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# Leadership Ventures

Newsletter of the Congregational Life Centre

## Transforming your Congregation

Shifting to greatness is what we see ahead for the church. Last newsletter talked about individuals making a shift to the point where they can provide the constructive leadership the church is crying out for. This newsletter is about leading our congregations through the deep changes that transform them from yesterday's model to tomorrow's powerhouse.

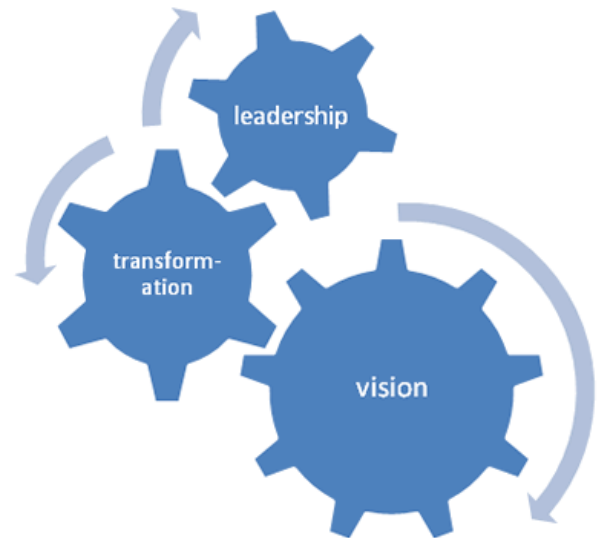
We use the term "transformation" rather than "reformation" for a very good reason. Martin Luther started a reformation when he nailed a list of propositions to the door of his church in Wittenberg November 17, 1517. In doing so he was issuing an academic challenge to anyone in the Catholic Church of his day to enter into a debate. One thing changed that innocuous challenge into a full scale movement – the printing press. A printer made a copy and began to sell them. Within two weeks Luther's fighting words had spread across Germany and within a month across Europe.

What that reformation was about was a change in the source of religious authority. The Catholic Church said that it had the authority to interpret scripture. Luther insisted that scripture stood on its own, and he had every right to interpret it in a different way.

Today we are in a time of *transformation*. A transformer changes one kind of power into another. Electrical transformers change the 2,000 volts in that line strung between power poles into the 220 volts we can make use of in our houses. The transformation in the church is changing the way we read those scriptures so the church has real power to make a difference in people's lives.

### The Transformation Guru

When we are clear about our mission, we know why we exist. If we are a Christian church,



our mission is to establish the just society that Jesus called the Kingdom of God right here in our neighbourhood. The vision of a new society that Jesus had does not change. What does change is our neighbourhood as urbanization, secularization, globalization take place. The question then is how to make Jesus' vision a reality in this new situation. That is our mission, and to carry it out means transforming the church from a child of the industrial revolution to the communications powerhouse that is needed today.

William Bridges was the pioneer who realized there were three phases in any effective transformation process: the ending, the neutral zone, and the new beginning.

*The ending* has to be a clean break with the old way of doing things or thinking about things. It is not easy for us human beings to let go of baggage we have gotten used to carrying with us, even if it is weighing us down. We need to be freed to move ahead by committed leadership

*Our mission is to encourage possibilities*

that knows there is a better way, even though they may not be totally clear about what that better way is. This is the kind of leadership that is willing to risk a voyage of discovery, knowing that to continue doing things the way they have always been done will continue to give the same results – a dying church.

Then comes that in-between stage, *the neutral zone*. Yes, Star Trek probably got the phrase from William Bridges. There is bad news and good news about the neutral zone. The bad news is that it is an uncomfortable place to be. You will hear loud voiced, “Why don’t we just get on with it.” If pressed, there is no clarity about what it is that they want to get on with, except it will not be that different from what has been done in the past.

Søren Kierkegaard, the 18th century Danish philosopher, likened the in-between time to being “out on the deep over 70,000 fathoms of water.”

We have found Robert Quinn’s image of building the bridge as you walk on it very helpful. The world today is changing so quickly it is next to impossible to look forward five years let alone ten to create a plan. Entering that neutral zone means not knowing what that new beginning will be. Sometimes it is not knowing whether a new beginning is possible. But you go on, knowing that to stay where you are is the recipe for a slow and increasingly painful death.

The good news is really good. The neutral zone can be a time of great creativity. If you are willing to put your anxieties on hold all kinds of helpful ideas will emerge. Don’t leap on to any right away. A wise teacher once said your first idea will be what you think you ought to do. Your second idea will probably be what you feel comfortable doing. The third idea may well be what God is calling you to do – the thing that is really needed.

The task of the leader is to keep things moving slow enough so there is time for those really creative ideas to emerge. The over-zealous need slowing down, the hesitant need time to catch up. It’s that kind of a balancing act.

Then comes the third phase – *the new beginning*. For the Israelites, the new beginning was entering the promised land. Jesus talked about the need to put God’s new way ahead of family traditions or cultural expectations. In the early church the Jerusalem council opened the door to people who were not Jewish becoming

followers of the new way. Risky, each one of these, but the results were outstanding.

### The Promised Land

The promised land today is Jesus’ description of the Kingdom of God – God’s New Community. Across the church there is the dawning realization that the fascination with “saving souls” that dominated the medieval church and mesmerizes contemporary evangelicals is way off base. What Jesus was about was a transformation of society from the domination by Roman and Temple elites to a radical egalitarianism. The last were to be first. The weak were to be supported. The strayed were to be forgiven. Those who asked for help would receive it.

It’s there in his initial declaration in the Nazareth synagogue. “God has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when God will free this people.” (Luke 4:18-19) That is the promised land.

For years, centuries actually, the church has stressed the need to follow its rules and regulations in order to get right with God. The transformation that is taking place is that here and there, and in a number of people everywhere, the call of Jesus to care for our neighbour is being taken seriously. “The greatest commandment is this – to love God with all your heart, strength, mind and spirit, and your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus made it clear that if anything separated us from that neighbour, handling that was our first priority. Then and only then would it be possible to develop a deeper relationship with God.

A new day is upon us. The time for reformation is past. We are now in the middle of the Great Transformation. It is a time to either join in with God’s flow of history, or get out of the road as congregations recapture the mission that Jesus envisioned – being partners in the creation of God’s New Community.



## Book Review

# Practicing Reverence

an ethic for sustainable earth communities

Ross Smillie, the author of this new book from Wood Lake Publishing, captured me with this humour at the beginning of the introduction:

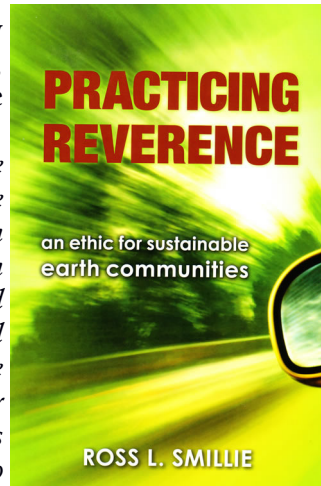
*A plane filled with passengers hit some severe turbulence during the flight. There was a bright flash of light and an alarming loud bang. The pilot came on the intercom and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that we were hit by lightning and all of our navigational and communications instruments are shorted out. We have no radio, no compass, no GPS. We have no idea where we are or what direction we are going in." The captain paused, and people looked around nervously at each other as they absorbed the news. Then the captain continued, "But the good news is that we do know our airspeed, and we are making very good time."*

Ross feels this "encapsulates the spirit of our times." Where are we going in the church? Where is society going? We do know we are getting there in a real rush as everything speeds up from individual agendas to global communications.

Ross Smillie's prescription is to examine our ecosystems, the forests, wetlands, grasslands and deserts that recycle our water and keep growing things healthy. For him, the healthy communities we cherish have to be embedded within thriving natural systems. "When natural systems are healthy, we have the best chance of enjoying good health and good life."

There is documentation aplenty in the book of the ecological problems we face. One-third of the carbon dioxide being emitted into our atmosphere is absorbed by the oceans, turning them slightly more acidic and threatening important sea life like coral. We are over-fishing our oceans, over-cultivating our land, and over-polluting our air. The question is then, what can we do about it?

Smillie's answer has to do with ethics – "what is right and good and fair, what makes for a good life. Exploring the field of ethics can help us learn



to live a life that is good for individuals, communities, other creatures, and the natural systems of which we are a part."

A key issue for society today is its emphasis on the rights of the individual over against what creates strong community. The book reminds us that we are social creatures, and the emphasis on individualism has led to much loneliness and isolation. This is a place where the church can play a key role, providing a place where people can be accepted for who they are and find a community that supports their

development as whole human beings.

For someone interested in what it means to be an ethical human being in this changing world of ours, this book offers many insights. I found it an interesting read on its own, but I suspect it would yield the greatest benefit to those who took the time to be part of a study group moving through it at a thoughtful pace. The book ends with these words:

*In converting to a life that is more respectfully integrated into the ecosystems of which we are a part, the journey we need to make will be less like walking a straight path and more like walking the narrow and twisting path of a labyrinth. For as we seek to leave behind economic, technological, and religious practices that are destructive of the ecosystems on which we depend, it is not at all clear what new practices will sustain us. We need to embark on a journey whose destination is not clear. We will need to change and change again, trusting that even dead ends will still help us in the process of our transformation. If the turning spoken of in the old Shaker hymn can stand for our transformation then it may indeed be that "to turn, turn will be our delight, 'til by turning, turning we come round right."*

Ross Smillie leads the ministry team at St. Andrew's United Church in Lacombe, Alberta. *Practicing Reverence* is available from Amazon.com for \$21.24.

## Words to brand by

Christopher White

Our congregation is in the early stages of a branding process. In the beginning, I thought that it was just about a logo and a mission statement. But it's much more than that. It's about our essential identity as a community of faith and how we deliver that throughout every sector and moment of the church experience - from when you first walk in the door, through to worship and even governance. It's about understanding, telling and integrating our story.

Branding is something that the private sector takes very seriously, and there is much that church people can learn from it. In fact, if you read business literature these days, you will notice something quite interesting: writers are using the language of faith, values and evangelism - just as we seem to be moving away from it.

In his book *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life Without Losing Its Soul*, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz writes that the company's mission is "to inspire and nurture the human spirit, one person, one cup, and one neighbourhood at a time." The book uses terms such as "full of humanity," "human connection," "respect," "dignity" and "being a force for positive action." These words are part of our church lexicon, but Schultz is referring to a cup of coffee. For Schultz, coffee is the means and metaphor for creating community and a third place between work and home. The place that church used to fill.

And it's not just Starbucks. Banks such as HSBC have made global sustainability part of their corporate mission. They have trained 1,400 employees to work directly with Earthwatch and the World Wildlife Fund, and have been carbon neutral since 2005.

American author and theologian Leonard Sweet has noticed this as well. In his book *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, he points out that corporate America has appropriated the language of faith. He believes

that as a church, we are losing our language because we "don't know what to do with our own stuff."

This was illustrated to me very clearly at a Presbytery meeting where the mission strategy was presented. When the suggestion was made that a statement about "making disciples" be included, the meeting erupted in dissension. I spoke to Sweet about this and asked why the church seems to be moving away from its own language just as business is embracing it. He responded, "I simply don't know; it's a mystery to me." Part of it, he asserts, has to do with the church "not liking the mission that Jesus gave it and wanting to create a different one." For the church to thrive in the future, Sweet believes it needs to answer just one question: "How resonant is your story?" Do our churches' stories connect and resonate with the communities around them? If businesses can articulate their story, so can the church.

Call it branding, call it telling our story, call it anything you like. But if we are no longer invested in making disciples, if we believe that we have nothing to offer those outside the church, then I think Howard Schultz would be interested in our locations. He wants to make disciples every day.

Rev. Christopher White is a minister at Fairlawn Avenue United in Toronto. Reprinted from the United Church Observer by permission.



### **Leadership Ventures**

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# Board/Parish Council/Vestry Leadership Event

What does a congregation's Board, Parish Council or Vestry need to do to provide the leadership required by a church in these changing times? It's a simple matter of getting the A, B, C's right. In this case it's A-B-C-D.

**A**ll the small stuff gets dealt with by the executive. Don't waste everyone's time dealing with where a picture gets hung or the colour of the bathroom paint.

**B**udgets and money matters take ten minutes at most of the Board or Vestry meeting. If the money's in the budget, what's the issue. If it's not, consider creative ways to fund the project.

**C**urrent issues are important, but often not that exciting. Give them a little time, but not too much.

**D**eep exploration — peering into the future — dreaming what could happen if ... that's exciting. That's what will make your gatherings events no one will want to miss.

This is a one-evening event at a location near you. The cost is \$200 for a Board, Vestry or Council.

## OUTLINE

### **Introduction**

Getting to know a little about one another.

### **Creating Community**

Today there is a need for ways people can get to know one another and feel free to share their joys and sorrows.



### **Governance as Leadership**

Exploring three areas that characterize the work of a Board or Council -- along with the priority to be given to each.

### **Building the Bridge**

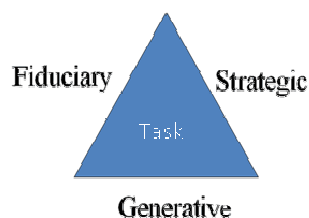
Generating new ideas and playing with new possibilities is something that invites participation, focuses energy and releases excitement.

### **Strategizing**

You have a great idea? Here's how to make that idea a reality.

### **Closing Celebration**

This event is designed to provide a Board, Parish Council or Vestry with new perspective, new energy, and renewed leadership. It is important for this body at the centre of a congregation's life to model what it truly means to be the church in action.



Insights from Christina Baldwin's *The Circle Way* show how to create a deep sense of community. The authors of the book *Governance as Leadership* have a plan for Board or Vestry meetings that gives the priority to creative thinking. We draw on Robert Quinn's *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It* to provide very helpful guidance how to put wheels under all this and make it happen.

All this is wrapped in a highly experiential, informative and creative one-evening event, three hours 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. We are offering it in three locations:

<b>Calgary</b>	Tuesday March 20
<b>Central Alberta</b>	Wednesday March 21
<b>Edmonton</b>	Thursday March 22

**Space is limited to the first five Boards, Parish Councils or Vestries that register. Phone the Congregational Life Centre at 780-619-0386 or e-mail us to register your Board or Vestry. More information on our website:**

[www.congregationallife.com](http://www.congregationallife.com)  
Click on Training.