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# Competing Frameworks: How Theoretical and Theological Frameworks Influence Congregational Renewal Efforts and Color External Evaluations

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COMPETING FRAMEWORKS:

How Theoretical and Theological Frameworks Influence Congregational Renewal Efforts  
and Color External Evaluations

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BLM	Black Lives Matter
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
GLBTQ	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning
MDT	Moralistic Therapeutic Deism
NAMS	Neighborhood Area Ministry Strategy

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“To say that Christianity in the world at large is undergoing a major transition is to indulge in understatement.”<sup>1</sup> Numerous surveys, like the FACT survey, describe declining trends in membership rolls across nearly all denominations.<sup>2</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is no exception. In 1965, the predecessor bodies of the ELCA boasted 5,887,093 baptized members.<sup>3</sup> By 2015, 50 years later, ELCA congregations reported 2,803,450 confirmed members, a 52% decrease.<sup>4</sup>

Each year, the ELCA spends over two million dollars on a variety of renewal strategies with congregations. Renewal efforts focus on helping congregations become more vital with the expectation that this will make them more sustainable. In January 2017, an internal review of the current ELCA renewal process found that half of all change efforts fail from the start. It recommended the development of a new curriculum to help congregations become more vital since the current curriculum doesn't appear to

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 1.

<sup>2</sup> David Roozen and Faith Communities Today, *American Congregations 2008* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Inskeep, "Priorities in Context: A Background Paper for the Future Directions Tables," Research & Evaluation (Chicago IL: ELCA, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Research & Evaluation Dept. of the ELCA, "Parochial Report Data " (Chicago IL: ELCA, 2015).



be working.<sup>5</sup> These findings were shared with the Conference of Bishops at their March 2017 meeting along with the findings of the Future Directions task force called “Called Forward Together in Christ: Strategic Directions 2025.” After that meeting a press release quoted the Rev. William O. Gafkjen, Bishop of the ELCA Indiana-Kentucky Synod and conference chair: “We committed to lifting leadership and cultivating vital congregations as the two highest priorities for our attention and action as a conference for the foreseeable future.”<sup>6</sup> However, it is not yet clear what kind of leaders are needed to cultivate vital congregations.

As a researcher and project manager for the Congregational Vitality Project of the ELCA part of my job is to help congregations and the denomination by using outcome measurement tools to study congregations engaged in the renewal process. I am expected to learn what renewal practices are and are not working and use this information to help develop the new curriculum. One follow-up study revealed that renewal efforts in four synods were not consistently producing increased connections with God, each other and the world. Even when those results are achieved, there was no significant connection between increased vitality and sustainability.<sup>7</sup>

To better understand the causes behind renewal, so I could use the information to create a new curriculum, I decided to study one initiative in depth. This initiative was one of many Area Ministry Strategies in the ELCA. In this case, it was a collaboration among

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<sup>5</sup> Tiger Team, "Congregational Renewal Tiger Team Report & Recommendations," (Chicago IL: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Candice Hill Buchbinder, "ELCA Conference of Bishops Targets Developing Leaders, Congregational Growth," news release, 3/16/17, 2017, <http://elca.org/News-and-Events/7878>.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Bobbitt, "Impact of Middle Judicatory Interventions on Congregations," in *Religious Research Association Annual Conference* (Newport, CA 2015).

four very different congregations from the same community who were working to renew their ministries and deepen their impact in the community. Studying this initiative produced four learnings. First, I identified elements required for congregations to collaborate in a renewal process. Second, I learned the causes within congregations that produced specific strategies and drove outcomes. Third, I learned that the theoretical and theological frameworks used by the congregations led them to imagine their own work in ways that limited their capacity for learning and changing. Fourth, I saw how using different frameworks facilitated asking new kinds of questions. These new questions led both the congregations and me to different conclusions from the same data. The lessons learned here have broad implications, not only for other collaborative efforts, but for the ELCA at large.

CHAPTER 2:  
THEORETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Embedded within the ELCA's renewal efforts is a theological and theoretical framework and ecclesial commitments. This chapter will describe the framework of the ELCA efforts and place it in conversation with emerging models.

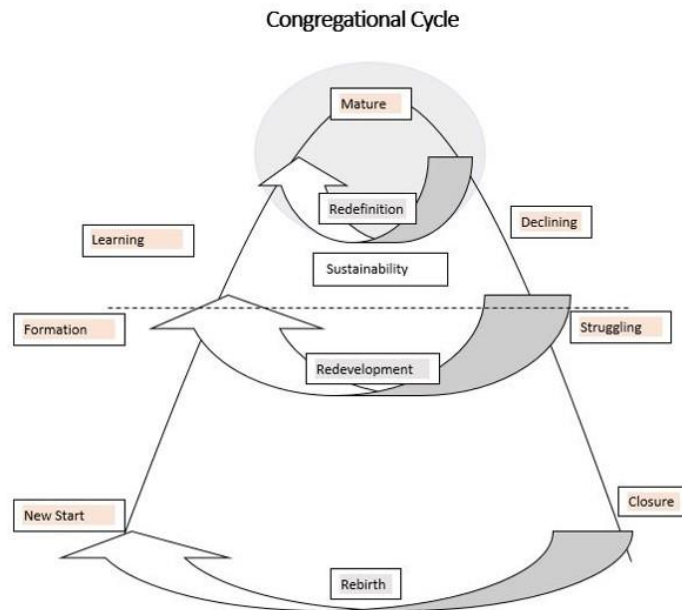
**Framework of Current ELCA Renewal Strategies**

The ELCA's renewal strategies rest within an understanding that congregations have a developmental life cycle as described by Rothauge.<sup>1</sup> The Domestic Mission Unit of the ELCA that oversees these interventions works with a modification of Rothauge's congregational life cycle, as illustrated in Figure 2.1.

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<sup>1</sup> Arlin J. Rothauge, *The Life Cycle in Congregations: A Process of Natural Creation and an Opportunity for New Creation* (New York, NY: Congregational Ministries Cluster, Episcopal Church Center, 1996).

Figure 2.1: Current ELCA Congregational Life Cycle



The model assumes that when congregations are formed they establish patterns and traditions that create a distinct identity. They grow and become stable and may even thrive, acquiring people, staff, a building and many artifacts. At some point the structure of the congregation plateaus and the congregation enjoys a bit of stability when its membership is consistent and its programs appear to be working well. Eventually congregations notice that the things that used to work well no longer have the same impact. They may feel like things have gotten stale, that there is a lack of excitement and that participation is beginning to sag. At this point, congregations may redefine themselves.

### Redefinition

Redefinition is indicated on the life cycle model as the first arrow that moves from the upper right to the upper left. Numerous resources are available to congregations

that seek redefinition. Resources help congregations find new ways of doing the same essential practices including: worship, evangelism, youth ministry, hospitality, leadership, church administration, and stewardship. Most of these resources help congregations find new ways of doing the same essential practices. The assumption behind providing these resources is that congregations simply aren't doing a good enough job in critical ministry areas.

ELCA data from the congregation's 2015 annual reports suggests that there is merit to this assumption.<sup>2</sup> Every ELCA congregation was expected to complete the annual report. On that report, a key informant (usually the pastor) used a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (great) to rate how well their congregation performed on 15 activities associated with missional congregations.<sup>3</sup> Seventy-five percent of all congregations responded to these questions. Areas that received an average rating between three and four included: incorporating newcomers, seeking out and using gifts of people of all ages, building strong healthy relationships, managing disagreements, equipping people to share their faith, and helping people live out their faith in daily life. These mediocre ratings on core programmatic elements suggest that there is much room for improvement.

Faith Communities Today was one of many surveys over the past 15 years that pointed to correlations between doing particular practices well and "success" (most often

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Bobbitt, 2016, <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/Blogs/2015VitalityResults.html>; "Vitality of New Ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," Congregational Vitality Project, <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/Research/New%20ministries%20campaign%20report%20on%20form%20A%20Final.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> "Creating Shorter Scales to Measure Congregational Vitality," *Review of Religious Research* (2015).

congregational growth).<sup>4</sup> Many prescribed programs were developed in response to this kind of research. One prominent example, adopted as a recommended practice of the ELCA, was Natural Church Development. Developers of Natural Church Development studied characteristics associated with numeric growth in congregations around the globe. The key factors they identified were: passionate spirituality, inspiring worship service, empowering leadership, loving relationships, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, gift-oriented ministry and functional structures. Natural Church Development maintains that all eight characteristics must be strong for a congregation to grow. Congregations are taught to assess their abilities in these areas and to work toward improving them, starting with the weakest one.<sup>5</sup>

A similar approach imagines the problem lying within the congregational system and relationships among its members. One prominent example comes from Peter Steinke who described congregations as a family system and pointed to the need for members within that system to function in healthy ways.<sup>6</sup> Others focus on the organizational culture, especially a congregation's willingness to change. The opening lines of one such book declares,

Mainline protestant churches can live again! They don't have to die! They can become vital centers of Christian life and mission as they once were! But to

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<sup>4</sup> David Roozen, "American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving," in *Faith Communities Today* (Hartford CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Christian A Schwarz and Christoph Schalk, *Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: : ChurchSmart Resources, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Peter L Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

succeed, they must be *willing to change* and *do most things differently* than they have been doing in the last thirty-five to fifty years.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that congregations must make an intentional choice to live is not uncommon. For example, Nixon names six vital choices struggling congregations should make to thrive: Choose life over death, community over isolation, fun over drudgery, bold over mild, frontier over fortress, now rather than later. “It’s really that simple: six clear choices that will greatly amplify the impact of our lives and of the churches we lead.”<sup>8</sup>

This quote captures the spirit of how change is expected to happen from this understanding of the overall problem and solution. Congregations must change how they operate or die. The corollary is that if they change they will succeed, and, most of the time, that means they will grow.

This begs the question, what kind of change is necessary to keep congregations alive? Dougherty studied congregational mortality and identified leadership transitions across generations, usually after 45 and 75 years of ministry, as a time of high mortality.<sup>9</sup> He found that mortality was related to the congregation’s identity and sense of purpose. If the congregation was imprinted with an identity designed to address the needs and concerns of the founders themselves, then the congregation was less relevant to succeeding generations. However, if a congregation was founded on ideals that

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<sup>7</sup> Robert D Schieler, *Revive Your Mainline Congregation: Prescriptions for Vital Church Life* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Nixon, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Dougherty, "When the Final Bell Tolls: Patterns of Church Closings in Two Protestant Denominations," *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 1 (2008).

transcended the immediate needs of the founders, the congregation was more likely to continue across generations. Dougherty's work suggests that one of the key problems in congregations is that their identity is imprinted from former generations and needs to be updated to bring it in line with the needs of the current members and local context. That kind of work falls beyond the scope of redefinition which focuses only on the internal functions of the congregation. Addressing matters of identity and context require what Rothauge calls redevelopment.

### Redevelopment

Congregations in need of redevelopment are assumed to be focused on preserving their own traditions and a sense of family rather than changing to focus on God's vocational call for the sake of their neighbor. According to Rothauge, "A redevelopment effort returns the congregation to the earlier stage of "formation." The starting over again necessitates letting go of pride, guilt, shame, deception, illusion, and fears about the congregation and about change."<sup>10</sup> Rothauge appears to assume that this earlier stage was focused on God's mission and that the congregation has gotten out of touch with that mission. However, Dougherty's work suggests that many congregations were never primarily focused on mission beyond their own walls. The need to change the church's understanding about what it means to be church was taken up by the missional movement.

The missional movement was summarized by Van Gelder and Zscheile. They summarized four common themes in this literature:

1. God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world...

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<sup>10</sup> Rothauge, *Congregation Life Cycle*, 5.



2. God's mission in the world is related to the reign (kingdom) of God...
3. The missional church is an incarnational (versus an attractional) ministry sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context...
4. The internal life of the missional church focuses on every believer living as a disciple engaging in mission....<sup>11</sup>

Branson and Martinez summarized the missional literature even further by asking, "What is God doing in our community and how do we participate?"<sup>12</sup> Their book looks at particular ways congregations can adapt to address multi-racial and multi-cultural shifts so that God's mission can be lived out in their new contexts. This is a much deeper question than, "How do we fix the church?" Branson and Martinez propose that answering and living into an answer to this kind of question begins with recognizing the disruptive nature of the cultural shifts and moves toward asking deeper questions by adopting a continuous learning cycle of experience, reflection, study and action. Only through these kinds of practices can a congregation explore and expand its world view and continue ministry into the future.

Several other authors point out that most mainline congregations require adaptive change to make them relevant in their contexts. Adaptive change was laid out originally by Heifetz.<sup>13</sup> Heifetz distinguishes between problems that require technical vs. adaptive change. Technical problems are those where the problem and solution are both understood. Change in these situations is a matter of developing, implementing and

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<sup>11</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Baker Academic, 2011), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 66.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Abadian Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

evaluating a plan to help the organization move from the current state to the desired and defined solution. Adaptive change is required when the problem and/or solution is not understood. In this situation, a specific plan toward a solution cannot be created because there is no clear direction. Instead, the organization must adapt to its new environment or condition. In short, technical change processes ask “how” while adaptive change processes ask “why”. In recent years, several authors, including Keifert, described a process of adaptive change used by congregations while adapting to the new conditions in their cultures.

Keifert describes four phases congregations go through to make adaptive changes.<sup>14</sup> They include Discovering, Experimenting, Embodiment, and Learning and Growing, **Discovering** occurs by listening to God through spiritual discernment and listening to one another within the congregation and community. **Experimenting** then takes place where congregations try out new ideas based on what they learned while listening. Each experiment is *reflected* upon in ways that expand the congregation’s imagination and clarify its sense of missional vocation (God’s call to the congregation). In the **Visioning for Embodiment** phase, the Spirit uses some people within the congregation to cast a clear vision and give it shape through structures so that it can be implemented. Finally, **Learning and Growing** becomes a reflexive act of the congregation as it moves forward continuing to listen, experiment, reflect and move forward into the future.

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, Idaho: Allelon Publishing, 2006).

Zscheile also emphasizes the need for continuous innovation that is led by the Holy Spirit and for moving through the same practical steps of discernment, listening (inside and outside the congregation), experimenting and reflecting.<sup>15</sup> He helps congregations engage those steps by describing particular disciplines or practices that allow congregations to intentionally create spaces where the steps can take place and become part of the pattern of the congregation's life. These practices include:

1. Cultivate space (time and place) for conversation and practice without fear of failure or judgment.
2. Address already existing fear and shame.
3. Engage ambivalence and conflict.
4. Interpret the present in light of the past by identifying elements or identity stories of the past that are still useful and relevant in the present context.
5. Discover open spaces where conversations with neighbors can take place.
6. Be present – show up and be available to listen and participate. Then share these stories throughout the congregation.
7. Practice a way forward through experimentation with every step of adaptation so you can learn and grow by doing.
8. Translate Christianity into the current context.

The descriptions of Keifert and Zscheile point to a particular process and practices that allow the Holy Spirit to direct congregations through a period of confusion and learning and into a new understanding of their identity and sense of vocation.

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<sup>15</sup> Dwight Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (Harrisburg, PA: Church Publishing, Inc., 2014).

## From Framework to Practice

The ELCA incorporates this framework into practice in several ways. The Living Into the Future Together task force made the following recommendations at the 2011 Churchwide assembly,

To make support for the work of congregations one of the highest priorities of this church. To request congregations be invited to take up to two years, in collaboration with synods to begin, develop, review or redefine their unique mission plans by the end of 2013, so that each congregation strengthens its capabilities and resources for witness and mission.<sup>16</sup>

This recommendation stands on the assumptions that the problem with congregations is that they don't have a clear mission, and that if they did have a clear mission, they would be able to move forward developing and implementing strategies toward fulfilling their mission. That approach treats a congregation's approach to mission like a technical problem to solve. It starts by defining missional behavior as part of the plan. It then assumes that a strategy will be developed, implemented and eventually the outcome evaluated.

Another way the ELCA assists congregations in need of redevelopment is through their renewal training called Transformational Ministries 2.0. A variety of tools are presented to congregational leaders who are led through an adaptive change process that starts with the three great listenings: listening to God, one another and their neighbor.<sup>17</sup> It then moves toward developing a mission/purpose statement and a plan. From there congregations are encouraged to do experiments designed to move them toward their

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<sup>16</sup> Minutes from 2011 Churchwide assembly.  
[http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CWA2011.pdf?\\_ga=1.151064057.1929500424.1471355330](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CWA2011.pdf?_ga=1.151064057.1929500424.1471355330)

<sup>17</sup> Stephen P Bouman, *The Mission Table: Renewing Congregation and Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2013).

mission plan and reflect on them. These tools were intended to be used with congregations in hopes of expanding a congregation's missional imaginations with the expectation that renewed imaginations would lead to transformed congregations which would, of course, grow. This assumption, is based on an underlying world view, grounded in the values of modernity, in which bigger is better and hierarchy is considered efficient.

There may be many reasons why redevelopment efforts are not working. One possible reason is that the way they engage these steps is lacking the disciplines described by Zscheile. Another is that by defining the mission plan early on, they are treating the adaptive change process like a technical problem to solve. Defining a mission plan toward the beginning of the process and working toward it places agency in the hands of the congregation rather than God. It also confines the mission plan to the imagination of the congregation before the Spirit has had a chance to teach congregations new lessons. Yet another possible reason this method is not working may be that it is based on the assumptions of modernity which are no longer relevant in much of today's society.

All of these examples suggest problems with the ELCA's current framework. Roxburgh points out that using terms like "missional" and "adaptive" as described above turns those terms into "a language game played by the church."<sup>18</sup> Rather than entering into an adaptive process that allows congregations to change their identity and become more relevant in their current contexts, activities like discernment, listening, experimenting and

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<sup>18</sup> Alan J Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 153.

reflecting become techniques are used to “fix” the church, within its old identity so that the church remains essentially the same.

### Rebirth

If redevelopment is not attempted or not achieved, the congregation will continue to decline until it is unsustainable. Once unsustainable, a congregation is no longer eligible for formal ELCA development funds. Unless the congregation can change course on its own, the only option for “renewal” is re-birth. Rebirth typically means closing the congregation and preserving its legacy by using remaining assets to begin a new ministry. This form of adaptation recognizes that every congregation closes eventually.

### Need for a New Model and New Questions

Despite years of attempts, numerous programs, and millions of dollars, only a small percentage of congregations have successfully implemented the changes required to avoid decline or achieve renewal. The downward trends of the ELCA has continued. Years of research has asked questions like, “What is going wrong?” and “How do we fix the church?” These questions assume that congregations are most healthy and missional when they are at the top of the bell curve and that those who have decline are somehow less faithful. They also assume that the inability to successfully use technical and adaptive change techniques is what leads to the death of a congregation. In this framework, the congregation is the active agent.

However, several scholars have suggested that the downward trends aren’t a sign that the church is failing, rather they are a sign that God is actively doing something new. Adaptive change actions aren’t techniques designed to save the church of the past, rather they are tools to allow the church to adapt to a new environment by changing all together.

## Emerging Framework

Roozen reviewed the decline of mainline denominations reflecting on how, historically, changes in religion typically come at times of great societal change.<sup>19</sup> There is broad agreement that the USA is in the midst of great societal change now. Authors like Roxburgh<sup>20</sup> and Herring & Elton<sup>21</sup> describe newly emerging networks binding society together in new ways and call for the church to adopt similar structures. But there is more to it than form.

Roozen states that denominational structures reflect their core identities.<sup>22</sup> His research shows the key role of denominational narratives in establishing identity and talks about the importance that strong denominational identities will play in navigating today's societal changes. Roxburgh describes how the existing denominational structures reflect a hierarchical narrative that embraces the values of modernity.<sup>23</sup> If today's society has moved away from hierarchical structures, how can the Church change its narrative so that it can reimagine its identity and change its structure?

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<sup>19</sup> David Roozen, "National Denominational Structures' Engagement with Postmodernity: An Integrative Summary from an Organizational Perspective," in *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, ed. David Roozen & James Neiman (Grand Rapids, MI: Wim. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission*.

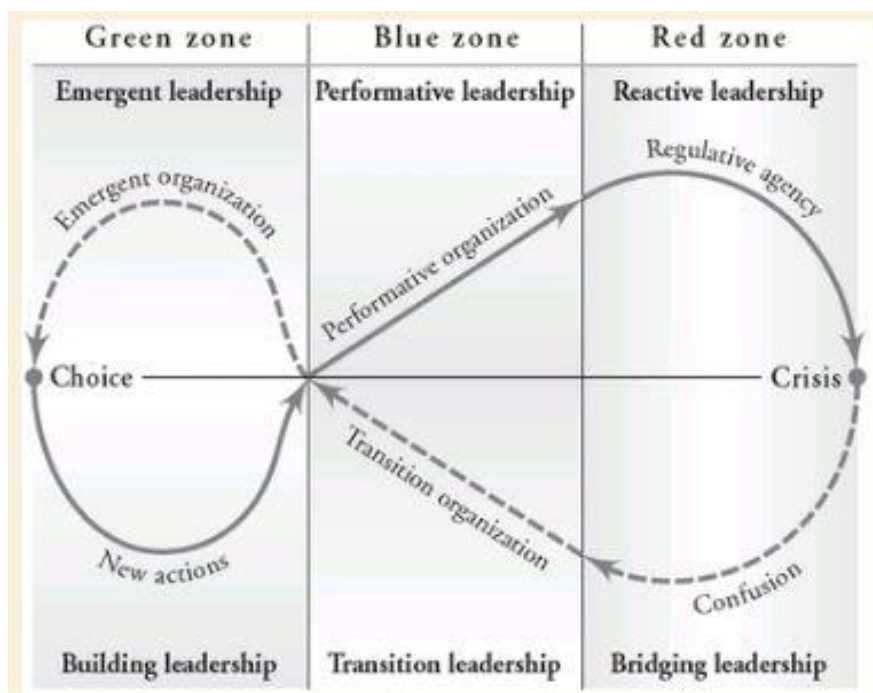
<sup>21</sup> Hayim Herring and Terri Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World: Platforms, People, and Purpose* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Roozen, *National Denominational Structures*.

<sup>23</sup> Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission*.

Roxburgh and Romanuk may provide an answer. Figure 2 is an illustration from their book (Figure 2.2).<sup>24</sup>

Figure 2.2: Three Zone Model of Missional Leadership



The authors spend considerable time and detail describing how congregations move through this cycle beginning on the lower left (new actions), moving up from left to right (performance organization), curving down on the right side from top (regulative agency through crisis) to bottom (confusion) and then moving back across along the bottom from right to left (transition organization) until they reach the top (emergent organization) and the cycle continues. They also point to the need for different leadership skills and styles depending on the particular stage of the congregation.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, vol. 17 (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).



This cycle is not completely different from the one presented by Rothauge,<sup>25</sup> but its zone approach and infinity shape denote continuous change rather than looming death at the end of the curve. It recognizes that congregations live in dynamic contexts and allows them to evolve over time rather than simply live, return to a former state or die. Yet even this shape and the ideas of this problem/solution are likely to fall victim to the same language games because without a new underlying narrative, the ELCA in all its expressions (churchwide, synod and congregation) has no other way of interpreting information.

Rendle may provide a way beyond the language games by illustrating the process for moving around the “red zone” from a regulative structure through crisis and confusion, into transition (bottom blue zone) and emergence (top green zone) until the point of a new choice (middle green zone). In addition to the steps of the process he also describes the emotional rollercoaster that accompanies it and the leaders’ role along the way.<sup>26</sup>

He likens the journey to that of the Israelites wandering the dessert. In this model, congregations perceive pain is described as an awareness that there is something unacceptable about the way things are and a desire for something else. This desire spurs action. If **pain** is modest and the difference between how things are and how they should be is simple and small, it is perceived as a problem to fix. Then, technical change ensues. However, if the difference is large and the solution unknown (because of a regulative

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<sup>25</sup> Rothauge, *Congregation Life Cycle*.

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert R Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual & Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

system), people are motivated into adaptive change (Crisis). They are pulled forward in a particular direction by the **possibilities** they imagine. These possibilities aren't solutions, but general values and beliefs about what could be. These possibilities may also be described as their sense of a call from God. Understanding a congregation's pain and possibilities requires spiritual discernment and deep listening among the congregants and the people in the communities where the congregations are located.

Once congregations begin to move they are confronted by their **box** (crisis continued). The box is the assumptions congregations make about the situation they are facing, the way congregations work, the way they will find the solution or the next steps available. Leaders must find a way to break out of these boxes in order to move forward. The act of letting go of assumptions is an act of faith. Once assumptions are let go, the leadership falls into **chaos** (confusion). This is an uncomfortable place for congregations, but it is the leader's job to hold them there so that new possibilities can emerge as God reveals them. This stage is both frightening and liberating as people begin to experience God's agency and explore new ways of thinking and experimenting with new ideas. While in the chaos/wilderness they will continue to confront new boxes, and learn to let them go before moving on. This happens as the congregation grows in faith as it moves through the transition phase until there are fewer boxes being confronted and more experiments going on (emergent). After letting go of many boxes and doing many experiments based on new ideas, a **creative and faithful choice** presents itself to the congregation. Finally, they are spiritually mature enough to recognize the direction in which God is leading and to trust God enough to choose it. When they take the final leap, and commit to this choice, their transformation is complete – at least for now. Rendle

describes this journey as one of accompaniment where we accompany God into the future. God calls us from the pain toward a vague promise, encourages as we confront our box and walks with us in the wilderness while showing us new ways of being the Church.

Note how this process follows Roxburgh's adaptive change model using stages described by Keifert (discerning, listening, experimenting, reflecting, adopting). It is only through this process of moving forward, confronting boxes, and letting them go that adaptive change can happen. This kind of process can produce a new identity from which new structures can emerge. If congregations begin the process by adopting a new missional purpose, that purpose will be constrained by the congregation's starting imagination. That appears to be the most significant difference between the current ELCA framework and the one described in this section of the chapter. The older framework turns adaptive change practices into a technical process while the new one allows for adaptive change to alter a congregation's identity which may in turn create new structures.

As I moved into the research, I began by considering the data from the perspective of the current ELCA's framework and continued by applying lessons from the new framework. I expected to build a theory articulating the ways in which frameworks combined to form strategies that help or harm congregational renewal efforts. Instead I found that the situation is far more complex.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### **Research Question**

To learn more about what is happening within renewal efforts and understand which framework is most useful, I decided to step into one group of four congregations that are part of the Neighborhood Area Ministry Strategy (NAMS) to get a behind the scenes look. My research question was broad: Why is NAMS not leading to substantial renewal in congregations or having substantial community impact? I wondered whether the apparent failure was related to the specific strategies used and/or the way they were implemented, or if it had something to do with the congregations themselves (e.g. leadership, sustainability, identity). I also wondered whether something entirely different was emerging. If that was the case, then previous standards for success and failure would need to be reconsidered. To find out, I moved to the city and spend a month with people of NAMS.

### **Rationale for Research Method**

A qualitative approach was chosen because I was asking “why” questions. These required me to look behind the quantitative data normally collected as part of the evaluation process and into the complex systems that make up this effort. This kind of study was needed because until now, the primary qualitative evaluations of renewal efforts have been comprehensive ministry reviews. Comprehensive ministry reviews are

done with a team of people who spend a weekend with congregations, interview members of the congregation and the community, and tour the building and the community. The purpose of those reviews is to provide concrete affirmations and recommendations intended to help the congregation make corrections that bring it in line with the ELCA's existing understanding of a healthy church based on the Rothauge framework. They are not designed to understand the intricacies of why things happen within a congregation and are not done with curiosity about what God might be doing. The resulting reports are considered confidential and not aggregated to create shared learning within the ELCA. This study gained permission from participants with the agreement to keep the names of the congregations and leaders anonymous, so that what is learned here can be shared with the wider church.

### **Subject Selection**

NAMS was selected as the subject of this study for three reasons. First, the congregations had worked together on an intentional renewal project for over two years with many activities to show, but little actual renewal occurring within either the congregations or their neighborhood. There appeared to have been enough time for things to happen, yet they had not. Second, NAMS congregations were diverse. This allowed me to study dynamics within and across congregations that include different ages, races, cultures and values. Finally, neither the congregations nor the synod had obvious dysfunction or significant conflict within or among their leadership, so that obvious obstacle would not explain results or interfere with the analysis.

## Data Collection

### Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with congregational councils and groups of members who volunteered after or before worship. Most groups were about one-hour long. These groups were recorded via audio and transcribed. In each of these focus groups I asked questions about perceptions of NAMS, their congregation and the neighborhood. In addition to focus groups with the congregation, I conducted focus groups with two of the congregation's councils. As part of these focus groups I asked about how their group practiced discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting. I intentionally did not ask any questions using the words God, Spirit, etc. until the end of the group. During analysis, I tracked when, whether and how participants used those terms. If they did not use the terms, then I usually did ask something about where they felt the Spirit was leading them toward the end of our time.

The focus group with the parish council that coordinated NAMS came near the end of my time. Since I had already met with most of the members and already knew their history and how they worked, I decided to do something different. We opened the meeting with a Dwelling in the World practice using the Woman at the Well story (John 4:1-42), so that the following conversation would be informed by the Gospel and therefore more consciously guided by the Spirit. Next, I shared some of the observations I'd made across multiple congregations. Then, we had time for open questions, reflections and conversation. The information and subsequent activities from that meeting were analyzed separately as described below.

## Interviews

I conducted 18 one-to-one interviews which were audio recorded. Interviews were conducted with each pastor and the synod's Director for Evangelical Mission. In addition, interviews were conducted with three people from Our Savior, four people from Salem, and six people from New Beginning. In congregations where a council focus group was impossible, I met with at least one council member individually. Beyond the formal interviews I had one extended conversation with a person from Trinity and another extended conversation with someone from Our Savior. These were not recorded, but I reflected upon them in writing. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, but most were around an hour long. During these interviews, I asked the same questions I did in the focus groups. I also asked people familiar with NAMS to draw a diagram of how all the parts interacted. Parts had to include the congregations, synod, parish council, neighborhood and God. Some people alluded to having a different vision than the one they drew so I asked them to draw their vision for an ideal system. In addition to intentional interviews there were several conversations with leaders and members that were done informally. After these conversations summary notes were written.

## Site Visits

Each congregation was visited on a Sunday by myself and the two research assistants. Each of us took notes during and after the visit, reflecting on how they were engaged (or not) and what they experienced. Summaries of the site visits may be found in Appendix Y. These provide a good way to get the feel of each congregation.

## Congregational Vitality Survey

Three of the four congregations gave the Congregational Vitality Survey<sup>1</sup> to every member attending on a Sunday in January. The survey asked members questions about their own and their congregation's connections with God, one another, and the world. There were additional questions about leadership and sustainability. The final report places each congregation on a matrix like the one in Table 3.1. This table is used to quickly assess their sense of mission and their capacity to continue in mission.

Table 3.1: Summary of Vitality X Sustainability matrix in Congregational Vitality survey

Vital but not sustainable	Vital and currently viable but not sustainable	Vital and sustainable
Neither vital or sustainable	Currently viable, but not sustainable or vital	Sustainable but not vital

Members of Peace had taken two online surveys through church consultant companies, and I was given copies of the reports.

### Additional Data

Additional information used in this research includes the congregation's annual reports, minutes of past Parish council meetings, newspaper articles, and a description of the neighborhood based on a door-to-door survey of the neighborhoods near Our Savior.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Bobbitt, "Measuring Congregational Vitality: Phase 2 Development of an Outcome Measurement Tool," *Review of Religious Research* 56, no. 3 (2014). Sample available at [www.congregationalvitalitysurvey.com](http://www.congregationalvitalitysurvey.com).



### **Research Personnel**

Researchers included myself and two Sociology Ph.D. students hired from the local university, Sarah and Amber. Both students were women under 35. Sarah is white, and petit with long straight blond hair, and Amber is black and tall with a shaved head and nose ring. (Amber prefers “black” to “African American.”) I am a white woman in my fifties. All three of us attended each worship service, though not always at the same time. While I was known to the pastor and often pointed out to the congregation before or during worship, in most cases, the research assistants visited congregations and interacted as visitors. Focus groups were facilitated by me while the research assistants took notes. Research assistants kept personal reflection logs for both their congregational visits and the focus groups.

### **Analysis**

Analysis took place in three stages. The first stage considered the NAMS parish council to see how it was perceived by all participants. Here I confirmed the initial perception that it was not considered widely successful by anyone. Next I looked at what strategies were used and how they were implemented. I compared them to existing theories of adaptive change to see if there were any obvious problems with the implementation that could explain the failure. Indeed, there were.

Most studies end here. The practical application would be for congregations and collaborations to do a better job developing and implementing adaptive strategies. But there seemed to be more here that I wanted to discover. This led me to stage two.

Stage two of the analysis looked at the congregations themselves to better understand the failures in strategy/ implementation that had taken place using a grounded

theory approach.<sup>2</sup> I identified the congregation's identity as the key phenomena, then explored how that identity came into being. Then, I considered how the identity, interacted with their context and the conditions within each congregation to generate strategies and resulting consequences evident in stage one of this analysis. This generated fruitful results that I used in stage three.

In the third stage, I used the theory developed in stage two to take a deeper look at NAMS and then look forward based on what happened in a parish council meeting toward the end of my study. The results of these analysis are presented in the next chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> John W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013).

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this section I will begin by introducing the community in which NAMS exists. Then, I will briefly introduce each congregation and the NAMS parish council to provide background and context for the analysis. Finally, I will go through each stage of analysis. All the names of the congregations, the community and the individuals have been pseudonymized.

### **Introducing the Context and the Congregations**

Several distinct neighborhoods are all considered part of the same community that I will call “Westside”. The Westside neighborhoods are just outside of a major mid-western metropolitan area. This is a diverse community with almost no census blocks containing a majority of any single race. Most common ethnicities include Black/African American (42%), White (31%), Asian (15%) Hispanic/Latino (6%), and multi-racial (4%).<sup>1</sup> Much of the area is economically depressed with the majority of census blocks earning an average household income of less than \$56,000 and many earning less than \$43,700 per year. Several of the census blocks have a high transient rate. (Over 5% of people moved within the last five years, far exceeding the national average of around .75%) This is a community that struggles with crime. In late June- mid-July there were

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<sup>1</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives: The ARDA, "Gis Maps," The ARDA, <http://www.thearda.com/>.accesssed 2/20/17.

five homicides in addition to a multitude of other violent and non-violent crimes.<sup>2</sup> Some residents referred to it as the “summer of violence.”

Members from several congregations described the founding narrative of this community. When the city was first founded, it was the ghetto for Jews, followed by Blacks. Later, around 1890-1910, white immigrant communities moved in and founded congregations, including three of the four in this study. Most worshiped in their native languages of German, Swedish and Norwegian. In the 1960s there were race riots that resulted in the burning of the major retail center and the tearing down of a community center to build a police precinct on that plot. This is a story that still stirs resentment in the neighborhood. Since then the community has never fully recovered. There are still few chain stores, and very few restaurants are open after 6 pm. Over the years the neighborhood has become multi-ethnic with lower incomes and higher crime rates. Many church members moved to the suburbs. Now there are six ELCA congregations in the community and more close by. Four of these congregations joined together to form the NAMS. The four congregations are: Our Savior, Peace, Trinity, and New Beginning.

These four congregations include three distinct ethnicities. The Caucasians, mostly from northern Europe, call themselves “white.” The first-generation West Africans consider themselves to be of African Descent or African American, but they do not identify themselves or refer to themselves as black. The third group, consists of black people, most of whom grew up in or around this city and have been part of the United States for more generations than either of the other ethnic groups. I will respect their

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<sup>2</sup> City Police online precinct crime reports for 2016 (source not listed so that the city remains anonymous).

identities by calling them the terms they used themselves: white, West African, and black.

Within this diverse, and changing, neighborhood, all four ELCA congregations found they had a need to change. With different histories, cultures, and programmatic assets, each had responded to change differently at different times. As a result, all four congregations are presently at different places on Roxburgh's change cycle. Figure 4.1 illustrates the current position of each congregation. To introduce the congregations, I will describe each congregation in terms of their current position on this cycle. This reference was chosen because their position appears to best describe their primary way of acting/reacting to current stressors.

Figure 4.1: NAMS cong. positions on the cycle



Our Savior is acknowledged by all as the healthiest and strongest. It is a multi-racial multi-generational congregation with lively worship and a multi-faceted urban, contextual ministry. Pr. Peter has been the senior pastor there for over 15 years and is viewed with respect by all the other partners and the ELCA at large in part because he helped them move from a time of confusion through an emergence stage to the performing congregation they are now.

Pr. Ruth has been with Peace for about 6 years. She is also viewed as a strong leader who helped Peace turn the corner of crisis and begin moving toward transition. This was done in part by working with the congregation to embrace their progressive theology, to become a Reconciling in Christ<sup>3</sup> congregation and to actively seek out, welcome and incorporate GLBTQ persons.

Pr. Mary has been with Trinity for about a year and a half. Trinity is a small elderly congregation that is presently at the crisis point after being in the red zone for many years. She has now earned the trust of the congregation and is beginning to help them confront their assumptions about church, so that they can move beyond their box and into the wilderness.

Pr. Andrew is the third interim pastor in a row at New Beginning. He had been there only 4 and one half months when I arrived. New Beginning has been in existence for about 14 years, as the result of a merger between Bethel and Grace, two smaller dying congregations. One of those congregations was predominantly elderly and white, and the other was primarily middle aged West African immigrants. As the elder white population

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<sup>3</sup> Reconciling in Christ (RIC) is a movement within the ELCA that allows congregations to publicly identify themselves as intentionally welcoming and affirming people who identify as LGBTQ.

died, the West Africans became about 75-80% of the population. Now the congregation is using up its endowment and will run out of money within a couple of years. Members of New Beginning have recently embraced their financial situation and are actively seeking solutions, but they are in deep confusion with many voices pointing in different directions. Pr. Andrew has considerable leadership and community development skills, but he does not yet have enough relational collateral built up within the congregation or with the other pastors to use these skills effectively.

NAMS began in the fall of 2013 when a facilitator brought pastors from seven neighboring congregations into conversation to imagine what it might look like if their congregations partnered together. In January congregations added lay leaders to study scripture and discern how they might be stronger together than they were individually. Additional pastor meetings took place, and later there were more meeting that included lay leaders. These facilitated meetings included activities designed to help participants get to know each other and to imagine other ways of working or exploring ideas together. Participants visited a successful example of collaboration in the area, documented assets in each congregation and sent leaders out to interview people and institutions in the neighborhood. From these activities, a plan for NAMS emerged. It was decided that the initial priorities would be developing ministries for people in the first third of life, addressing basic needs of the community and starting a new congregation that could serve people living in the community who were not already part of an ELCA congregation. In November 2014, a parish council was formed to steer the activities of NAMS. Initially, the Parish Council was composed of lay and clergy from each

participating congregation along with three additional community members. The four described above are the ones that signed the agreement.<sup>4</sup>

Since its beginning, the parish council has been chaired by Sandy, the synod's Director for Evangelical Mission. Sandy is a member of Our Savior, and she lives outside the community being served by NAMS. NAMS has hosted several events, including a Bible study led by the former presiding bishop of the ELCA and a conversation about racial justice and race relationships in the community that was hosted by the synod bishop.

The parish council hired a youth director and began hosting events designed for youth from the four congregations. In the summer of 2016 they opened the gym of one congregation for community youth. During Advent, the group planned an event designed to attract members from each congregation so they could get to know one another.

### **Stage 1: NAMS Parish Council**

When I visited three years later in January 2017, I asked focus groups from each congregation to tell me about NAMS. People from every congregation who were not directly involved in NAMS had heard of it. However, they did not know much about it. At Peace, the people remembered a youth overnight activity, a congregational sharing event, joint confirmation efforts, and the joint Bible study. When reminded of other activities (e.g. shared youth staff, Advent activity) they remembered that those had also occurred, but they didn't realize these activities were part of NAMS. The focus group had no particular sense of a broader vision and no particular hope or expectation for the

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<sup>4</sup> NAMS partnership support grant application 2/2/16 submitted to the ELCA in Chicago, IL.



future of NAMS. One congregational leader not on the parish council said it makes sense to have a group of churches collaborate to draw on each other's strengths and support each other. Another stated that the idea was that by doing things together they could do more than they could individually. Pr. Ruth said that early in the process, "We all thought in those early meetings that working together might help us grow our individual churches.... That really hasn't happened. But wanting to get to know the other Lutheran's in the neighborhood doesn't seem to be something the congregations particularly care about."<sup>5</sup>

At Trinity, people were more informed about NAMS and their activities. They described some of the youth activities and talked about the time they came together to "talk about the blacks,"<sup>6</sup> referring to the bishop's conversation on racial justice. Members described various fairs or other gatherings designed to help people meet each other. They said the purpose of NAMS was to help the congregations support each other by sharing resources. They explained that this was needed because, in their perception, each congregation is struggling and losing congregants because people are growing too old to carry on ministry themselves. Creating economies of scale would save resources and might help congregations survive a bit longer. There was some frustration that the focus is on youth when this congregation doesn't have any to participate. Their hope was that NAMS could do more practical sharing around things like shared building maintenance.

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<sup>5</sup> Pr. Ruth interview, January, 2017. This sentiment was expressed in some form at each congregation.

<sup>6</sup> Council member at Trinity focus group, January, 2017.

If it were successful, they imagined NAMS resulting in more people, especially children, in their congregation.

At Our Savior, people said that NAMS was about bringing congregations together to grow and learn from each other and pool resources. Participants at Our Savior named the Bible study, the conversation about racial injustice, youth events including the sharing of the gym, joint confirmation and the recent Advent event as activities that had occurred. When asked what NAMS would be like if it was wildly successful one woman scoffed and stated, it will never be successful and that this was a loaded question. When I rephrased the question, they said they hoped it would lead to some kind of radical sharing of resources – not necessarily monetary. A young adult woman talked about the hope to reach young adults. One barrier mentioned by an elderly white woman was that there were “huge differences in how the neighborhood and its needs are defined and understood” by different congregations. This woman recalled the conversation on racial justice where members from another congregation shared “very different perspectives” (There was a clear implication of racism in other congregations). She expected these differences to make collaboration difficult.

People at New Beginning knew about the existence of NAMS but little else. This was a source of some frustration, especially for West African members because they felt like the programming happened without much education of the people in the pews or relationship building across congregations. They wondered what their congregation had to gain or lose from it. Some felt like they could be more useful to NAMS if they knew what was going on. New Beginning is the congregation with the gym that was opened to the public and where most of the youth activities took place, but few people at New

Beginning knew much about it and none of the participants in these activities came from the congregation. When asked about a vision for the future of NAMS, participants were open to the idea of increased collaboration, but said it wouldn't happen until they really knew the people of the other faith communities. Despite this need to know their neighbors, there has been little participation by West Africans in the NAMS events designed to build relationships. People from within and outside the congregation blame the fact that, as new immigrants, the West Africans often work multiple low paying jobs and have little free time, making participation in anything beyond Sunday morning very difficult. They also blame the fact that most of the congregation and all the West Africans live in a suburb outside the Westside community making participation even more difficult.

The Parish Council meets monthly and continues to include all four pastors plus other members. Our Savior has never brought lay leadership, opting to send staff instead. All other congregations included lay leaders, but while pastors continued to participate, lay participation waned. Several individuals described recent parish council meetings as being about the pastors checking in and saying what their congregations are doing. That activity was considered unhelpful, and, in fact, seemed to compound feelings of inferiority among smaller, struggling congregations. Even though prior parish council meetings included discernment and listening, most efforts are now focused on planning experimental events and reflecting on their outcomes.

When people directly involved in NAMS were interviewed, they described it with phrases like the following: "Not effective," "We are still trying to figure out who we are," "We don't really know how to be church together," "We aren't part of each other's

lives.” “We’re making the road by walking on it. We don’t know collectively what we’re doing.”<sup>7</sup> Some point to a sense of difference/inequality among the churches which gets in the way of collaboration. One person from Our Savior asked, “When do churches have to look out for their own self-interests and when are they committed to caring about the other? Are we married to each other or dating?”<sup>8</sup> The new pastor at New Beginning was being paid a small stipend to assist NAMS, yet only he and Shelly mentioned that fact. After being in this congregation half time for a little over four months, he was working to build relationships within his new congregation and with the community while trying to figure out how to pay the rent. This left little time for NAMS. He pointed out that leaders from the synod and other congregations had been reluctant to state a clear vision of what NAMS could or should do. When asked why he had not shared his own (very specific) vision, he gave three reasons: 1. He wants the direction to be driven by the grass roots within the congregations, 2. He is still very new and doesn’t feel like he knows enough, 3. Sharing the vision he already has hadn’t occurred to him until I asked about it.

I asked the NAMS leaders about the three goals of all area ministry strategies, spiritual growth for participants, congregational renewal and community impact. One person laughed and said, “I think those would be wonderful goals, but they aren’t the current goals.”<sup>9</sup> Another said that there had been some spiritual development in regular participants, and that there had been some benefit to some congregations, but that there had been no progress made in relationship to community impact. Sandy, the synod’s

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<sup>7</sup> Comments from various NAMS parish council members during individual interviews, January, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Our Savior member interview, January, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> NAMS parish council member interview, January, 2017.

Director for Evangelical mission said, “The Spirit has made us all one body in Christ . . . but we don’t always act like that. . . . I don’t think we are yet at a place where we are throwing in our lot with each other. . . . This is *one more* thing, but not *the* thing. It’s not at the center of everybody’s vision of who they are as a congregation. In order for us to do some big and bold things, the identity piece is huge.”<sup>10</sup>

Even though NAMS had gone through the steps of adaptive change (Discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting), their missional imaginations have not expanded beyond the walls of the individual congregations. They have not yet moved past the Experimenting phase named by Keifert to create a Vision for Embodiment.<sup>11</sup> When Zscheile’s seven practices are considered, NAMS did not cultivate an appropriate space. Although many experiments had taken place, that space was not completely free of judgement. Issues of fear, shame and ambivalence were not addressed, and participation in the group beyond pastors was not consistent. Space was not consistently created for conversations with neighbors to take place (as part of NAMS), so new relationships were not formed. Individuals from each congregation participated in the group events because they seemed interesting, not because they wanted to build relationships across congregations. Sandy’s perception was confirmed in my interviews. Leaders viewed NAMS as one more thing they did, just another program draining time and energy from the congregations. None of the congregations saw NAMS as part of their own identity or imagined NAMS as something that could or would transform them. While every

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<sup>10</sup> Sandy interview, January, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Keifert, *We Are Here Now*.

congregation longed for something more or better, none of them looked to NAMS to fulfill that hope. If NAMS were placed on Roxburgh's change cycle diagram, it would most likely be placed near the Crisis point in the red zone. When I arrived, leadership was primarily reactive and stuck in an old, unhelpful ways of thinking. Most leaders were aware that it was time to make a decision about the future of the collaborative.

There are many technical reasons for the apparent failure of NAMS to significantly impact the congregations or their community including the following:

- **Lack of Intentionality:** Participants did not join this with the goal of congregational transformation. None of the congregations engaged NAMS as a change process and none of them made space within the congregation to engage NAMS issues beyond one way communication about events.
- **Lack of Imagination:** Congregations were not thinking beyond themselves, and there was no common vision for a joint future together. If NAMS's journey to date were described by Rendle's adaptive change model, it would be placed neatly inside *the Box*.<sup>12</sup>
- **Lack of Intimacy:** While leaders know each other, congregational members are generally out of the loop, and some have feelings of superiority or inferiority in relationship to others. They are not part of one another's lives.
- **Lack of Investment:** None of the congregations had invested emotionally or materially in the project, the fate of the other congregations, or the larger community. There was a general lack of buy-in, especially at the member level.

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<sup>12</sup> Rendle, *Leading Change*.

- **Lack of Internal Leadership:** The parish council is chaired by Sandy, rather than one of the participating congregations. Many people consider Sandy to be the keeper of the vision and bringer of energy. The domination of the group by pastors fails to tap into ideas, skills and energy within congregations while also missing opportunities to build relationships, thus decreasing buy-in.
- **Lack of Integration with the neighborhood:** Nearly all the efforts to date have been about building relationships among NAMS participants. Very little focus has included the community itself. No one from the community is part of NAMS.
- **Lack of Inspiration from the Holy Spirit:** Few people saw NAMS as something the Spirit was doing with them or a way in which they joined the Holy Spirit. Rather NAMS was one more thing they were each doing.

Pointing out the failures of NAMS in this manner makes them look obvious, but they were not so obvious to participants. When I met with the parish council, I began by describing the common themes I had seen to date. That appeared to have been the first time they had reflected on the overall NAMS project, rather than planning or reviewing specific experiments. NAMS was stuck.

Even though these four congregations lived within three miles of one another, and even though they joined the parish council with an earnest desire to collaborate and have a positive impact on the community, and even though they kept trying things, something was holding them back. But what was it about the congregations that kept them from developing deeper relationships and entering deeper into mutual commitments for the sake of the issues they all signed up to address? To answer those questions, we must go to stage two of the analysis.

## **Stage 2: Grounded Theory**

This section proposes a theoretical model for understanding the factors that determined how these congregations engaged in NAMS. The key phenomena discovered in the open coding analysis were the congregation's current identity and the identity to which they aspired (what they longed to become). The current and hoped for identities were central because they drove decisions and strategies used within each congregation.

This analysis identified three causal conditions that combined to create the congregations' present identities: their founding narrative, intentional decisions made since then that updated their narrative, and their present stage in the change cycle. These three things combined to create either a positive identity of life or a negative identity of failure. Aspirations for their future identity appeared to be framed by these three things, interpreted through the theological lens of each person. No congregation had a shared theological lens that defined their collective sense of future. Some congregations had sub-populations and others had individual leaders with different theological lenses. The lack of shared theology appears to account for some of the conflict and indecision within congregations and NAMS as a whole. The next section will give examples of how identities were formed. After that I will address the impact these identities have on behaviors.

### **Narratives that Frame Identity**

All four congregations knew their founding narratives. They were all originally founded in the late 1800 and early 1900s by immigrants from Sweden or Norway. Three of them are presently challenged to make the transition to the next generation of leaders. Two of them previously reached a crisis point that forced them to make an intentional



decision about whether and how to continue as a congregation. *What appeared to matter the most was whether the decision to move forward was based on the needs of the congregation itself or the neighborhood.*

Example of an internally focused identity: Around 20 years ago, a pastor at a congregation called Bethel (predecessor of New Beginning) led the congregation to meet its neighbors and invite them to worship. One woman they met was a West African immigrant who was Lutheran but who didn't have a church. After she joined she brought her friends and family. Soon Bethel had a sizable West African population integrated into the previously older white congregation who enjoyed the diversity and new life. According to Emerson, et al. this probably worked because it had two of the most helpful characteristics of multi-ethnic congregations: the effort was initiated out of a sense of mission, and the participants came from the congregation's community.<sup>13</sup>

New Beginning was formed 14 years ago when Bethel realized it could no longer afford to remain in its crumbling building. They chose to sell their building and merge with Grace so that they could remain together. One of the lay leaders (a white man) talked about the decision to leave the building where his family had been for two generations.

The concept of walking away from that first building that I'd been in for 35 years was pretty tough. But I'm over it. . . . As much as the idea of leaving this building might seem impossible, it's not. It's a building, you know?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Michael O. Emerson and Karen Chai Kim, "Multiracial Congregations: An Analysis of Their Development and a Typology," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2003).

<sup>14</sup> New Beginning congregational leader interview, January, 2017.

Bethel joined with Grace, another congregation in trouble that wanted to stay together and keep their large well-maintained building. The desire to remain together continues to be a primary motivation of New Beginning. At their recent annual meeting one of the former members of Grace made the following proposal which was approved indicating the commitment of the newer merged community to stay together.

Moving forward in faith

We the family of God here at *New Beginning* Lutheran church resolve to continue to worship and serve our Lord and Savior here at *address*. God has led us to be together here and we have come this far by faith. We continue in the faith that God will provide for our spiritual and physical needs here in this place. We will pursue opportunities for us and others to use our building to build up this community and spread God's good news. This may involve, however, selling the building and renting worshiping space here. Should we find that this pursuit does not leave us financially able to remain here, we will be looking for another congregation to join as a group.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly the primary objective is to remain together, in this particular place if possible. The idea of serving the community is also present, but service may be provided by either “us or others” who could use the building to do service. The person who talked about leaving Bethel wondered if it might be better if they left this building so that new tenants could do an urban ministry for the sake of the neighbors. He stated, “This congregation doesn’t have the heart, the desire, or the ability to do urban ministry.”<sup>16</sup> He went on to note the commitment of time and emotional investment that he felt were lacking. “If we leave the building (*the current building where New Beginning now*

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<sup>15</sup> New Beginnings member, Motion proposed at January council meeting. Shared with me during interview with the member, January 2017. (The name and address were changed.)

<sup>16</sup> New Beginning congregational leader interview, January, 2017.

*resides*), then someone is going to come in and use the building in a way that we're not. You know, so there's some satisfaction in that. . . . I've shared the idea that leaving the building isn't as life changing as you think."<sup>17</sup>

One of the West African men said "It's a trying time. The church needs to be a place of doing for the members and the community."<sup>18</sup> But he also noted the burden of commuting and how that makes it hard to know the community and invest in it. He feels that if they are serious about staying in this community then they need to work out transportation so that people can participate. He is frustrated by people who use transportation as an excuse to not come and wonders how to stir up commitment among the people.

Since merging, the congregation's primary service to the community has been outsourced to various social service organizations that rent the space and provide a service to the neighborhood. Leadership acknowledges that their members are not connected to these efforts but feels that it is unrealistic, particularly for the West Africans who don't have time to participate. Several of the male West Africans claimed the outsourced ministries as part of their own identity and saw them as satisfactory ways of serving the neighbors. But not everyone was satisfied. One West African woman said she wanted to attend a community meal, talk to people about God and invite them to church but was told by the agency responsible that this was unacceptable. Several women (West African and white) expressed a longing to serve the community directly. During the focus group time the women gathered in a separate room as was their custom. When I joined

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> New Beginning congregation member interview, January, 2017.

them, they talked about a longing to serve local single parents and their children. When asked why they didn't do so, they said they didn't have enough people or resources. When and if the church grows stronger, they would be able to do those things. They were frustrated and confused by the community's lack of participation in the church and the general lack of Christian community in the United States. One woman threw up her hands as she expressed the irony that her own faith was formed by Lutheran missionaries from America who had strong faith and talked about Jesus in such a compelling way. Now that she is in America, no one knows about Jesus. She wondered how this could be and doesn't know what to do about it.

At New Beginning the current identity is one of confusion. Some people want to continue as they are, others want to "return to Egypt" by abandoning the large, expensive building and moving back to the neighborhood about five miles away where Bethel once was (where most members still live) and starting a congregation with a West African worship style. Everyone at New Beginning acknowledges the need for a church to do ministry to its neighbors, but this need is not what drives them forward, rather it is the desire to be together somewhere.

Example of an Externally Focused Identity: Our Savior was founded in the 1909, but people don't talk much about their early history. The story people tell is of a time 20 years ago (before the current pastor) when they were in crisis and had to decide whether and how to move forward. Below is an excerpt from an elder who described their decision to transform in response to my question about how things had changed.

I've been fortunate enough to live through that and experience that change. When I first came here we were going through the trouble of deciding of whether we should remain a congregation. We engaged with the synod office and had discussions about that and the congregation decided that we would stay here and

there were members at the time that had been here for many years and had a real sense of ownership and decided to move forward but that we couldn't continue to be who we had been. So, we re-styled and went out into the community. I remember doing door knocking and asking people if they knew anything about the church. . . . they knew there was a church on the corner but many people didn't know what kind it was. . . . [T]he congregation decided that if we really were going to stay in this place, here in this community, then we had to find ways to connect with the community and be about the life of the people in the community.<sup>19</sup>

In this case, the reason for the decision to continue as a congregation was outside of themselves. Rather than waiting until the church was strong enough to do ministry itself or continuing to outsource services, they forged new relationships with neighbors and community organizations, thus creating a culture that included the community as an integral part of their identity. Their current success at engaging their community is a key reason new members join the church and the primary reason they and others label the congregation as successful.

Today, when asked what the congregation is all about, people respond with words and phrases like inviting, trust building, social justice, a working power in the community, leadership development, innovative, always something going on, and engaged in the community. Below are some longer quotes from both interviews and focus groups that describe the current dominant narrative of the people:<sup>20</sup>

- It's about opening doors and welcoming people in. People need to understand that this is a safe place and they are comfortable with where they are. They aren't going to be judged or told to go away because of how they look or what they're wearing or whatever it may be.
- The whole point is to be inviting because when you have an inviting environment more people are willing to speak to you, talk to you, and express their concerns. Until they are ready to express their concerns...people don't do

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<sup>19</sup> Participant at Our Savior focus group, January 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

that with people they don't trust. We have to get them in first in order for them to actually express their concerns. I think we do a pretty good job of doing that. Can we address all of them? Nope. That is not realistic. We can't do that with everyone in terms of capacity but we can at least address the issues that are present and we are good at currently.

- A friend of mine who visited, who doesn't believe in religion, said that it doesn't feel like a church, it feels like a community of people who love each other, who belong and a place where they can come for help. And that sort of defined it for me.
- I've been challenged to show up for my neighbors and listen to people with other stories than mine.
- We are a community of people who love each other, who belong to a place.
- We make other people's ideas happen.
- Church was the one institution in society that will stand by you from birth to death.

It is interesting to note that no one used the word "family" to describe the congregation. It is also interesting to note that no one in the focus group mentioned worship as part of who they are as a church. This fact did not escape the notice of the pastor who expressed surprise and some concern after the focus group. It is clear to me that this is a group of people drawn together by a sense of purpose and community. That purpose has to do with their experience of God's presence and expectation of justice. Congregants appear to see themselves as part of bringing God's kingdom to and with the people of the neighborhood and beyond.

The other two congregations are moving around the change cycle for the first time. Because of this, their identities are not yet formed by a clear decision about whether and how to continue as congregations.

Peace was first organized by Swedish immigrants in 1895 and continues to lift up that heritage by participating in an annual celebration for the larger community. As the congregation grew, a new building was constructed on the same site and the old one torn down. Peace continued to thrive through the 1990s when social lives in this community

still revolved around church. Most people lived in the neighborhood and the church had multiple choirs, youth sports teams and over 70 children in Sunday school. By the late 1990s after many children left home and people moved away they tried to re-engage the neighborhood by visiting new neighbors and inviting children to participate in programs. Children did participate in events, but they did not join the church. One member of a focus group talked about how “they never really taught the community of saints”.<sup>21</sup> For him this means teaching people about the importance of being part of a mutual community. This loss of community was exacerbated by several short-term pastors.

After 2009 the congregation lost some members because of the ELCA’s decision to allow pastors to be in same-sex committed relationships. That changed the tone of the congregation. Six years ago, they called Pr. Ruth in part because she was in a same-sex committed relationship and had recently become an ELCA Lutheran pastor. Since hiring her, membership is growing. Some new members followed Pr. Ruth from her previous congregation and others have come because she invited them or because they were attracted by the message of acceptance. About two years ago they voted to become a Reconciling In Christ congregation that “sees God reflected in the faces around us”.<sup>22</sup> On their website they describe themselves as progressive Christians who take the Bible seriously but not literally. They boast of providing “a hospitality of radical inclusion and extravagantly expressed love.”<sup>23</sup> They also talk about their call to be a public witness that advocates for neighbors both locally and globally and one that cares for those in need.

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<sup>21</sup> Participant, Our Savior focus group, January 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Congregation website. Not listed to preserve anonymity. Accessed February 7, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Peace website home page. Not listed to preserve anonymity. Accessed February 20, 2017.

When asked what contributed to their shift from crisis to hopeful about the future, the pastor tells the story about a re-dedication ritual where she asked if they were still called to be in that place for the sake of the neighborhood, and they said “yes.” At which point she told them they needed to find God in the neighborhood. However, that story was not shared by anyone else. Members primarily pointed out the appearance of new members (many from GLBT community) as a sign of hope and movement toward the future at the same time acknowledging their persistent financial deficit. Newer members talked about their appreciation of the progressive theology and genuine affirmation of who they are as people. The MAP survey placed them in the “land of possibilities” suggesting that most people felt they were ready to “make bold decisions and advance their mission in new and renewed ways.”<sup>24</sup> Peace’s emerging identity appears to be primarily centered externally and this is moving them toward a more hopeful future despite daunting fiscal realities.

Trinity was started around 1911 (20 years after Our Savior) by a German congregation that wanted an English speaking outreach ministry. The community always included people of different ethnic groups. In 1957 when this facility was re-built, there were roughly 950 members with over 50% coming from the local community. Now about 4 of the 20+ family units attending on Sunday were residents (around 25%). The dominant narrative of Trinity is the story of what “used to be.” When asked about the congregation’s history, members were quick to tell me how they used to set up chairs in the isles to make room for everyone, they used to have 300 children in Sunday School,

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<sup>24</sup> Joshua Group, “Missional Assessment Profile” for Peace, received during a leadership team meeting at Peace, January 2017. 6.



and they used to do a variety of social outreach and host a community dinner. When asked what their congregation was all about, members talked about being a family that knew each other well. However, they also talked about their sense of call to be a positive force in the neighborhood. Trinity is a congregation with a deep heart for ministry. Many of them love the neighborhood and want to serve people in it even while they are deeply frightened by the violence that goes on right outside their doors. When pushed beyond the stories of “used to” members told us of the bi-monthly fresh produce give-away done in their parking lot and how they enjoy visiting with neighborhood people face to face. They also talked about how they brought food to support the protestors at the police station in the community last summer (which included members of Our Saviors and other congregations). They are deeply saddened, frustrated and afraid of the recent violence. Frustrated, because it has kept them from visiting with the neighbors as much as they would like to and they feel helpless to improve it. For Trinity, serving the neighbor means helping to improve the conditions for the neighbors and meeting their immediate needs. As a congregation that has yet to go around the crisis in the Red Zone, the leaders at Trinity have little imagination for what could be. This was evidenced when I asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up and they laughed saying they were already old and probably dying.

### **Grounded Theory Part Two: From Identity to Action**

Once the cause of present and hoped for identity was understood, I shifted my attention toward understanding how identity impacted behavior. Two important factors were the context and the conditions present within the congregations. Context includes the capacity of the congregation to move forward (sustainability of people, energy for

mission, financial resources, facility constraints). Conditions include the leadership style of the council and pastor, the presence of adaptive practices (discernment, listening, experimenting, reflection), attitudes about the community and those that live there, and the way people understand God's active presence in their congregation. Having discovered these critical elements in their collaborative work, I went back and looked at each congregation with a new understanding of what drove their behavior and what determined the consequences. What follows is the second half of the grounded theory presented for each congregation.

### Trinity

Trinity has an identity of failure, and strong sense of family but a heart for mission.

Context: Trinity is in the heart of Westside closest to where much of the violence was last summer.

**Capacity:** Most of the elderly members are weary and energy is low. In 2015, average worship attendance was reported to be 56 people with membership that is 57% white, 30% West African, 6% black, and most others multi-racial. Their Congregational Vitality Survey describes them as vital but not sustainable. Sixty-five percent of respondents agreed that they didn't have enough people to do ministry well, 45% agreed that the facility got in the way of ministry, and 100% agreed that they were using up their financial resources. It is this lack of capacity that places them in the Red Zone.

Conditions: **Leadership:** As a pastor of less than two years, Mary has already gained the affection of her congregation who proclaimed as much during the focus group, noting that it took a while to get a pastor, but they got a good one. The council was made up of elderly white men and women along with one West African elderly man. The

meeting was very much run by a lay leader (white gentleman) who led a tight meeting, often declaring decisions after minimal discussion, rather than voting. This style was criticized in a subsequent conversation with another lay leader. His style is very different from the gentle encouraging and persistent style of Pr. Mary. The dichotomy may explain why 25% of respondents described the leadership style for the congregation as “take charge” while another 25% said it “inspires people to action,” 16% said it acts on goals others set and 32% said they were “not sure” how to describe leadership.

**Adaptive Practices:** When asked how they discern God’s will, council members pointed to Bible studies which are attended by the same 7 people all the time (this is seen as a failure by some). As a church council, they open and close with prayer and hope that God leads them through their meeting. They said it sometimes feels like that happens, but not always. I asked how they listened to each other, and they asked why they needed to when they already knew one another so well. When the survey asked how often they had meaningful spiritual conversations with people in the congregation, 30% said never and 20% said once a month or more. They were hard pressed to think of any experiments they had done intentionally or any times they had reflected on actions. Most of their work was reacting to the latest building repair needs.

**Attitudes about neighbors:** When people in focus groups were asked about their neighborhood, they responded with words like: rough, struggling, and frightening. In the council focus group participants told stories of two tragic deaths that occurred within a block of the congregation last summer. They also talked about members being mugged while leaving a church meeting at night. While listening to these stories, I counted at least three sirens go screaming by. These events led members to cancel some scheduled

community outreach and many are now afraid of coming out at night. Yet, during the same council meeting Pr. Mary talked about feeling the most blessed when she is out on the streets meeting local people, sharing stories and praying with them. This sentiment was echoed by others in council. Everyone agreed they felt more alive when they were connecting with their neighbors, including a time when members went into the community after the shooting of a child last summer offering people cold water and listening to their stories. Presently, the congregation continues to hand out fresh produce in the parking lot each month and hosts a transition home for women coming out of prison. While they don't manage the program, they have gotten to know these women and invited them to participate in the life of the congregation. At the council meeting the group running the home acknowledged that they had under-budgeted for utilities and were now a thousand dollars in debt to the congregation. The council readily agreed to a proposal to cover the expenses (perhaps in exchange for some labor fixing the building). They also agreed to allow the women to have utilities placed in their name so that they could build credit and learn responsibility, as long as council got regular reports about their payments. The general feeling among council was that helping the women become sustainable was more important than recouping the money already lost. This commitment was made with little debate even though later in the agenda they reviewed the 2016 profit and loss statement that showed a loss of over \$80,000. Even though they fear their neighborhood, they love their neighbors and put their neighbor's needs above their own.

**Understanding of God's active presence:** The congregants I spoke with at Trinity had a fairly consistent understanding of how God engages with the congregation. "There have been times when we were really in dire straits and God did something and

we came out on top again, so I think it is just prayer—individual or as a group or whatever. Because there have been times when we have really been in tough shape.”<sup>25</sup> Another member told this story, “In 2010 we were just about out of money and God came through. That’s got us to 2017. Now we are ready for another influx of God’s magical powers, (some laughing), but we’ll see.”<sup>26</sup> The Congregational Vitality Survey showed that 40% of people strongly disagreed that God was removed from their congregation’s daily life but only 30% strongly agreed that God was directly involved in the congregation’s daily life. This hope that God is somewhere watching and will eventually intervene may be responsible for the inaction and apparent denial. The pastor pointed out that the people were still in denial about the fact that their endowment would run out within two years, or sooner if another major repair was needed. They were weary, faithful people who had a heart for ministry to the community but who were afraid of recent violence that had prevented them from serving the way they wanted to. They did not appear to want to make any major decisions until God came to the rescue. While the people of Trinity experienced God as a rescue worker, Pr. Mary talked about God in a different way. She described the church as followers of Jesus. Church is about inviting people and telling stories of their own faith and how they have been transformed by Christ himself. Worship is central to this because it is the proclamation of God and God’s mission. But she also sees God’s mission of caring and sharing with others which is equally necessary. When asked what the Spirit is up to, Pr. Mary believes that God works when we work with God. She sees the Spirit working for justice in the Word and within

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<sup>25</sup> Council member, Trinity council meeting focus group, January, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

the congregation as they gather together to care for their own who are hurting. God is at work in revealing things to us that Jesus couldn't reveal when he was here. She quoted scripture: "The Holy Spirit will come and will reveal all things"<sup>27</sup> and talked about how that is happening both in her life and the world. She sees God at work in her own life to help her step outside of her own boxes and talked about how everyone needs to let God work in them individually. She helps her congregation see this by preaching this message in her sermons where she calls them to remember their baptism which has joined them to Christ's death and resurrection so that they can live their lives as he did – loving and caring for the world.

Strategy & Consequences: The hope of God's eventual assistance combined with a genuine love for one another as a family and compassion for the neighbors has kept Trinity going in expectation of a better future. Their low capacity, burn out, fear of their neighborhood, closed leadership style and lack of intentional listening to God and one another or their neighbors, has kept them from moving forward proactively. If the congregation can embrace God's agency and expand their genuine compassion to see neighbors as partners rather than threats or beneficiaries of their good works, then the potential for transformation is there. But right now, they are stuck in their box. Pr. Mary talked about her plan to begin an intentional conversation to confront the looming financial crisis in hopes of creating movement. Phase three of the results will describe new opportunities that are spurring that conversation.

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<sup>27</sup> Pr. Mary interview, January, 2017.

## Peace

Peace has an identity of promise, and a heart for inclusion, esp. GLBTQ community

Context: The congregation is located at the far end of the Westside community where there is less violent crime and fewer black people, but still a lot of diversity.

**Capacity**: The congregation's annual report was last completed in 2014. It stated that 86% of all confirmed members were white. The Missional Assessment Profile report said that typical worship attendance was 65 and that there were 250 baptized members. The treasurer told me that generous donors built up a memorial fund which has allowed them to run a deficit budget for about 10 years. A few years ago it was announced that they would run out of money in five years. Two years ago they were told they had two years left. When asked if that had changed she said, "not really".<sup>28</sup> But the pastor said that in recent years last minute donations have closed the gap slowing draw on memorial funds. When asked about their plan for another deficit budget this year, the pastor shrugged and said that somehow the money always shows up. "Last year we ended in the black and we all nearly fell off our chairs."<sup>29</sup> Yet one of the people in a focus group said it was still one of her goals to end the year in the black. Her perception was that it had not yet happened. The MAP results show that 81% agree or strongly agree that leaders manage finances efficiently. When asked how much they planned to donate to the congregation over the next year, 59% said they would give the same, 5% said less and 37% said more. It was not clear to me whether things are actually getting stronger or if the congregation is in denial or hope.

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<sup>28</sup> Peace's council treasurer interview, January, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Pastor Ruth interview, January, 2017.

Another concern of several members and the pastor is the age of the congregation members, particularly its lay leaders who tend to be older. Pr. Ruth described the weariness of many felt their capacity to participate beyond what they are already doing was limited, particularly if it involves physical labor.

Conditions: **Leadership:** This congregation is led by Pr. Ruth who served as a consultant for a congregational consulting company. She has a strong grasp of missional ideas and regularly used missional and contextual language both in our interview and with the congregation. People in other congregations commented on her strong leadership with admiration. Most congregation members credit her with moving the congregation from a time of crisis into a time of promise. This summer she plans to move to another city for personal reasons. One reason she asked the congregation to do the MAP survey was to help them prepare for her departure. When I visited the congregation, she had not yet announced her eminent departure, though the other pastors and synod staff were aware of the plan. In my interview with the treasurer, she said that they had done the MAP survey to help them understand who they are and to focus their energy moving forward. During the MAP debrief, Pr. Ruth initially spoke very little at first, but few lay leaders contributed to the conversation in substantial ways. By the middle of the meeting, Pr. Ruth was the primary voice with few other people contributing at all. I did not see signs of strong lay leadership that is ready to step up when she leaves. One potential exception is Jane, who presently serves as the NAMS secretary and representative from Peace. She has clear ideas of new ways the congregation and NAMS could take its next steps in mission with the community. She describes a close working relationship with Pr. Ruth, but it is clear that Pr. Ruth calls the shots.



The fact that no other lay leaders described the same transformational story as Pr. Ruth and no one else I spoke with agreed that they were financially sound, causes me to wonder how much of it has become part of the congregation's story and how much is still part of the leading imagination of Pr. Ruth. Congregation members do have an independent sense of hope, but it is primarily grounded in the presence of newer members and their successful monthly neighborhood dinners. Since pastoral changes are usually accompanied by people leaving I wonder whether this sense of momentum will continue in her absence.

**Adaptive practices:** The congregation struggles to create a culture where adult faith formation is central to its life. Pr. Ruth told stories of rituals she's done to reinforce baptismal promises and encourage faith formation, but the MAP survey showed that 52% of respondents neither agreed or disagreed that participating in the congregation's educational opportunities is important to their faith development. During the debrief, lay leaders said that previous efforts were discontinued because of lack of attendance. When asked how they listened to one another they referred to fellowship time and pointed to the fact that some people gather informally. They said there is no systematic time for listening and felt that busy schedules made this unlikely to happen on its own. The MAP survey was an example of how the congregation listened to one another and reflected on what they learned, except, as I mentioned before, the debrief involved very little input from leaders. Perhaps later council meetings involved a more open discussion. The monthly community outreach meal is an experiment done by the congregation in order to meet its neighbors, and this is viewed as a success. No other experiments beyond participation in NAMS were mentioned.

**Attitude toward neighbors:** Compassion is the best way to describe Peace's attitude toward their neighbors. According to the MAP survey, 37% of respondents lived within a two-mile radius of the congregation. When asked to describe the neighborhood, several people said it wasn't as bad as people say (mostly referring to the news and reputation of Westside). The pastor and others expressed some relief that they were on the edge of the neighborhood where there is less violence (compared to the other NAMS congregations). The pastor reported that some members did not want to visit the other congregations, especially at night, because they feared the violence. One woman described the community as very diverse and economically and socially challenged but then said "we want to be a part of that to make sure people know that there is a safe and supportive place in the community."<sup>30</sup> One way Peace reaches the community is through their monthly community meals which invite neighbors to come in for a free meal made from scratch by the congregation members. Members also come to eat with the neighbors to develop relationships with the 80+ people who come any given month. When I attended one of the dinners I encountered neighbors of diverse ages and races sitting at round tables in mostly racially segregated groups of families and friends with members from Peace mingling among them. The neighborhood people I talked with came, not because they needed food, but because they wanted to be part of a local community gathering, to visit with their neighbors. When I asked where one group of people lived, a soft spoken elderly white man said "west of the gunfire."<sup>31</sup> The table conversation then turned to the persistent violence, their fear and present consideration of moving into the

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<sup>30</sup> Pastor Ruth interview, January, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Participant at Peace community meal, January, 2017.

suburbs. He went on to make racist comments about those (non-white people) he thought were initiating the violence but did not seem troubled by the presence of many black people in the dining hall with him. This interaction was similar to those I had with members of Peace in that the fear and desire to be further away was real. However, they differed from people of Peace in that there was a genuine desire to serve those around them and to be a place that honors and welcomes all, including people who are not white or GLBT.

This meal was the primary example of community engagement named by members from Peace, but they also donate space and water on their lot for a local non-profit to grow food for the neighborhood. This caring spirit of the congregation was uniquely expressed by one young adult man who shared his story about how the congregation had given him a sense of family and structure as a wayward youth. Reflecting on the gunfire outside his home the night before, he wondered whether those youths, that he assumed were like him as a young man, might need the same kind of loving structure as he had needed. He hoped to find a way for the church to reach them. His story is like those of other people at Peace because they are all concerned for the wellbeing of the individuals and families in the community. Another woman sought me out to tell me the story of her gay son and how important it was to be in a church community where being GLBT was not only accepted but embraced and celebrated. This helped her work through her own initially mixed emotions about her son's revelation. While anti-discrimination issues were discussed in terms of how they impacted individual's lives, systemic racial injustice or discrimination were not explicitly named. Even though their pastor and several women marched in the women's march in January,

there was no call to action around fighting systemic issues. The pastor told me that she intentionally avoids such direct calls as they would not sit well with several members who are averse to politics in the pulpit.

**God's active presence:** Few people in focus groups talked about God's activities of presence. The MAP report showed that 55% of respondents strongly agreed that they believed God is active in the world today and 36% strongly agreed with the statement: "God works through me to carry out God's mission." When Jane was asked how they discerned next steps, she said that God moves in small quiet ways and the pieces fall together. She noted that the current political climate makes it hard to hear God. Pr. Ruth regularly refers to God using action words. But that language was not reflected in conversations I observed.

Strategies and consequences: Peace has moved from a dying church to one that engages its neighbors and one that has consciously adopted a lived progressive theology. They have also invested in NAMS by contributing one of their members to serve as the NAMS secretary taking notes, sending reminders and writing the monthly newsletter. Peace has included people from NAMS congregations in their community dinners and incorporated youth from other NAMS congregations in to running the Swedish festival.

When they consider what they would do if they actually run out of money, their first thought is that they can't afford to rip down and build another building as they have done in the past. They wonder about selling the building to construct something more practical and sustainable. This new building may include other Lutheran churches in the area. Other thoughts go to renting out the building to others to help pay to maintain their building. This sense illustrates how bound they are to the idea of church being a building

where people gather and then do things for the community. That underlying identity has yet to be challenged so it continues to define their imagination for ministry. The disconnect between Pr. Ruth's understanding of the present ministry and her imagination for potential ministry and the congregation's own understanding of the present and potential for ministry may be the result of any or all of the following factors: 1. A strong pastor who leads herself rather than developing shared leadership, 2. Not enough time to develop those leaders, 3. A lack of extended intentional conversation about the future of the congregation and its positioning within the larger community, 4. A lack of congregational commitment to intentionally listening to one another and growing their faith. However, the planned council discussions around the MAP survey and Pr. Ruth's inevitable announcement that she is leaving may move council in new directions that help new leaders to rise.

### Our Savior

Our Savior has an identity of thriving, and a heart for community development and justice.

Context: This congregation is located closest to the downtown area. Our Savior has been a beacon for hope for the past 20 years and is well known in the community. After years as a majority black neighborhood they are now experiencing creeping gentrification. This is something the congregation is determined to fight and recently purchased apartments to provide affordable places for local folks to live.

**Capacity**: The congregation's annual report puts average worship attendance at 100 with 45% white, 55% black, 22% multi-racial and the rest a variety of other

ethnicities. No one I saw or met appeared to be West African. This congregation is lively with high energy during worship and throughout the week. Financially, their annual report shows revenues exceeding expenses since 2010, however that is because they are sponsored by some larger wealthy suburban congregations who partner in ministries as well as providing financial support. In 2015 approximately 38% of their annual receipts came from grants and partnership support. Sixty-five percent of respondents to the Congregational Vitality Survey said the congregation was able to grow. During my visit with the council there was concern for the lack of accessibility within the building and 30% of respondents agreed that the facility gets in the way of ministry. The survey also revealed concern about the financial stability of the congregation with 57% agreeing and 29% strongly agreeing that the congregation is using up its financial resources.

#### Conditions

**Leadership:** Leadership at Our Savior is complex. There is a strong staff component intertwined with a strong lay leadership component. Most of the time they work in harmony, but sometimes they are at odds.

The Congregational Vitality Survey confirms a leadership that is inspiring people to action (81%) with only one person saying they were not sure how to describe leadership. The inspirational leadership is attributed to Pr. Peter who has been with the congregation 17 years. Pr. Peter is a black man who came to Our Savior after years of community action experience in other cities. A few people told me that when he came to Our Savior and saw a tiny dying congregation, he decided to become the pastor for the neighborhood rather than the pastor of the 35 mostly white elderly people in worship. In my interview with him, he did not tell that story. Instead he talked about what the

congregation was like when he first came to Our Savior. Even though they had made the decision to continue for the sake of the neighborhood, they didn't know how. Most services were outsourced to people from the suburbs that came to help the neighborhood. There was little sense that the church belonged to the neighborhood, and there was a strong undercurrent of entitlement from the members who knew the rules and maintained the power (holding the keys to the kitchen as Pr. Peter refers to it). Pr. Peter said that strong pastoral leadership was key to their transformation. He took the time to build up trust and then began to act as a mirror to folks, helping them see who they are in relationship to their neighbors. He translated the catechism into language the community could understand and in this way, he helped members reframe what it means to be a church. At the same time, he built relationships with neighbors. Early on, he was accused of being a "black Klansman" by one neighbor who observed that the restaurant run by the congregation didn't employ local folks. From then on he worked to intentionally include people from the community as part of the solution, rather than simply a group of people to serve. That philosophy has since become a key part of the congregation's identity. Now the identity of Pr. Peter and the congregation are intertwined. During my conversations with each congregation's pastor I sometimes referred to the congregation as "they". Pr. Peter was the only one who corrected me and said, no it is "we".

Even though they are approximately a program size congregation, Our Savior is not program driven. Pr. Peter refers to the big activities of the congregation as primarily staff driven. He describes the role of staff as setting the table and pulling pieces together. The few standing programs are typically planned and run by staff of the congregation or the non-profit started by the congregation before Pr. Peter arrived. This style of

leadership may explain why only staff have ever attended NAMS parish council meetings and why few members knew much about it. Even though staff coordinate regular activities, the emphasis on intentional leadership development appeared in several places across the church including council. Several ministries of the congregation, including the coffee/bike shop, were initiated by members who were encouraged and assisted by the congregation and leadership to pursue their ideas. Council members talked about wanting to find ways to have kids be in charge of children's church and to more deeply engage young families. I also witnessed intentionality around leadership development at the council meeting. There the council talked about the fact that their upcoming annual meeting would elect new members. Time was spent on how to use a planned retreat to intentionally build relationships among members so that they could learn about and lift up new people's gifts and enhance their ability to function as a team. The balance Our Savior achieves between member or community driven activities (more ad hoc) and staff driven activities (more sustained) allows the congregation to continue experimenting and reflecting and adapting.

Council is made up of mostly young and middle aged professional individuals of mixed genders and ethnicities. The meeting was well run with wide participation in conversation by most members coupled with proper (but not overly strict) use of Robert's rules. Pr. Peter participated but did not dominate the conversation. Periodically his ideas were sought and they were always respected. During the council meeting, two interesting things happened which gave cues to how formal and informal leadership at Our Savior works.



The first example illustrates how formal leadership imagines the work of Our Savior. In a prior interview with Pr. Peter, he said that one reason he wasn't more committed to NAMS was that it didn't have a big enough vision, one that would be transformational. At that time, he wondered who had the power to issue such a challenge. But during this council meeting, Pr. Peter took on that role himself by proposing such a vision. He informed the group that the New Beginning building was available for sale and floated the idea of expanding their ministry west by taking over responsibility for the building. He described how this would add equity to their organization allowing them to take out a loan and expand their ministry while allowing New Beginning to continue worshipping in the space. It would mean expanding the identity of the congregation beyond their particular neighborhood to encompass more of the Westside. The council was intrigued by the idea and had several questions noting the need for a complete risk assessment before any decisions were made. One concern raised was whether Our Savior would be expected to seed the congregation with new members. This comment appeared to be rooted in concerns about losing valued members and potentially weakening Our Savior. A similar perspective was raised to me previously by a NAMS involved staff member. She said, "There's a sense in the congregation of- we've got a lot of good things going on and we don't want to screw that up."<sup>32</sup> In the council meeting, Pr. Peter suggested that only staff would have to move and pointed out that that the new venture may not bear the name of Our Savior, rather it may be a collaborative effort with other ELCA congregations. Pr. Peter saw little financial risk because space within the building could be rented and if all else failed, the building could be sold and any loans paid off. He

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<sup>32</sup> NAMS council member interview, January, 2017.

pointed out that it was good for organizations to take risks and grow because staying still too long allows it to atrophy. He said that relying more on God and pursuing an audacious project helps strengthen faith. Pr. Peter raised this issue in part because of an upcoming meeting planned with the synod and leaders from New Beginning and Trinity. Even though Pr. Peter left room for a collaborative effort, he was not explicitly pitching one. He was testing to see if there was a possibility of support for potential collaboration and clearly saw their council as a guiding force. Council's positive reception allowed him to enter the synod meeting and subsequent parish council meeting with confidence that he could agree to further conversations regarding creative solutions. It was clear to everyone that Pr. Peter would be the person involved in moving this effort forward until more people were needed. No one offered to join him or asked to be involved.

The second example describes how informal leadership is beginning to gain power and the tension that creates. Council described the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as a current "big issue" within the church. The BLM movement at Our Savior, began after last summer's shooting of an unarmed young black man by a white police officer. This movement is self-organized and very public, often calling out perceived injustice both within the community and elsewhere in the country or the world. When operating locally, they have publicly used the name of the church as the source of their actions, firmly believing that they are acting as part of the church because two or three are gathered together for the sake of the neighbor. This created some tension among some formal leaders because they did not necessarily agree with some of the tactics used and they were concerned because the formal leadership had not explicitly sent BLM folks to speak on their behalf. BLM reacted to council's concerns negatively and this raised

tensions further. This issue had been discussed at several council meetings. At the council meeting I attended, the president wondered how BLM folks could say that Our Savior didn't support their cause when many of the people in that room participated in their activities. The frustration was summarized by the council president who said, "Everything we do on a day to day basis clearly says that (we believe in the same principles). . . . I didn't understand why people thought there was a lack of support from the council when we were always physically there."<sup>33</sup> One member described these tensions as growing pains pointing out that the church has many members who are passionate about different things.

I think that speaks to the greater piece of the congregation having growing pains of where is everyone at with the piece of social justice: BLM, GLBTQ, disparities in economics, education, Standing Rock, the different ways we are supporting social justice, social equity, and those causes. There are going to be different views of where different members are going to feel differently. Where is our place as a church? . . . Is that in the sanctuary, or is that through a ministry, or is that completed through outreach?<sup>34</sup>

In my observation, the tension was created primarily by the difference in leadership style between BLM and the formal Our Saviors leaders. The development of BLM was described in an interview with an elderly woman who spent her career in community organizing and who now participates in BLM when she can, but mostly watches it with the eyes of an organizer and church consultant. She said that initially it started like any other movement. After the shooting, people just couldn't be silent anymore. They found each other, aired frustration and outrage, gained clarity and this

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<sup>33</sup> Our Savior council focus group, January, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

eventually became a call to action. But now the movement has become so organized that it is beginning to take on the appearance of a church. Correspondence from group emails among 70 people show the group's unique pattern of decision making. When they gather together (in people's homes or at Our Savior in the community space) they listen to one another deeply, pray, study scripture and mutually discern next steps. This results in a call to action and an invitation to beyond those present. The call to action isn't always an invitation to an event, rather it is an invitation to be part of continued planning. People from across the network are included in a detailed description of the process and discernment to date and asked to participate in both the continued planning and the next step of the action. Once an action is taken, the group again gathers to listen and discern before determining the next action steps. Throughout the process BLM members shared inspirational quotes and prayers with one another. This cycle of gathering to listen and pray followed by sending to act and then gathering to reflect and listen/pray again has created a space within Our Savior for adaptive change to continue happening. This way of being church has changed some participants understanding of what church is, as illustrated in these quotes:

Twenty years ago it (the congregation) was defined by the walls of who was here on Sunday morning, but now there are people who define themselves as part of Our Savior but they don't come on Sunday mornings. So it's an explosion of what it means to be a church and a church identity that may not have gone through a process of agreement.<sup>35</sup>

I'm resetting my understanding of what "normal church" is. I'm not going to deal with people who say "The church can't really do that." Because I already have examples in my back pocket. This is the new normal we're creating here.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Coordinator of BLM interview, January, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Our Savior leader interview, January, 2017.

The contrast is significant. Our Savior's formal leadership style is traditional. Council provides vision and oversight while pastor and staff led teams develop plans then invite others and put on and/or participate in activities. This is true even when the nature of the activity is to empower local lay leaders; it is generally initiated and to some extent controlled by staff. BLM leadership works differently. Even though the primary coordinator of BLM is a staff member, her job is not directly related to this movement. She does this out of her passion and sense of God's call to action while bringing her work skills and role at Our Savior in to the mix. The fact that she is staff allows Pr. Peter and others to be connected to this movement, however, the movement does not take its vision or guidance from the pastor of formal leadership. They develop it among the group and copy formal leaders like the pastor in the correspondence. In other words, Pr. Peter is in the loop but not in control of BLM's direction.

During our one-to-one interview, I asked Pr. Peter to reflect on the apparent similarity in the way he described power struggles of the early church (between his vision for a community centered congregation and the "keepers of the keys" who had a church centered vision) with the current power struggle between formal leadership and BLM. He had not seen that parallel before and said it was insightful, but needed to think about it more before he could respond.

**Adaptive practices:** Council meetings started with opening devotions lead by a member and reflected on by the group. During the meeting lessons from that reflection re-emerged to help inform conversation.

When the pastor was asked how Our Savior's members listened to each other, he said that it happened mostly on Sunday morning. During worship, there is time for people

to share what is going on in the congregation or their own lives. Other opportunities were described by other people. Leaders regularly listen to the neighborhood residents in both formally (door-to-door conversations) and informally (hangout in public spaces). Council talked about the importance of establishing relationships with neighbors because they were not likely to be open and honest until there is trust. Our Savior is present at all local neighborhood association meetings and hosts a big block party each year. This kind of community presence helps build trust.

In terms of experimentation and reflection, the congregation has become an expert. According to one woman, “We do have some experience wrestling through some really hard questions.”<sup>37</sup> She described the process they’ve gone through over the years which has continued to stretch their boundaries to the point where today’s congregation bears little resemblance to what existed 20 years ago. Indeed, in many ways Our Savior represents the embodiment of the Learning and Growing stage described by Keifert. These adaptive practices have become the hallmark of the BLM movement which may eventually cause the congregation to embody a new vision in the future.

**Attitude toward neighbors:** There are too many examples of community interaction to list here. However, a few illustrations are offered. One council member talked about new buildings in the neighborhood that are being used for recovering addicts and those re-entering the community after incarceration. He told the story of some women from the community he met recently at the church who talked about how wonderful it was to have a safe place close by where they could share what is going on in their lives. Referring to how neighborhood people see Our Saviors he said,

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<sup>37</sup> Our Savior leader interview, January, 2017.

But they don't think that black people come to a Lutheran church and they really are wondering what really goes on here. People are scared to come to church like they are going to be hit by the lightning bolt or something; like all the sudden they gonna be good when they don't want be good right now. People don't want to feel less than. I know how people get in that mindset. Like you said the way they dress or they may not have as much as others. But then they walk in here and think, wow people dress like anything. That's why I like wearing shorts in the summer. We show em come on in, come as you are.<sup>38</sup>

Neighbors are considered part of the congregation whether or not they attend worship on Sunday. Their gifts are welcome and their needs are considered part of the needs of the congregation itself. Pr. Peter told the story of a young man who had never been to worship but who came to him for help after his friend was arrested. He quoted the congregation's mission and asked if they meant it. Pr. Peter said it was then that he knew he was making a dent in the neighborhood. Now it is not uncommon for community members to hang out in "the living room" which is a public community space within the congregation managed by the non-profit. In that space, there are also events, classes and services offered at various times. This church also has a community garden and outdoor pizza oven managed by and for the neighbors. It opened a bike and coffee shop run by young adult community/congregation members and an NA group organized by a congregation member.

While many members of Our Saviors focus on the individuals within the neighborhood, others (often BLM) focus primarily on the systemic issues within the community and society. One white woman who is part of BLM talked about the need to "dismantle whiteness" by which she meant white privilege. People with this perspective were more likely to assume the other NAMS congregations were racist because they

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<sup>38</sup> Our Savior council focus group, January, 2017.

weren't actively calling people to fight injustice. For some, this is the primary and perhaps only faithful response the church can offer. In his one-to-one interview, Pr. Peter raised concerns that the congregation is becoming more white (now 65%) with most new members coming from outside the community. They are attracted to the social justice work and this is good, except that doing work on behalf of others is not the same as people fighting for their own rights. He didn't mean to imply that only people who are oppressed can fight for equal rights, but he did note the tension and difference in philosophy.

**God's active presence:** According the Congregational Vitality Survey, no one disagreed with the statement that God is concerned about the well-being of the congregation and that God is present in the congregation's daily life (58% strongly agree). Slightly fewer (45%) strongly agreed that God is directly involved in the congregation's daily life.

In focus groups and interviews I saw different ways of understanding how God was active and present. When speaking at a council meeting, Pr. Peter stated that churches operating with the understanding that the neighborhood is scary are dying while the churches that built on the assets of the community and embraced them are doing well. He believed that this (the success or failure of the churches) is the Spirit's doing. When asked how God sees his church during the interview, he said, "Hopefully He approves and says, 'Hey, they're doing something good.' Let's find ways to open doors and support and encourage them in their work! Open our minds and hearts to welcome, not only each other as Lutherans but people in the community—and not to be afraid of



them.” His views are associated with the core identity of people from the neighborhood lifting up each other.

This identity goes beyond the immediate neighborhood. One person named the deep sense of God’s presence she experiences in herself and within the congregation. She described her call to be part of the church and also the church’s call to witness and serve the neighborhood. When NAMS was discussed, one council member said,

*Our Savior* is doing pretty well in terms of, there’s a dynamic that’s going on across the generations people in relations and programming relations and all those things. I think it has more to do with not just thinking of ourselves as a congregation but as a church. It’s more a stewardship in a responsible way of sharing what God is doing for and with us but other congregations that are struggling and that if someone doesn’t do something that those other congregations are not likely to be around. My belief is that just like we have partner congregations that support us, it (NAMS) is a way for us to give back and have an identity that is bigger than just being in this location.<sup>39</sup>

This image has a God who is connected with the congregation and doing things in the community and with the community. This perspective reveals a congregation-centered understanding of how God engages the community.

Within the same congregation several people (often those associated with BLM) shared a different understanding of God. When I asked the council’s focus group what the Holy Spirit is up to, they said the Spirit is busy addressing racism and stigmatization at large. The Spirit is also building up the assets of the community and making space for relationships that allow community to happen. More spaces are popping up all the time, and they are not necessarily inside the church. They point out that God is already present working in the community and they feel it is insulting to suggest that anyone is bringing God to the community. “God is already here!” When asked what God is up to, another

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<sup>39</sup> Our Savior council focus group, January, 2017.

person said that God doesn't always have a particular path for us. Rather it is our job to pray as a community and listen together before coming to a decision. Yet another leader described God as the glue that held each congregation and NAMS together. This understanding of a God who hates injustice and actively compels people to join the fight is what inspired the BLM movement. This God drove and continues to drive them into action, sometimes before they joined the church. For this community, the traditional pattern of Claimed, Gathered, Sent understood by most congregations may be flipped to be Claimed, Sent, Gathered and Sent again.

Strategies and consequences: The primary outcomes caused by Our Savior's identity interacting within their context through the conditions of leadership, attitudes about neighbors, adaptive practices and understandings of God are three-fold. First, it has created a dynamic adaptive organization that appears to be in another prime time of its life. This exciting energy attracts new members and visitors from beyond the immediate community.

Second, it has created feelings of "success" both in people in Our Savior and those in surrounding congregations. This was illustrated at the council meeting when NAMS was brought up. The pastor explained the relationships among the congregations as follows:

Where *Our Savior* is at, in terms of its interests and the prophetic identity, is very far away from where those other congregations are at. So it's like pulling a relationship with other congregations. So the idea is there, but we are in very different places. . . . I think they (other NAMS congregations) see *Our Savior* as running. It's the analogy of a track meet. *Our Savior* is sprinting and they are just getting out of the block and they don't know if they want to stay in the race. Two of 'em are literally at this point where they don't know if they are going to

continue to exist or not. What Our Savior has not made the commitment to, and what we are so invested in, is that we would try to pull them forward.<sup>40</sup>

In an interview, another leader wonders whether Our Savior's sense of success is creating an arrogance that is hindering collaboration. She wonders if it will prevent them from fully committing to a mutual relationship where the sharing of their gifts helps deepen their own discipleship. Some of this sense of arrogance can be directly tied to the understanding that God is watching and judging all the churches. This understanding allows them to judge as well.

The third outcome is the tension between formal and informal leadership with BLM. When people perceive God as judging it creates feelings of superiority. However, when people perceive God as active within and among the people – particularly when they are working with God in the world, worship does not need to be the center of the community. Pr. Peter addressed this issue in a sermon I heard about holding the “priestly” (those who focus on worship and service) and the “prophetic” (those who focus on social justice) in tension. In an earlier interview, Pr. Peter expressed concerns because most of the people joining the church these days are white and live outside the neighborhood. They come because they are drawn to the community action orientation, but they are working with God on behalf of the neighbors (and other disenfranchised groups) rather than being part of the neighborhood and fighting for their own rights. He appears to be concerned that social justice without a connection to worship and faith may lead to self-righteousness.

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<sup>40</sup> Pr. Peter interview, January, 2017.

## New Beginning

New Beginning has an identity of determination and confusion, internal focus, and a heart for family first. Much of New Beginning's story was told earlier in this chapter, so this section will be condensed.

Context: New Beginning is also located in the heart of Westside near Trinity. The lack of consistent pastoral leadership is probably why the congregation has not turned in an annual report since 2013. At that time they reported an average worship attendance of 60 with 54% white and the rest West African. Since then worship appears to have shrunk to under 50 with 80% West African. The energy is low. The white members tend to be elderly and the West Africans work multiple jobs and commute to church. The council president explained that it costs \$10,000 per month to pay for monthly utility bills and other expenses. While the building is expensive, it is also a tremendous asset. Three stories high in parts, not only does it have a gym with locker rooms, but it also has several classrooms, a welcoming narthex and fellowship area, a large chapel (big enough to host worship of Trinity, or Peace or New Beginning), a very large beautiful traditional sanctuary with pipe organ and balcony (big enough to hold all four congregations combined), a large functioning elevator (designed to move caskets from the ground level to the sanctuary), a commercial grade kitchen and large dining hall. Recent improvements for a non-profit caused the congregation to bring the entire building up to code. The existence of this under-utilized asset has not escaped the notice of local non-profits, the synod or the other NAMS congregations. In some ways, the potential for this building to be used for the sake of a Lutheran witness in the heart of Westside is the unspoken reason for NAMS.

Conditions:

**Leadership:** Leadership at New Beginning is complex. Members name the frequent transition of pastors as a key reason for their floundering. One member told me that a third of the time since their merger 14 years ago has been spent with interim pastors. She and others (both white and West African) told me that it is particularly important for West Africans to have a personal relationship with their pastor. Having so many interims has made it impossible for the congregation to move forward or make decisions.

Within the congregation there several distinct leadership groups or individuals simultaneously holding back direct expressions of their leadership while finding other ways to exert leadership. I asked the current council president (a white former Grace member) why he had not shared his very clear vision for the future. He said, “I haven’t come out as council president and shared exactly how I feel of what I think we should do because I don’t want people to say that Richard says we’re going here and doing this.”<sup>41</sup> Pr. Andrew also expressed a reluctance to share his clear vision because of his desire for the direction of the church to come from its people. From what various leaders told me, there is no consensus and little genuine conversation.

It was a former member of Bethel who put forward the proposal that the congregation stay where it is and find a way to continue after running it by the pastor (for feedback more than permission). The proposal was agreed to at the annual meeting, but conversations I had later indicated that this was done, in part, out of politeness. West Africans are not often willing to openly contradict a white elder. That dynamic may have

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<sup>41</sup> New Beginnings leader interview, January 2017.

been at play during the annual meeting, but another aspect of the decision was apathy. The West Africans and other members from Grace are willing to worship in the space, but are not attached to it. One West African I spoke to genuinely didn't care where she worshiped as long as she could worship somewhere. When I asked why she didn't worship in the town where she lived, she said with some exasperation, "because the church is here!"<sup>42</sup> Another layer of complexity is that the men and women operate separately, each planning and doing various activities for the sake of the church and the membership. The male pastor expressed that he was not comfortable with nor welcomed by the women of the church. When I attended their focus group, it was clear to me that they were the ones with the keys to the kitchen. By not including the pastor, they are not able to develop a trusting relationship with him making it difficult for them to move forward as a church. In an effort to get going, the pastor quickly identified the problem as a financial crisis, and began work building relationships in community organizations and looking for people who would pay substantial rent for space within the building. This was not done in consultation with NAMS or the synod. This independent approach has frustrated others in NAMS who would like him to take the need for a Lutheran witness more seriously.

**Adaptive practices:** New Beginning has very few adaptive practices. Their entire congregation only gathers every other week when many local businesses allow West African immigrants a day off for worship. These "West African" weekends are a prime time for worship and fellowship. These Sundays are the only times when the community can gather to make decisions. Council meetings happen here, but not usually

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<sup>42</sup> New Beginnings member interview, January, 2017.

separate from the general gathering. The council president explained that there are many conversations but limited imagination for new ways of doing things and little commitment to do the work required for a solution. It was clear to me that each group had strong ideas and opinions, but that they did not talk with one another. The crisis state of the congregation made them open to experiments and new ideas, but the lack of communication and, therefore, lack of relationships made it difficult to make decisions.

**Attitude toward neighbors:** New Beginning members who were originally from Bethel (the congregation in that building) are very attached to the building, and some have compassion for the neighborhood. In fact, it was Lynn (the author of the resolution to stay) who gave me the clearest reason for maintaining a Lutheran presence within the neighborhood. She talked about walking around the neighborhood and seeing the large number of fundamentalist churches all eager to condemn people to hell for their behavior. She expressed that the real purpose of New Beginning was for God's message of love and grace, as understood by the Lutheran church, to be heard. She wanted New Beginnings to be a place that provided this hopeful, non-judgmental outlook to the community. In her mind, the way that would happen was by getting people to come into the building and experience worship. She spoke of earlier unsuccessful attempts to invite neighbors to church. The same sentiment was shared by one of the West African women who, when asked what the Spirit was up to in the neighborhood, had no idea and no imagination for church happening outside the walls of a building—even if not this particular building. Her only solution to addressing the problems of the community was to bring people into church and she expressed frustration that the people had not come despite their efforts to engage them.

As described, most men and women at New Beginning understood that a congregation should serve its neighborhood and wanted to provide some kind of service to the community. However, this was seen as something they would do when they had the resources, rather than something that they would find a way to do regardless of resources.

Since most of the current members do not live in the neighborhood and are not attached to it, it seems unlikely that any substantial ministry will develop.

**God's active presence:** There were interesting differences in the ways the different populations at New Beginning understood who God is and how God interacts with people. The people who talked the most about God were West Africans. When asked what the congregation is all about, West Africans in both Trinity and New Beginning are quick to say that church is a place for worship. When asked what that means, they respond with some incredulosity that we are there to worship God and Jesus. One woman from New Beginning said "church is the heart of my holiness within me".<sup>43</sup> She went on to say that church was not the particular building; it was about being together in the presence of the Lord. She was irritated at those within her congregation (mostly white people) that felt that church was primarily about having others take care of you. This woman comes to church to be filled with the Holy Spirit so she can make it through her week. One West African woman talked about the church as a holy place that they had desecrated by hosting immoral behaviors (done by people using the building for various social services to clients who sometimes misbehaved). She felt that God was angered by that and that this was part of the reason they struggled to survive. Her solution

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<sup>43</sup> New Beginnings member interview, January, 2017.



was to cleanse the building and re-consecrate it to make it holy again. Her husband, former council president, agrees saying, “This is a church and it is holy! There must be holiness here.”<sup>44</sup> He said he spoke out at their annual meeting about how people must commit or leave the church, quoting scripture he stated that he and his family would serve the Lord. When asked what church is he said,

The scripture itself says forget not the assembling of my people. This is a central point because biblically and spiritually, each and every individual is a church, you are a church within yourself. But we come together to share the blessings and to encourage each other as individuals. We are people, we are humans; we have our weaknesses and our strengths. Your experiences aren't mine. Your strengths aren't mine. Sometimes we come together on issues that bother us. . . . In discussion, giving testimony, in sharing the love of God, embracing God and how God blessed you can lift the people to say “we are serving the true living God.” That is the meaning of church to me. Throughout the week we are in different places, but on Sunday we come together to glorify God. It lifts the Spirit up. It's not a place you go to be sad. It is a place to rejoice and be glad in the Lord.—It's a place where believers come together to share the blessings of God and to encourage each other in the work of God they are doing. Because one person can't carry the load. It can happen anywhere—wherever two or three are gathered.<sup>45</sup>

This man and his wife have been thinking about starting a house church so that people can worship closer to home.

The current council president (white elderly man) said that many in the congregation are waiting for God to reveal his will. They believe their job is to look for the signs and then follow. He complains that this attitude keeps them from taking proactive actions.

But God works differently for Pr. Andrew who said, “The Holy Spirit works through relationships and not through buildings or institutions.” He frequently remarked

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<sup>44</sup> New Beginnings member interview, January, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

on what the Spirit was doing in the congregation and community wondering where it would lead and how he and the congregation could join in.

Strategies and consequences: The financial crisis confronting New Beginning combined with a lack of trusted pastoral leadership and poor internal communication has increased confusion. However, this heightened sense of urgency may also provide the motivation needed to make radical, creative changes.

### Summary of Stage Two

When I began this study the primary research question was: “Why were these congregations not able to achieve renewal?” I found that each congregation’s internal or externally oriented identity interacted with its particular context and was influenced by both positive and negative conditions. Those things combined to determine particular strategies used and their outcomes. However, by only explaining what went wrong, a lot of information was left on the table. There was no room for the many positive things I saw in each congregation and the collaboration as a whole. When I shifted the question to ask how God might be working in these congregations and the Westside neighborhood, other conditions came into focus. Table 4.2 summarizes both the harmful and helpful conditions. Sometimes the same condition served as both.

Table 4.2: Summary of congregation’s identity, positive and negative conditions

Congregation	Core identity	Harmful conditions	Helpful Conditions
Trinity	Internal focus on family first but with compassion for neighbors.	Afraid of neighborhood Racist comments made without understanding they are racist Elderly members with low energy Building crumbling	Healthy relationships among members Compassionate, trusted pastor with love of urban ministry and clear understanding of an active present God

	Prioritize neighbors' needs above their own.	Lack of critical mass of people or of financial resources Denial of resource constraints No space for mutual discernment, listening, experimenting or reflection. God as rescue worker: waiting for God	Congregation trusts that God will intervene and that God has a use for their congregation
Peace	Progressive theology and celebrating GLBT community  Sense of hope and promise for better future	Lack of lay leadership Older people and building that is too large Financially strained Building centered understanding of church Fear of neighbors Future loss of strong pastoral leadership No strong commitment to adult faith formation No clear understanding of God's active presence	Outreach via community meal is stretching imaginations and building trust MAP survey providing direction
Our Savior	External focus as beacon of hope, dedicated to empowering people of the neighborhood and fighting injustice.  Multi-racial and multi-generational	Significant financial resources from partners Different priorities creating tension Sense of judgmental God that allows sense of superiority Different imaginations of what church is and who it is for? Insistence that societal issues are only faithful response to God's call.	Significant financial resources from partners Experience with adaptive change processes High energy, high capacity people Experience as diverse community Leadership development skills Experience of God as part of relationships and present in neighborhood. High capacity/skill set of lay and rostered leaders
New Beginning	Internal focus Multi-ethnic Strong sense of	Many people commute – little neighborhood investment	Large, well maintained facility

	Holy Spirit present within people and community	Difficulty seeing God active in community outside cong. Lack of clear leadership Lack of clear communication or strong relationships & trust Lack of opportunities to develop healthy adaptive practices Financial resource crisis Burden of large facility	Community need/interest in facility Some sense of responsibility for mission Some understanding of need for Lutheran witness in neighborhood Pastor with community organizing and leadership dev skills
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Looking at it this way it is easy to see why congregations were not better able to participate in NAMS. In some cases, the presence of too many or too powerfully negative conditions overwhelmed the assets. But this chart also makes it easier to see opportunities to change conditions which may ultimately change the outcomes. These opportunities are scattered across all the congregations. If they stay within each congregation, the negative conditions will continue to overpower them. However, if they are combined across congregations something new may be able to happen. This kind of thinking opens the possibility that altering a few key conditions might alter the strategies and perhaps the consequences. That is what I saw at the parish council meeting. This process is described in Stage three.

### **Stage 3: NAMS Parish Council Reconsidered**

The same table summary of conditions is now applied to the parish council in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Grounded theory for NAMS parish council

Congregation	Core identity	Harmful conditions	Helpful Conditions
NAMS	<p>Internal focus on helping congregations re-build</p> <p>Longing to make a difference in the community</p>	<p>Lack of the following:</p> <p><u>Investment</u> (emotional, spiritual, relational, time, energy)</p> <p><u>Intimacy</u>- being part of one another's lives</p> <p><u>Imagination</u> beyond each cong.</p> <p><u>Intentionality</u> working with expectation of deep cong. change</p> <p><u>Inspiration</u>—seeing the community from God's perspective and feeling called into that perspective by the Spirit</p> <p><u>Integration</u> with the larger Westside community</p> <p><u>Internal</u> lay and rostered leadership keeping the vision and driving the process</p>	<p>All congregations had the following:</p> <p>People with a deep compassion for neighbors and desire to do urban ministry</p> <p>Leaders who long for something more from NAMS</p> <p>Leaders sense the Spirit's work</p> <p>Each congregation could offer specific gifts including: experience with leadership development and adaptive change, strong connections with neighbors, local non-profits, a large facility in good condition, experience with multi-ethnic, multi-racial, LGBT communities</p>

Stage one of the analysis pointed out the many conditions that kept NAMS from having the desired outcomes. Stage two highlighted conditions and contexts that inhibited congregational participation, and identified helpful conditions that may be leveraged in new ways to mitigate the harmful conditions or to make them irrelevant. In stage three, having a big picture view across all congregations allowed me to see that this could be a

Kairos moment for NAMS. Having congregations in crisis creates an opportunity because can motivate them to seize the moment and make bold changes allowing the Holy Spirit to do new things that result in a new healthier identity for both NAMS and the congregations moving through the Red Zone now. But I was not the only one to see this moment evolving. Talking with me stirred people's imaginations and challenged their assumptions.

Signs of this kind of movement were demonstrated at the parish council meeting toward the end of my visit. That meeting included people from Our Savior, Trinity, Lynn from Peace (Pr. Ruth was not available) and, unfortunately, no one from New Beginning (Pr. Andrew and regular lay participants were not available). During that meeting we opened with a Dwelling in the Word exercise using the Woman at the Well story (John 4:1-42). Pr. Peter lifted up the part of the story where Jesus says he will give her water and the woman wonders how because he has no bucket and the well is deep. He observed that Jesus didn't need buckets. That insight bore fruit throughout the meeting as participants were confronted with their assumptions and reminded that Jesus is not bound by our imaginations.

During my portion of the meeting I shared my observations of both helpful and harmful conditions described above. The harmful conditions were not a surprise, but many of the helpful ones were. Participants did not know that all the congregations longed for more from NAMS or that each congregation had a love for the neighbor and desire to connect more deeply. They also had not yet realized how bound their imaginations were to their own congregation's walls. Naming this reality allowed the group to being thinking about Westside as a larger community from God's perspective.

Finally, they had not realized the many different ways people in each congregation understood how God interacts in the world. Talking about these perspectives allowed them to see how their own understandings of God influenced their own decision making and their opinions of one another. Learning about the Roxburgh change cycle allowed them to see beyond present appearance of success or failure. They could see that successful congregations today were once in a state of crisis and confusion. That allowed everyone to wonder how congregations in a stronger position now might be guides to those presently in the red zone. This led to a more collaborative attitude.

When asked to use a word to describe how they felt after this portion of the agenda, the following words were used: charged, energized, frustrated (that we haven't come further) but hopeful (because of God's energy), sparked. One person felt daunted by the larger task and wondered about capacity:

There are more jobs to do than there are people. Especially in our church it feels like that. Yeah, it feels like we are going down. We need a breath. We need the spirit to come in and lift us back up. And we need some more people that have energy to do it. Well however that looks. . . . If we recharge people we will have it.<sup>46</sup>

But another person countered:

You make a good point. There are capacity issues, but the question is, does it have to be more capacity coming into each individual church or could it be something different? Or could it be us thinking about one body on the Westside. And is that where the capacity will come?<sup>47</sup>

Next the group went on to reflect upon the recent Advent event. Rather than simply talk about what did or didn't happen at the event, Pr. Sandy asked us to view it

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<sup>46</sup> Dialogue from parish council meeting of NAMS, January, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

through the lens they had just received from the previous discussion. Someone from our Savior described this lens as: inspiration, imagination, and relationships. So, they reviewed the event through those lenses and realized that even though not many people came, the event had done much to build up their relationships and inspire the collaboration because, “We all did have something to bring and no one was the cool kid on the block. It seemed like everyone was their own cool arm or leg and we all got together.”<sup>48</sup> Pr. Peter talked about the way they have reflected in the past. He saw one problem was that the group’s efforts and reflections focused on events rather than the larger objective of transforming the community.

Finally, Pr. Sandy shared information about the meeting at the Synod office among Our Savior, New Beginning and Trinity. This was the first time people from Peace or lay people from any congregation had heard about the possibilities being discussed. Pr. Sandy told everyone about New Beginning’s vote to stay in the building and seek help to do so. Pr. Sandy continued:

So, we are exploring to see if Our Savior or the parish to relieve that building burden from them and make that a ministry center to do three things. One would be to organize spirit and vision to think about the why. Why might this be a faithful thing to do? That is the best building we have on the north side! It would be a shame if Lutheran witness couldn’t happen at the best building we have on the north side. . . .

So, we are going to do three things. We are going to organize spirit and vision. We are going to come up with someone who can look at numbers and see what it would take money-wise. We are going to organize money and organize people. What kind of roles would it take to make this happen? I want to be super transparent and let the group know this is happening.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



I know some people might think . . . “oh well Our Savior is going to take it over.” That is not it. We, who have been practicing being one body in Christ on the Westside, as New Beginning listens to God and says we really feel like we need to stay here, we see that this is an opportunity to be good stewards. I would add that it’s not about the building for New Beginning, but it’s about a location for ministry. What would it take to make that ministry sustainable?

One of the participants commented,

To me, it’s an exciting vision. To share that excitement would be something that I would be very interested in doing. I see it as a gathering place for a Lutheran presence and to invite others who are working in God’s kingdom for causes of righteousness and justice and peace in our nation and world and especially at this time.<sup>50</sup>

Sandy continued,

The reason why I bring it up is, could this be a Westside parish thing rather than two churches saying can we share two spaces, or can we reconfigure? Could this be something that we make happen together?<sup>51</sup>

Additional conversation asked questions about who participated and how the finances would work. Throughout the conversation a lay person from Trinity sat with her head down, eyes closed, rocking gently in her chair and listening intently. I wondered whether she was furious or excited by the idea and thought she might just explode either way. Finally, she lifted her head and said to her pastor, “I’ve given a lot of thought to what you said yesterday about the fact that we could be in trouble.” Then to the rest of the group with great passion she continued,

Our church, I mean, the water goes out every time we turn around. The door won’t close. I mean big major things that are happening at our church and for forty people we can’t dig any deeper into our pockets. And what I pray about more is if someone gave you \$100,000 and you could make your building beautiful, I would rather have our people served, learn to know where the well is. I don’t think it’s all in the cement. So, if we could open some people’s eyes and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

include them in a meeting . . . everybody wants to help. If you had committees and you had people who are excited about it, that is how you are going to do it.<sup>52</sup>

In this statement, she perfectly illustrated the compassionate heart at the center of Trinity. She had already begun to imagine ways to help her fellow parishioners to agree to leave their building for the sake of mission—by giving people things to do which would build both relationships and their investment.

The events of this meeting illustrate how conditions that hinder congregations and collaborations like NAMS can be challenged by listening to God and one another and reflecting on the larger picture from God’s perspective. The fact that no one from New Beginning was there hindered progress after the meeting because they continued to operate independently searching for ways to relieve financial stress on their own. According to the February meeting notes, New Beginning was present. Pr. Andrew asked the group to consider what they brought to the neighborhood and how they are part of God’s work in the neighborhood. The group brainstormed possible uses for the building and potential partners to contact. There was a collective decision that they are all “in” and that it is not about the building. Right now their effort is about helping congregations capture a common vision through mutual discernment. Later Pr. Andrew told me he was asked to develop a common mutual discernment study so that they could all enter into a listening season concerning the future of Westside.

Only God knows how NAMS will continue to unfold into the future. Their ability to move forward together will depend on whether they can begin to view Westside through God’s eyes and allow the Spirit to dismantle their congregation-centered

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

understandings so that a new identity is shaped and new ways of being church emerge.

While it is not clear where their journey will lead them, it is clear that the lessons learned from these courageous congregations can inform congregations around the country as well as the ELCA as a whole. The discussion section of this paper reflects those lessons.

## CHAPTER 5: COMPETING FRAMEWORKS

In this section I will revisit the ELCA's theoretical framework and guiding assumptions in light of the lessons learned from this project. A new framework will be proposed that could be used to guide the ELCA as it works to adapt to support the new priority of increasing the vitality of all congregations.<sup>1</sup>

### **Revisiting the ELCA's Framework for Renewal**

The ELCA's reliance on Rothauge's life cycle and some of the assumptions that go along with it may be hurting the church more than it is helping. The first unhelpful assumption is that, according to Rothauge, as long as congregations continually redefine themselves they will remain vital. If they fail to redefine themselves, they fall into decline and eventually need redevelopment. Using this model leads congregations to believe that redevelopment is the result of failure. This creates unhelpful self-assessments and unhelpful attitudes across congregations who see themselves as either better or worse than others depending on their current stage in the life cycle. This study found that using Roxburgh's cycle of change removed the sense of shame associated with redevelopment, instead casting it as a natural phenomenon within every congregation's life. The red zone isn't a result of failure, rather it is an opportunity to confront assumptions and redefine

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<sup>1</sup> Buchbinder, *ELCA Press release*.

the congregation's core identity. That is especially helpful in cases where the previous identity was based on a culture that no longer exists within the community.

The second problematic assumption within Rothauge's framework is the steps outlined for renewal. Rothauge describes the following steps in this order: rediscover identity, reaffirm their call to be faithful and describe a vision for what that looks like, determine a strategy for achieving the vision, do some experiments beginning with the highest priority area to see what kinds of strategies will work and reflect on the experiments before trying again. This process expects congregations to define their identity and determine their vision for the future before moving forward. That sets them up for technical change which assumes the problem and solution are known. An adaptive change process would encourage congregations to begin listening and experimenting without a clear sense of their identity and vision for the future. In this way, they can be formed by what they learn rather than conforming what they learn to an identity that was formed under an old narrative. The nature of redevelopment is that it requires adaptive change. By adopting assumptions under Rothauge's model, and expecting congregations to develop a mission plan as a first step, the ELCA may have made it more difficult for congregations that need adaptive change to experience real transformation. This doesn't mean having mission plans is a bad idea, but it does mean the ELCA needs to consider how and when they are used and to what purpose.

But the third underlying assumption is the most important. It is the deep assumption that success in congregations is equated primarily with size and growth. Rothauge's model talks about the need to reach out to ethnic communities and creatively change congregational structures within rural communities so they can survive recent

demographic changes. For Rothauge, missional focus, contextual relevance, and structure, implicitly serve the priority of institutional survival. Branson and Martinez's cross-cultural work sheds light on the issue.<sup>2</sup> They point out that seeing the decline of the Church as the primary problem is a very EuroCentric way of considering the situation. The continued existence of the Church in its present form is seen as a sign of strength and perhaps even God's favor. The dominance of that narrative within the ELCA was illustrated recently in a press-release. The statement describes the recommendations from the report of the most recent long term planning task force "Called Forward Together in Christ: Strategic Directions 2025." Text of the statement included this quote from the chair of the Conference of Bishops, "We committed to lifting up leadership and cultivating vital congregations as the two highest priorities for our attention and action as a conference for the foreseeable future."<sup>3</sup> Yet the press release headline read "ELCA Conference of Bishops targets developing leaders, congregational growth."<sup>4</sup>

This narrative is problematic because when all efforts to improve practices, renew a sense of mission or even restructure congregations are judged from within a EuroCentric worldview, it makes any adaptive transformation resulting in structures that don't conform to that worldview impossible. The church will simply force all new ideas through the cultural defaults turning potentially innovative concepts into techniques for church health, church growth and effectiveness. Roxburgh notes has this has already happened with the terms "missional" and "adaptive." He cautions that it will continue to

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<sup>2</sup> Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*.

<sup>3</sup> Buchbinder, *ELCA press release*

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

happen as long as what he calls the Eurotribal churches try to manage and control the change process, even if they aren't aware of their own efforts. According to Roxburgh,

It is difficult for leaders to know when their management, expertise and organizational defaults might be driving their well-crafted responses to adaptive challenges and, therefore, failing to create an adaptive culture even as they work hard to do just that. Adaptive work is not simply applying certain techniques to specifically defined challenges. It is about how leaders self-reflect on those default systems of leadership and organizational response that keep working in the background, undermining well-intentioned responses to adaptive challenges.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of self-reflection may be assisted by exploring other faith traditions within the United States. For example, some Jewish traditions in the United States are also seeking to modernize religious community life and are wrestling with desires for both technical and adaptive change. Aron et al. describe the same cultural shifts and post-denominational malaise impacting modern synagogues in the USA.<sup>6</sup> But the questions they ask are inherently different than those asked by many Protestant denominations. In their study, they set aside dysfunctional congregations and focused on highly functioning synagogues that needed to adapt to address new sociological realities. They wondered whether these congregations could free themselves from their institutional habits or whether they would simply disappear. Then they wondered if it would matter if they did. Their study showed that synagogues could indeed move from functional to visionary and that in doing so, they could actually change the lives of the people in their congregations. “If there is one lesson that we learned, it is that visionary congregations can matter a

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<sup>5</sup> Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission*, 155.

<sup>6</sup> Isa Aron et al., *Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010).

great deal to Jews and to Jewry.”<sup>7</sup> For Aaron et al, changing people’s lives was the ultimate measure of success.

In another book, Herring suggests ways to adapt synagogues so that synagogues relate to people in modern everyday life.<sup>8</sup> He offers ideas for how the organizational structures and leadership need to change to facilitate mission rather than impede it. Both examples show an emphasis on developing congregations that provide meaning in the lives of their participants, rather than an emphasis on the organization’s structure for the sake of growth or even sustainability. Aron et al. acknowledge that increased participation from congregants is an outcome of a more visionary congregation, but that is a sign that the synagogue is doing something worth participating in, not a sign of increased sustainability. It is not that these two sources are not concerned with sustainability, rather sustainability is a secondary concern. The primary concern is on making a difference in the lives of their people.

### **Proposing a New Framework**

This critique of the ELCA’s current theoretical model for congregational renewal suggests that it is time for something new. In light of the lessons learned from this study, I propose the following as a new theoretical framework to describe how congregations change over time and how they might move toward vitality at any stage.

The new model uses Roxburgh’s change cycle as an underlying concept, emphasizing that all congregations move through these stages throughout their lives.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>8</sup> Hayim Herring, *Tomorrow's Synagogue Today: Creating Vibrant Centers of Jewish Life* (Herndon, VI: The Alban Institute, 2012), 242.



Each stage requires different kinds of strategies and leadership. At every stage, all congregations should strive to perform basic technical congregational functions well (e.g. worship, hospitality, evangelism, stewardship, fiscal management, etc.). When a congregation is in the green building or blue performing stages, these kinds of technical activities will most likely be the primary areas of attention, and that is appropriate. All congregations should periodically assess what they are doing and determine if there another or better way.

However, these tasks alone will not keep a congregation from moving through the change cycle. Even congregations that develop strong adaptive practices eventually reach a point where their underlying identity no longer connects with their environment and/or the people in the congregation. This kind of disconnect is inevitable, and is especially likely when generations of leaders change.

When a congregation reaches the red zone, they find themselves stuck in reactive behaviors trying to maintain a system that no longer fits within its context. At this point, even though there may be many problems with technical tasks, focusing on those can be a distraction. Instead, attention should be focused on the decision facing the congregation. The decision is whether or not to continue in ministry, and if so, why. That decision should only be made after intentional discernment and listening both within the congregation and the neighborhood. If the community determines it should continue for the sake of the people themselves, with little interest in including the neighborhood, it is likely to be a short-lived venture. The underlying identity is not likely to change so technical changes are the most likely. Because those changes won't address the

disconnect with the context, the congregation will probably find itself back where it started before long.

If, however, the congregation decides to continue for the sake of the neighbor then it has a stronger chance at long term survival because it will be more willing to confront the assumptions that underlie their identity and eventually redefine their very purpose moving forward. This new identity and purpose will frame the kinds of experiments they do and the way they define the success of those experiments.

Deciding to continue for the sake of the neighbor is not enough. The congregation must undertake the steps described by Keifert as they move through adaptive change through discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting. Those steps must be done in a way that involves the following seven “I”s:

- **Investment:** The congregation must be invested in the process emotionally, spiritually, relationally. Willing to put in the time and energy required.
- **Imagination:** They must be open to, and expect, their imaginations to be expanded. When well executed experiments fail, they should probably result in a broadened imagination.
- **Intentionality:** The congregation must be intentional about the way they do this work, setting aside time and space, and holding themselves accountable to the process and expecting change to be an outcome.
- **Inspiration:** The congregation work to see their ministry from God’s perspective and this guides their decisions. Their inspiration comes from an active, present God who they learn to imagine walking with them and drawing them through the process.

- Intimacy: Congregations must not only know each other and be comfortable with each other, they must be part of one another's lives. They must see each other as partners working together acknowledging that the other is necessary for God's vision to be achieved.
- Integration: The collaboration is integrated with the community where it resides. It is not designed as simply a service to the neighborhood but forms a mutual relationship with the neighborhood.
- Internal: Leadership comes from lay and clergy within the congregation. While a facilitator may be a helpful way of getting started, people within the congregation must be the keepers of the vision and drivers of the process. Both lay and clergy must be present for change efforts to be fully integrated into the congregation.

Congregations that engage their context in these ways for the sake of ministry to and with the neighbor will most likely succeed in moving from the red zone to the green zone where they will begin their journey again as evidenced by Our Savior. This work is not easy. But even if everything is done right and congregations enter into a genuine adaptive process, the effort is still likely to fail unless an understanding and expectation of God's agency is instilled into every conversation. Keifert found:

Without a critical mass of church members sharing a sense that God is calling them to a specific part of God's mission, the creation of mission statements, visions for mission, and strategic plans will not move a congregation from maintenance of Christendom to a New Missional Era.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that an active reliance on God's agency is important to a church seems obvious to anyone outside the institution. It only makes sense that congregations would

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<sup>9</sup> Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 97.

live out their faith by actually trusting in the God they proclaim. But the congregations of the ELCA suffer from the same secular values that have captured the imagination of USA's society creating culture of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) that places God off in the distance with little power.<sup>10</sup> A critical part of the ELCA's congregation's renewal will be the intentional rejection of MTD and embracing God's active presence as a way of life.

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<sup>10</sup> Kenda Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

CHAPTER 6:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ELCA

The beginning of this paper noted the steep declines in ELCA membership and cast doubt on its long-term sustainability. For many years, the Church has wondered what it is doing wrong and how it might correct its efforts and reverse the trends. But these are “church questions,” not “God questions.” When I started the Congregational Vitality Project, I too was working from the Rothauge framework focused on finding solutions to the problems of low vitality and decreasing sustainability. I was unknowingly expecting congregations to use adaptive change practices in a technical change way.

This paper identified another lens. That lens steps back from the crisis of the moment to take a wider perspective, God’s perspective. From this view, one can see that the ELCA is in the red zone approaching the crisis point where they must ask whether to continue, and if so, why. From here one can also see that the church has been there before. Anderson describes the various transitions the Lutheran church over its 500-year existence including the orthodox and pietistic movements.<sup>1</sup> He names the current ELCA’s DNA has a hybrid that combines a founding *Missio Dei* narrative with a modifying narrative dependent on its context. It is presently bound by roots in a twentieth century framework. But those roots are dying and the Church is about to be set free.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel R. Anderson, ed. *Missional DNA of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

If the lessons of this paper are applied to the ELCA, then it is easy to see that how the Church answers the question of whether and why it should continue, will set the foundation for its new twenty-first century identity and predict how it move through the cycle the next time. The new lens makes it easier to look beyond the immediate signs of death to find numerous elements within the Church's identity that prepare it for today's more networked, less hierarchical society. One example is the church's ecclesiology that rejects hierarchy in favor of three interdependent expressions of church: congregations, synods and the churchwide organization. Another example is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers which values the vocation of all persons rather than ranking clergy as higher or closer to God. These are both elements that have not been fully lived out within the present cycle of the Church. Perhaps the most obviously helpful element of the ELCA's DNA is its understanding of justification by grace through faith. This doctrine encourages an imagination for God's agency apart from our own. It allows us to more easily see the world from God's perspective, to ask God questions, and to trust in God's ultimate redemption with or without our participation. It frees us from the responsibility of "fixing" the church. Rather it encourages us to live into God's kingdom as it unfolds before us.

The Church's complex polity means that a new identity cannot be declared, rather it must emerge from each expression of the church through discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting. Indeed, that work has already begun. Congregations and synods throughout the church are already discerning and experimenting with new ways of living into God's mission. The Tiger Team report provided evidence that the Holy Spirit is already drawing the wider church from pain toward promise when it stated, "There is

enough urgency when seventy-five percent of management is genuinely convinced that the status quo is more dangerous than launching into the unknown.”<sup>2</sup> Equipped with a new framework for change, and empowered by the Spirit, church leaders will be able to see and cultivate the seeds that God has already planted throughout the ecclesial ecosystem. Using research and evaluation tools to ask both church and God questions will help the church identify new definitions of “success” allowing it to move beyond the boxes of its current imagination and toward God’s preferred and promised future.

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<sup>2</sup> Tiger Team, *Congregational Renewal Report*, 1.

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