take up the task engaging both their theological convictions and the current contextual realities.

Practical theology is one way of creating such a conversation, and can bring together Lutheran thought with active engagement of lived experience. Don Browning, for example, has four questions that can serve as a frame: Where is God in what is? What do normative texts say? Is this theology coherent, congruent, and ethical?, and What languages, relationships, strategies, and practices best accomplish the mission and ministry?^{iv} Such a framework honors systematic theology, while also acknowledging and giving voice to other theological perspectives. Practical theology makes action and reflection an explicit part of the work of theology. Action and reflection take seriously the contextual realities, believing that God's active and present in such realities and calls us, as theologians and leaders, to engage not only the work of trained systematic theologians, but also all of God's people, evoking and equipping them to be about the work of thinking theologically about all of human action. Working within a practical theological lens allows us the opportunity to not only draw on our training as people seeking to craft coherent and congruent theological frameworks that guide God's people to faithful living, but it also makes room for engaging the messiness of life, acknowledging God's activity within it, and helping God's people discover a Christian way of life together in this world.

Transition:

These learnings, basic in so many ways, have given me the courage to participate in the risky endeavor of public Christian leadership. They ground my assertions and challenge me to boldly take up the task of leading missionally in such radically changing times. Discovering these learnings, while it has been hard and perplexing at times, draws on my natural bend. Unlearning, or letting go of operating assumptions, on the other hand, has been a harder thing to undertake. While there are many reasons for this, one of the biggest is that unlearning challenges my habits and paradigms, things that are deeply embedded in my way of seeing the world. These things are our blind spots, and if you are like me, you'd rather not have them pointed out. But if we don't, and if they are not attended to, they can become obstacles for moving forward with the new learnings we have received. So, with that said, it is as important in these changing times to be willing to unlearn things, as it is to learn new things.

Unlearnings:

1. No one has the answers.

A sad, but true reality is that no one *out there* has the answers to many of the questions of our time. While quick fixes are what our human nature seeks, *no quick fixes exist to the situations we face*. I must confess that for many years I thought I, as a leader, was the problem. When confronted with a

congregational situation, I looked for various ways to address and “solve” that problem, and when the problem did not resolve itself I naturally assumed the problem was me. I hadn’t found the right answer, or engaged the right people; I hadn’t done due process. The reality is that going to another conference, reading another book, or consulting another expert is not going to give you, the leader, the concise answer you are looking for, given your particular situation. The answer is not discovered from looking backwards and repeating what others have done. The reality is - ours is a time of discovery and the way forward only emerges in the present, having seen the past and imagined the future. This reality means finding a way forward is a slow process that requires listening and inquiring, more than speaking and asserting.

While this is a hard pill to swallow, I am comforted as I am reminded that most of life itself is such a journey without easy answers. Life itself emerges only out of discovery. Life is a journey, one that can be imaginative and surprising, especially when taken on in community. Margaret Wheatley says, “life needs to link with other life, to form systems of relationships where all individuals are better supported by the systems of relationships where all individuals are better supported by the system they have created.” (Finding Our Way, 25) Life does not unfold linearly, but rather from within a network that’s life giving. And life is not afraid of chaos or change or even complexity. “Everywhere life displays itself as complex, tangled, messy webs of relationships. From these relationships, (however) life creates systems that offer greater stability and support than life lived alone.” (Finding Our Way, 25) Chaos is not the goal, working together is. “Life seeks organization, but it uses messes to get there. Organization is a process, not a structure.” (Finding Our Way, 27) Wheatley says:

the process of organizing involved developing relationships from a shared sense of purpose, exchanging and creating information, learning constantly, paying attention to the results of our efforts, coadapting, coevolving, developing wisdom as we learn, staying clear about our purpose, being alert to changes from all directions. Living systems give form to their organization and evolve those forms into new ones, because of exquisite capacities to create meaning together, to communicate, and to notice what’s going on in the moment. These are the capacities that give any organization its true aliveness, that support self-organization. (Finding Our Way, 27)

Wheatley speaks of organizations, basing her claims on the discoveries of new science. We, as people of faith, also make claims about life based on what we know and believe about God. We know that God seeks to be about life, and abundant life at that (John 10:10). We know, as our baptismal theology affirms, that life flourished in community. We believe that we are Easter people, and that abundant life is found on the other side of death. We believe that God is continually participating in the

creating, redeeming and sustaining life on earth. And God invites us into this creative and redemptive mission, as co-creators and as the body of Christ; as individual people of faith and as communities of faith. God has given us the ability to be creative, to engage in seeking life, even in the midst of death. This is what I need to remind myself of when I encounter radical change; when I want to become rigid and closed, I must rather remain open and seek to discover God's life-giving activity within the change. When my operating assumptions are challenged, I retreat and strategize my defense, rather than connect (or reconnect) with others and rest in the assurance that the Spirit is present and that our common practices are not empty rituals, but places where God promises to be.

Etienne Wenger states, "Since the beginning of history, human beings have formed communities that accumulate collective learning into social practices – communities of practice." (Finding Our Way, 172) And Wheatley adds, "Communities of practice demonstrate that it is natural for people to seek out those who have the knowledge and experience that they need. As people find others and exchange ideas, relationships develop and a community forms. This community becomes a rich marketplace where knowledge and experience are shared. It also becomes an incubator where new knowledge, skills, and competencies develop." (Finding Our Way, 172) Our way forward is not with easy answers or quick fixes; it is journey of seeking and discovering together, in Christian communities of practice that remain open to God's continual creative and redemptive work in their midst.

2. Change is not good or bad, in itself.

Change, in and of itself, is not the issue. *Change is not good or bad.* What matters is how leadership deals with change; how I/we view change and what I/we do with change. Change is what's "out there," how one views change or responds to change it is "in here." You see it's our attitude, behaviors, responses to change that matter and frame any given situation of change. Let me give some examples. Adolescence, and all the changes that accompany those years of life, is a reality. Physical changes (we can create a long list of those changes) are not, in themselves, good or bad. Growing taller, for example, might be great if you are a basketball player and bad if you are a gymnast. What frames the changes that occur in adolescence? Peers, families, society, media, tradition, activities, etc. Now think about that same process with other changes. Moving. Additions to one's family. Death. New Job. New technology. You get the picture.

Societal change that impacts the church, or change within the church itself, can be positive or negative, for life or against life, based on various factors. So, how do public Christian leaders frame

leading in the midst of change? Will we be resisters or seek to control it? Or will we be open and adaptive? Wheatley believes that in our day there are two overarching stories regarding change, the old one and an emerging one.

The old story asserts that resistance to change is a fact of life. Bound by a world view that seeks stability and control, change is always undesirable. But the new story explains resistance not as a fact of life, but as evidence of an act against life. Life is in motion, constantly creating, exploring, discovering. Nothing alive, including us, resists these great creative notions. But all of life resists control. All of life reacts to any process that inhibits its freedom to create itself. (Finding Our Way, 28)

My colleague at Luther Seminary Patrick Keifert frames it this way. He believes that church leaders have been aware of the cultural realities and their impact on the Western mainline church for some time. Yet, he asserts that they have been living in, what he calls, adaptive denial. Adaptive denial is the constant reframing of one's view of church so that one doesn't have to change their way of being church and doing ministry. (Keifert, Luther lecture) In other words, some church leaders are keeping the church captive by holding onto the old story's view of change, believing that it is a faithful and effective response.

I want to suggest that if missional leaders are to find a way forward, a way toward abundant life, then we must let go of the old story's view of change, and the posture of resistance, and accept the new story's posture. In so doing we change not only our way of thinking and being, but they also set the stage for others as well. "Leaders who live in the new story help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness; they welcome the surprises we bring them; they are curious about our differences; they delight in our inventiveness; they nurture us; they connect us." (Finding Our Way, 30) Believing that God's in the midst of change, this posture of engaging change can open up possibilities, allowing life to spring forth in our midst. Missional leaders are called to believe it and be witnesses of a new way!

Change can also be death and life; sorrow and joy. Yet, change is not the issue. There is the opportunity for abundant life to emerge out of all circumstances. What matters is how we frame change. And seeking to reframe change allows for all change to be learning opportunities. Change can be the organizing force or the transformational moment. Don't let your fixating on change distract you from attending to the deeper work that needs to be done.

3. My **perspective of time** had to change.

One of the things I had to reframe for leading in the midst of change was my *perspective on time*. Human's perspective of time is culturally framed, as well as impacted by various situational factors. At the dawn of the 21st century in the United States, the overarching concept of time is shifting; it is shifting from one of coherence to one that is segmented. Today experiences are episodic, seemingly unrelated one to another. Clearly, one's age or location has an impact on this reality, varying the degree to which this is true, but as a whole, this reality is a general shift that is taking place in the United States.

In addition to our cultural framing of time, situations impact our view of time. Think, for example, of our human response to radical change. When faced with crisis, or even surprise, our perspective of time narrows. Suddenly the past and future are not significant. What matters is the immediate situation. All our efforts go toward responding to what's in front of us, seeking to regain stability and order. This human tendency often gets played out on a larger scale for leaders or communities in times of radical change. This tendency, however, is the exact opposite view of time that is needed. Missional leadership requires widening one's time horizons in the midst of change.

Human beings, in order to be vital and healthy, need to be able to function in the present, knowing their past and believing in their future. If one of those dimensions of time is taken away, or if one is unable to connect these various dimensions of time, that individual loses some of their ability to function. For example, a person suffering from depression has somehow lost their future story and loses hope. A person without an understanding of their past, as in an adoption or memory loss, struggles with fully crafting their own identity. To faithfully and effectively lead in times of rapid change requires operating within and moving back and forth through all three dimensions of time – past, present, and future. Having an understanding of the past, while keeping an eye on the future, can allow one to appropriately frame and attend to the present.

One practice of reorienting our perspective of time comes from Heifetz and Linsky, it's called going on the balcony. Going to the balcony is "an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, 'What's really going on here?'" (Leadership on the Line, 51) Being on the balcony means taking one's self out of the fray, at least mentally, getting some perspective of the situation *with yourself* in the picture, and then returning to the situation. This requires moving from participant, to observer, and then back to participant. "The challenge is to move back and forth between the dance floor and the balcony, making interventions, observing their impact in real time, and then returning to the action. The goal is to come as close as you can to being in both places simultaneously, as if you had one eye looking from the dance floor and one eye looking down from the balcony,

watching all the action, including your own.” (Leadership on the Line, 51-52) Moving back and forth, from participant to observer is a skill one learns.

For public Christian leadership reorienting time means placing our story into a larger story – the overall Christian story and the story of our particular faith tradition. These stories have past, present and future aspects. One role that leadership has in a faith community is to reorient the view of time.

As Christians our perspective of time is altered. We have a future story written, salvation is ours. This reality frees us from the world’s sense of time and opens up new possibilities. Not only that, but our God has a history, God has been faithful in the past. God has not abandon God’s people in the midst of change before, God will not abandon us now. Our work is to discover and discern God’s presence in our midst. How do we do that? We remember who God is and how God has been in relationship with God’s people in the past. We reclaim God’s promises for our future and remember how faith orients our life together. Living by God’s time is different than living by the world’s time. You can be sure that in the midst of crisis or radical change, leadership will be pressured to let the world’s clock dictate their perspective, yet we have the opportunity as God’s people, to cling to the gift we have been given that has a different view of time. With an eternal perspective and a glimpse of our future, Christian leaders can exercise patience and offer a different perspective.

One practical way of living into and out of this time perspective is the communal engagement of Scripture. As we have already noted, for Lutherans engaging Scripture is a communal activity. As a community of faith dwells in God’s story and the story of God’s people it centers and holds them, giving them not only particular identity but also a particular perspective of time, God’s perspective. As God’s Word is publically proclaimed in worship, we, as Lutherans, believe we are changed in the hearing, presented with the law and gospel, convicted for the things that bind us and freed for living into a new reality.

4. Change is not about me/us. It’s about God and God’s world.

Finally, as a missional leader, I need to remember my place in this change process. One of human’s first responses to change is to take it personally, it’s hard not to react personally to change when we are involved in it. But as public Christian leaders we are called to lead God’s church in God’s world centered on God’s mission. In other words, *we, as leaders, are not the reference point (neither is a particular parish or congregation) – God is.* This reality is both freeing and scary, it’s empowering and paralyzing. It’s freeing because God’s so much bigger than we are and resting in that truth allows us to hand the

situation over to God. But it's also scary because we can get lost in the midst of these changes, not knowing where we fit in, what we can contribute, or where we can even begin making a difference. God is the primary agent in God's mission; we, as God's people, have agency and are invited to participate with God. We are co-creators and we are the body of Christ, but it is God working in, through, and among us that makes that possible.

Leadership is a dangerous endeavor. And at the heart of danger is loss. (Leadership on the Line, 26) "Leadership becomes dangerous, then, when it must confront people with loss." (Leadership on the Line, 13) Loss cuts us at our core. Public Christian leaders know that they are about God's mission in the world. Yet as people that are saints *and* sinners, when faced with dangerous situations in which no easy answers exist, we can lose sight of who and who's we are, disconnecting ourselves from our true identity in Christ. How does this happen? We learn habits, we adopt attitudes, we shift our values over time and in so doing, find ourselves in a different place. Heifetz and Linsky reminds us that no matter what, "Habits, values, and attitudes, even dysfunctional ones, are part of one's identity." (Leadership on the Line, ?) Our hope comes not from trusting in ourselves, it comes from reconnecting ourselves to the source of life and to the gospel message. For "The hope of leadership lies in the capacity to deliver disturbing news and raise difficult questions in a way that people can absorb, prodding them to take up the message rather than ignore it or kill the messenger." (Leadership on the Line, 12) There is a great paradox here – "It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be." (Finding Our Way, 117) And it is possible to boldly step into the dangerous endeavor, because we know abundant life is found on the other side of the cross. So, as we hold on to a glimpse of God's future, knowing who created, redeemed, and sustains our life, individually and communally, we are reminded that change is a dangerous endeavor, but we can engage it because it's not about us.

Conclusion

French author, Antole France writes, "All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind is part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter into another."^v (Bridges, 24) God's creative and redemptive mission for the world is about life, abundant life. We, as missional leaders, seeking to find a way forward in these changing times have been charged with discovering how we will be church in this time and place. On our watch, major shifts are taking place within the world, Christianity, and the church. Now is the time for innovative missional initiatives; initiatives that lift up the local, intergenerational faith community, as well as specialized missionary efforts, as God's people seek to participate in God's creative and redemptive mission in the world.

This presentation has highlighted four learnings from one that has ventured into this dangerous endeavor called leadership. These learnings were: rooting ones perspective theologically, as well as theoretically; seeing leadership as both an individual act and communal responsibility; being able to differentiate adaptive and technical situations; and putting theological claims into conversation with contextual realities. It also acknowledged that leading in the midst of radical change requires unlearning some things. The four unlearnings were: no one has the answers, there are no quick fixes; change in itself it not good or bad; our perspective of time needs to change; and it's not about me, it's about God and God's world. While discussed as separate categories, these two clusters of learnings and unlearnings inform and complement each other. They have a dynamic relationship. One without the other is insufficient, yet together they begin to create something powerful.

"Maggie Brooks grew up in a small Native American reservation in which nearly everyone older than twelve drank." (Leadership on the Line, 9) Because Lois, her elder and an elder of the community, believed in a new future for her people, Maggie's life was changed. Lois saw different possibilities for her life, the lives of her family and friends, and for her whole community. This future she imagined was discontinuous from their present situation, and there were no pathway charted to move forward and no guarantees of success. Yet Lois did move forward. How did she do it? She faithfully and courageously changed her ways. She stopped drinking herself. And she invited others to do the same. It was a risky endeavor, and there was loss as well as gain in the journey. The stakes were high, but people's lives were in danger.

Decades from now, when church leaders look back at this time in history, I wonder what story they will tell.

ⁱ This story opens the book, *Leadership on the Line*. It is adapted from Sousan Abadian, "From Wasteland to Homeland: Trauma and the Renewal of Indigenous Communities in North America" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1999). The names have been changed and the story altered to maintain confidentiality.

ⁱⁱ Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* is part of a large research project on pastoral leadership in the United States taking stock of the state of both Catholic and Protestant pastoral leadership. Ten research reports (available at no cost on the Public and Pew web site – www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu) and seven books have been written based on the learnings from this research. *God's Potters* attempts to provide a descriptive portrait of today's clergy, drawing from three data sources: a major national phone survey of clergy, twenty-three focus groups of diverse participants from seven regions of the country, and a national survey of congregations done in partnership with the U.S. Congregational Life Survey.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of factors contributing to this reality are the redefinition of clergy and lay roles, the opening of ordination to women in many Protestant denominations, the growing shortage of clergy, the increase in number and proportion of older (second/third career) entrants to ministry, and the public scandals of clergy moral failures. Carroll, *God's Potters*, 13-15.

^{iv} Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive*, 8. For a full leadership hermeneutic using this frame, see Terri Martinson Elton, "Leading in the Midst of Change: A Theologically Grounded, Theoretically Informed Hermeneutic of Change," *Journal of Religious Leadership*, vol. 7, no. 2, Fall 2008, 13-38.

^v Quote found in William Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 24.

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