

IDEOLOGICAL SHIFTS OF REVITALIZATION

Remembering how to be the Church in any age

1. GOD INSIDE → GOD OUTSIDE

In the models of institutional Christianity that became the “norm” in the last 100 years, the subtle assumption was that the church was the location for most of God’s action. This still pervades much of our thinking whether we realize it or not. It shows up in the desire to build programs that will attract members in. It shows up in the clericalism that has resulted in many members feeling ill equipped to speak about God’s action in their everyday lives. We simply have to get back to regularly speaking about how God is active in the world and in our lives outside of the time we spend together on Sunday morning, or any official programs of the church.

Ironically, the less the church becomes the focus, the more we can grow into what a church is actually called to be.

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: Create as many opportunities as possible for people to share where they see God active in their lives. Give away the microphone as much as possible. Ask good, down-to-earth questions, even in worship. Consider building a time for sharing with a neighbor into worship. Publicly acknowledge that this is difficult at first, because we haven’t practiced it often. Give people permission to be unsure how to speak in this way. But stick to it. Over time, this builds a congregational culture that is able to see the structures and programs of the congregation in their proper perspective. What we do in the church is really only a partnering with what God is already doing.

2. LANGUAGE ABOUT ACTION OF CHURCH → LANGUAGE ABOUT ACTION OF GOD

In every meeting, every interaction, and every piece of published materials, notice who is the subject of the verbs used. Are we talking primarily about the actions of the church or the actions of God? This subtle but profound shift communicates at a deep level that we believe God is actively working with and through our humble efforts. Conversely, when we speak only of what the church does, the subtle message is that this is a human endeavor, and we are on our own. This, then, helps lay the groundwork for shame when our efforts don’t yield institutional “success.” **If God is with us, however, even the “failure” of a program or initiative can build faith, deepen relationships, and draw us closer to God and to each other.**

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE:

Rather than jump right to “solutions,” ask questions framed like those below.

- Where do you suppose God might be leading us?
- What do you suppose is God’s desire in this situation?
- What do you suppose is one healthy next step God might be inviting us to consider?
- Where do you see God’s love showing up in this situation?

3. REDEVELOPMENT → JOURNEY

The language of “redevelopment” can sometimes send the message that there is an institutional promised land to which we need to return. Instead, re-frame change and loss as God’s leading into whatever is next. **In the book of Acts, the apostles were on a profound journey in which God was active in the world leading them. We, too, are on that same journey, and God is no less active now.** We have simply been blinded by our past institutional “success”

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: Study, preach on, and live in the book of Acts as a congregation. Suggest it as “required reading” for staff, key volunteers, and council members. Pay particular attention to stories like the one in Acts 16:6-15.

4. MEMBERSHIP → DISCIPLESHIP

As you begin to live into some of the shifts above, the conversation can shift from our identity as “members” of the institutional church to “disciples” following the way of Jesus. This also has the effect of connecting us to the 2000 years of Christ followers who have come before us who themselves dealt with institutional and cultural changes even more disruptive than the changes we are facing. **“Membership” can have consumerist overtones, as it is something we choose. “Discipleship” is something that chooses us.** In our baptisms, we were made disciples. In that way, this language shift again moves us from talking about our action to God’s action.

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: Pay close attention to the language used to refer to those who call your congregation their spiritual home. Review the congregation’s documents, website, announcements, etc. looking for the language of “member” and think creatively about other language to use. While it may not be possible to completely jettison the language of “membership,” we can add in other language that consistently sends the message that we are more than numbers on a tally sheet.

5. SPEAKING → LISTENING

This ideological shift may be the most profound, the most needed, and the most difficult. We have created a church culture in which the pastor is often seen as the “expert.” This trickles down to the elected leaders, who also speak with authority to the congregation. It further trickles down to our engagement with our communities, where we often assume we have something to share, but not something to learn. **As we begin to acknowledge that God is just as active in the world as in the church, we have to also acknowledge that we have something to learn from each other and from our neighbors.**

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: At every event in which a leader is “presenting,” find ways to ask questions of the group at least 50% of the time. Ask questions that invite those attending to engage with each other and share their thoughts. Take this same approach outside the congregation as well. Design listening experiments that ask questions of both leaders and members of your wider community. *Note: The Faithful Innovations resources from the Greater Milwaukee Synod would be helpful in designing “listening experiments.”*

6. WORKING FOR → BEING WITH

We have all too often assumed we know what others need, and that our job as Christians is to work hard to provide those things. While this is a loving impulse, it does have two negative effects. First, it continues to play into the narrative that our job as Christians is to *do more* and *work harder*. Many people in our congregations are tired! They need a sabbatical from *doing* to be allowed to simply *be together*. The second negative effect is that our work “for” others often sets up a power differential in which the church sees itself as having the answers or the resources needed by others. In this script, the “neighbor” is seen as having a deficit we can address. However, if we assume God is the active agent in our shared life, and God is active outside our congregation as much (or more) than inside, then **we can assume we will meet God in each other and in the neighbor. We can assume God is already creating community both inside and outside the church as well. We can assume that “the gifts of God come wrapped in people” and that a key way to experience God’s presence is to dive into relationship with each other.**

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: Create or reimagine your congregation’s Fellowship Team as a group that has the role of planning fun events. These events could have the singular goal of connecting people with each other. In these events, find ways to blur the lines between the church community and wider community in which you are situated. Last, consider planning at least half of these events outside the walls of the congregation, in spaces in which you are not host, but hosted by the community.

7. HOSTING → BEING HOSTED

When a congregation hosts every event, it misses out on seeing and being involved in the things God is already doing outside the walls of the congregation. As we continue to live into the shift from “redevelopment” to “journey” language, it is good for us to acknowledge that the apostles were always hosted. They knew God was out ahead of them preparing their way, and preparing others to be open to them. When every event is on “our turf,” we are simply missing out on experiencing God in other places and other people. We are also retaining all the power in those situations, which is a key barrier to relationship with those who have no affiliation with our congregation. Simply put, it is good for us to be hosted at least as much as we host, because it reminds us that God is active both inside and outside our walls, and it tangibly sends the message that this congregation is committed to, and integrated into, the community in which it is situated. **This continues the important work of blurring the lines between the church community and wider the community. It will strengthen our connection to God and each other if we intentionally get outside our walls and look for God’s activity in the wider community around us.**

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: Set a goal for planning half of all congregational activities in hosted spaces in the community. Consider having teams meet 50% of the time in a quiet corner of a café in town, for example. Consider taking one of the annual events that is already important to the congregation (a fellowship dinner, for example) and finding a space in the wider community that would be willing to host you. When planning events out in the wider community, consider inviting a “non-member” with whom you have a relationship to be on the planning team.

8. WHAT → WHY

Most congregational conversations about “mission” start with talk about what is done, or what has been done. **To begin to shift the conversation, we must start with questions that help us wrestle with why we do what we do as a congregation.** If our goal is to “get more members,” we have to dig deeper and ask, “why is that important?” Ultimately, we have to continue to reframe every conversation using language about the action of God.

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: When you see the conversation turn immediately to *what* should be done in any given situation, make sure find time to ask questions framed like these below:

- What are we hoping for at the end of this process, and how does that serve God’s kingdom?
- What is our goal with this program/event, and why is that goal important to God?
- Can we describe in one sentence why we think God would want us to do this?

9. SERIOUS → PLAYFUL

“The hallmark of anxiety in a system is undue seriousness” (Edwin Friedmann).

Because of the sheer pace of change and disruption in our congregations’ cultures, many understandably wrestle with unnamed grief, confusion, or shame. Laughter can be rare. While there is much deeper work that needs to be done to learn about the cultural changes around us and the causes for decline, one of the most important shifts that needs to happen is that we need to find excuses to laugh and “play” again. **God is not done with us...and even though the journey is difficult, we can find joy in it.**

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: Consider asking people to share a joy from the week at the beginning of a meeting, or in worship. Consider asking people to share with each other the last thing that really made them laugh. Consider counting the number of times your leadership group laughs together as a marker of spiritual health. Consider brainstorming together ways to bring more joy and laughter into your shared life as a congregation.

9. COMPETITION → COLLABORATION

We live each day saturated by the messages of consumerism. These messages seep into how we approach our congregational life as well, and we often view the congregations around us more like competitors than partners. As some congregations experience membership and worship attendance decline, this dynamic intensifies as we feel like we are competing for a smaller and smaller population of active churchgoers. Experience has proven time and time again, however, that **the more we see each other as partners, the more we can find consolation, abundance, and joy in collaboration with others.** “There are no ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots;’ we are all ‘haves.’ Our assets are diverse. In the alchemy of collaboration, we become equal partners. We create wholeness and sufficiency for everyone.” (Lynne Twist, *The Soul of Money*).

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: Consider interviewing community leaders, asking how your congregation can partner with them to help them achieve their goals. Consider setting up an informal conversation over coffee or lunch with leaders from neighboring congregations at which each shares what they truly treasure about their community and challenges they face. Consider planning at least one joint community activity with area congregations. Get involved in your mission cluster. Join the “Together In Mission: Year Round Resourcing” Facebook page to crowd-source and brainstorm with other leaders around the synod.

10. FOCUS ON THE LEADER → BUILDING A CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP

So often, we wait for the next great leader to come and provide the answers. However, we are often operating under the incorrect notion that some people are “born leaders.” In reality, leaders are made, not born. Leadership is a skill that can be taught; a muscle that can be strengthened. Those who lead in congregations (ordained and lay) can sometimes fall into the trap of feeling like it is their job to solve the problems *for* others, rather than *with* others. **Some of the most transformative moments that can begin this shift involve the leader up front having the courage to say, “I don’t know the answer...but let’s find it together.”**

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: Consider reading a book together as a church council or other leadership body, and then reporting the major learnings to the entire congregation in creative ways that can reach most of the membership (newsletter articles, forums, Facebook posts, etc.). (One book suggestion would be *Leadership Without Easy Answers* by Ronald Heifetz). Consider budgeting a small amount of money for lay leaders to attend trainings and conferences with the rostered leader(s). If this is financially difficult, see if there are any business leaders in or connected to the congregation who might feel motivated to contribute toward making this happen. Consider holding forums with congregation members more often when discussing large challenges to send the message that everyone has a stake and a role in imagining a path forward.

11. PLANNING → LEARNING BY DOING

All available research suggests that people of all ages learn best by doing. While good planning is certainly valuable, many congregations are beginning to live into a shift toward experimentation with a focus on learning. It is much easier to evaluate and tweak small “test runs” than it is to make changes to larger programs or initiatives already formed. Central to this approach is the normalization of “failure;” something we are taught to avoid at all costs in other arenas of our lives. **In God’s mission, any attempt to connect with God, each other, or the world can yield valuable learnings which shape the next steps in the mission.**

IDEAS TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE: For any new idea or endeavor, try a small “test run” or “pilot” phase. Come back together at regular intervals to ask open-ended questions like, “what are we noticing?” “given what we have experienced, what are we still curious about?” and “how is the Spirit nudging us to shift this and try again?” In particular, try experiments that cost little to no money. Regularly communicate to leaders and congregation members that, just like learning to ride a bike, regular “failure” is part of the process. Begin the process of brainstorming small experiments by asking “what do we need to know that we don’t already know?” Then, design experiments based on the answers to that question.