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Participatory Leadership
Building New Habits in the Body of Christ

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Abstract

Participatory Leadership: Building New Habits in the Body of Christ
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As an alternative to modes of organizational leadership that are more authoritarian or controlling, this project elaborates on leadership practices suitable for use by pastors in congregations that welcome the participatory leadership of the assembled body of worshippers. The article elaborates on three platforms of participatory leadership specifically—the World Café, the Circle Way, and Open Space Technology—and demonstrates how the author, a pastor in the Congregational tradition, used them in parish leadership. The article shows evidence that these practices can help the Body of Christ learn how to become more experimental for the sake of innovation in its mission. Furthermore, the article argues that practices of participatory leadership are helpful to the church in a disruptive time of adaptive change and faithful to an ecclesiology that values the congregation as an image of the Risen Christ.

Participatory Leadership
Building New Habits in the Body of Christ

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry

If anyone wants to provide leadership in the church, good!

1 Timothy 3:1 MSG

INTRODUCTION

The Body of Christ is alive. It is a living body: kinetic, nimble, and responsive to the world. My thesis explains an approach to ministry that gives the authority for ministry back to the Body of Christ. Mainline Protestants are living through a moment of tremendous missional disruption and adaptation. In these anxious times, we have magnified our focus on the promises of pastoral leadership. While effective pastors are critical resources for congregations, what we need much more than clergy is passionately engaged unpastoral leadership—that is to say, clergy who do not try so hard to act like pastors and laity who are empowered to lead like responsible disciples. I am going to describe here how pastors can welcome the participatory leadership of every member of the body—and how we can let go of a disempowering focus on pastors as the saviors of their communities.

Pastoral leaders will need to break the posture of expertise that their ministerial formation has primed them to hold. We are not the professional operators that we once were, like pilots to a spiritual flying machine. Through the late Twentieth Century, as the mainline churches flexed their muscles, they built enormous systems to govern their life. The names given to their corporate bodies speak for themselves, connoting industry, efficiency, order, and control. Ecclesial officers sat on “general boards.” Agencies that employed secular expertise in finance or insurance were called “instrumentalities.” Regional divisions of the church were called “judicatories.” Mainline congregations and the denominations they belonged to were the

religious machines of the modern era. Like aircraft to commercial aviation, the mainline churches consisted of many component parts carefully engineered to function in cooperation with the whole. Pastors, like pilots, were highly trained professionals—entrusted with great responsibility for spiritual guidance and ecclesial leadership.

But many of the conditions that made congregations such strong institutions in the past century have given way to new circumstances.¹ Our churches and the systems that sustain them are an aging fleet. Mainline pastors can hear the old machine grinding its gears. Ordained ministers seek to repair the contraption by working harder and replacing old parts, always carrying the assumption that there must be a fix—a more effective fundraising strategy, a revised curriculum for the church school, a presbyter or superintendent with more administrative skill. But the Body of Christ is not a machine and there is no technical solution to the identity crisis of the Christian church.

An alternative approach to pastoral leadership now is to let go of the trappings of pastoral authority and to step out in faith on the wilderness journey ahead. If the church finds its way through this wilderness, it will not be only by the mastery of a pastor over her craft but by building habits of faithful discipleship throughout the Body of Christ. To hide behind a veil of professionalism is to deny that the church is lost and confused about its purpose in these changing times. The clergy who have been trained to run and maintain the machine are as perplexed as the laity who trust them as religious leaders. Yet our ministry formation is a source

¹ Sociologist of religion Mark Chaves points to the irony that although liberal religious ideas have become more commonplace in American culture the institutions that house them have suffered such dramatic decline. Some of the most significant factors explaining the diminishment of liberal protestant institutions have to do with losing members to the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated, differing fertility rates with those who are more religiously conservative, and failure to retain youth in liberal religious institutions. Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 94–100.

of both security and control so we are reluctant to undress ourselves of the few remaining signs of pastoral authority that remain for us today. To demonstrate what I mean by this, I have spent the past four years practicing the public display of my ignorance. What I mean is that I have tried very hard to act less like the expert ministry professional I was trained to be and more like a faithful citizen of the church. The pastoral thing to do, when the leader is as lost as the group, is not to pretend that we know the way but to join with others in curiosity and wandering. So against all of the counsel of my controlling vocational instincts and my professional ministry judgment, I have loosened my grip on the toggle. I have adopted simple routines for church meetings and planning sessions that emphasize the responsibility of all worshippers to discern the will of God in our midst. The methods I use come from my friendship with Tenneson Woolf, a practitioner of a body of work known as the Art of Hosting.

In 2015, Woolf introduced me to practices of participatory leadership embraced by the Art of Hosting when he facilitated a process of strategic planning at the church I served in Grinnell, Iowa. This thesis is my attempt to elaborate on how I have used these practices in Grinnell and in another United Church of Christ congregation located in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. My aim is to show that a highly relational approach to ministry in which the pastor relies on her position as a convener of the community rather than on her preparation as a professional church operator can lead to a more vibrant ecclesial life. In Grinnell, this approach of participatory leadership has led to lasting cultural change in a congregation beset with internal conflict and bereft of missional purpose. In Chapel Hill, where I have employed this approach to ministry in a more robust and healthy setting, these practices of participatory leadership are useful programmatically and pedagogically. Our work together in Grinnell and Chapel Hill has shown how these practices help to summon the blessings of the community into the leadership of

the church. What shines forth in this story is not the competence of a pastor well prepared for the job but the resourcefulness of two communities where the Holy Spirit has moved among people who are gifted and called.

To tell the story, first I am going to draw on my roots in the Congregational tradition to argue that the Body of Christ is a living system, not a machine of component parts, and discuss how moving this living body demands that we first notice what God has provided to a local community where the church is present. Then I will highlight three particular platforms of participatory leadership—the World Café, the Circle Way, and Open Space Technology—and how I have used these methods in Grinnell and Chapel Hill. As I explain this approach to participatory leadership, the examples I use will come selectively in order to demonstrate how each process works. Finally, I hope to demonstrate, at least in Grinnell, where I am no longer engaged in day to day ministry, that these practices have had a sustained impact on the vitality of the church, and I will show how we continue to put these practices into action in Chapel Hill where I expect to have many years of ministry ahead.

DISCERNMENT WITH COMMUNAL GIFTS IN MIND

I serve in an ecclesiastical tradition that holds an especially high view of the congregation's discernment for ministry. My denomination, the United Church of Christ, is the product of careful negotiations between Presbyterian and Congregational polities. Congregationalism affirms the local and contextual movement of the Holy Spirit. Congregationalism is a statement of theological conviction that the church represents the risen Body of Christ. Where faithful people are present, or "two or three are gathered," Christ is present there.² This ecclesiology means that we approximate the wisdom of God more accurately

² Matthew 18:20 NRSV

and fully when God holds us in covenant with each other across our differences. Revelation, the disclosure of God's wisdom, comes not from the decision of a bishop, priest, classis, or other empowered group but in the spirit's movement among the whole. To serve pastorally in such a system, therefore, is to embrace Pauline language about the Body of Christ. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."³ This conviction that God is present in the church hinges on the embodiment of Christ in the disciples called to serve in a particular place and time. Christ is not in one or the other singly, but in the assembly. Pastors preoccupied with the institutional constructs of the church and not with relationships within the body itself have confused the vessel for the treasure. There is no church in the sense of agencies and instrumentalities or boards, but only in the people whom God has called into discernment and faithful action.

Most debates in the ecclesiology of Congregationalism turn on the local church's relationship with other local churches. What does one congregation owe to its sister churches and how will governance of the wider church, or the church catholic, interfere with local will and interest?⁴ Those debates, lingering from the legacy of midcentury mergers involved with the

³ 1 Corinthians 12:12

⁴ Congregationalists have often been vulnerable to a reclusive spirit of isolation from the Church Universal. In the United States, Congregational churches have had to remind themselves that they need other churches in different localities to more accurately and fully approximate the Body of Christ. Douglas Horton, a midcentury superintendent of Congregational Christian Churches in the United States, defended this principle in his lectures at Oxford's Mansfield College. "No congregation is regarded as a member of the Congregational Christian fellowship in the United States until its sister congregations in the fellowship have acknowledged it as such." His argument later prevailed in court when a small group of Congregational churches filed suit to prevent the formation of the United Church of Christ. Plaintiffs argued in *Cadman v. Kenyon* that the autonomy of local churches prevented any small number of officers from negotiating on behalf of a fellowship of congregations. Horton's ecclesiology maintaining that even sovereign congregations are held together with the church catholic won the legal argument but there were still dozens of local churches that chose not to join the new denomination when it

worldwide ecumenical movement, sap energy from a much more promising conversation that should routinely occupy the imagination of every local church. Who are the people that God has called to ministry here? And what gifts do they bring to proclaim the good news? A faithful ecclesiology of Congregationalism must accurately reflect the passions, strengths, and commitments of the gathered body. Congregationalism is an embodied expression of the church. The only material the church has to work with are the gifts that God has provided. Attention to these gifts—naming them and noticing how they change over time—will bear important information for the discernment of the church’s vocation.

Rather than celebrate their gifts, like many communities feeling lost or in distress, members of any congregation are likely to speak first out of their perception of needs or deficiencies. The church focuses on what it lacks and wants rather than the assets that it already enjoys.⁵ John Kretzmann and John McKnight, the founders of Asset Based Community Development, steer us away from this “needs-driven dead end.”⁶ No ministry is built with what it does not have. From neighborhood development projects to caring for the disabled or elderly, they say that reform efforts are often crippled by a disempowering and delusional “deficiency

was finally consecrated in 1957. Douglas Horton, *Congregationalism: A Study in Church Polity* (London: Independent Press, 1952), 9.

⁵ What church does not want a thriving youth ministry or a sanctuary full of children? But it may be that the path to life-giving ministry is through careful attention to the assets that are already in place. In Grinnell I observed that we had tremendous gifts for organizing elders in the congregation for caregiving ministries, book groups, and community meals. I argued that we did not have existing resources to develop strong programming for children and youth, critical assets like program space or leaders with instructional competencies. It was a tough sell, to invite the congregation to consider how to build on what we have already rather than take on the challenge of making something out of nothing. It is also worth noting that community assets are dynamic. They change over time. United Church of Chapel Hill was once located downtown adjacent to a large public university. In moving three miles north, however, the congregation’s asset map looks very different today.

⁶ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1993), 2.

orientation.”⁷ Furthermore, Kretzmann and McKnight observe that it is almost unheard of for a community to be saved by outsiders.⁸ A more successful approach will mine a community’s internal resources. Although an energetic and highly skilled new pastor or a judicatory office holding specialized knowledge may offer resources valuable to a congregation, the commitment and investment of the community itself is a condition necessary for advancement.⁹ The Body of Christ will have to put its own skin in the game.

Rather than the promise of salvation, what pastors can bring to a congregation are eyes to see and ears to hear. If the minister is not too busy nurturing the myth of her own professional competency, she can help the church to name and claim existing gifts, resources, and abilities for ministry. The minister can also bring a countercultural voice that proclaims the abundance of God’s gifts in this place. Peter Block, who has also written widely on community building and organizational development, joins McKnight in articulating the mysterious power of celebrating a community’s gifts. When we trust in the abundance of our blessings, Block and McKnight say, and spend more time and energy noticing and celebrating them our existing gifts seem to multiply. “Seeing the abundance in the neighborhood,” they argue, “thickens the social fabric.”¹⁰

⁷ Kretzmann and McKnight, 3.

⁸ In declining ecclesiastical institutions, a congregation in distress may look to a new pastor, perhaps especially a young pastor, to attract life to a church. This is a classic trap for those more focused on deficiencies than assets. Another form of this corrosive deficiency mindset comes in the form of blaming other settings of the church. “If only we had more assistance from ‘the conference’ or the Bishop we wouldn’t be in such a mess.” Pastors and other ecclesial leaders can be easily scapegoated when there are unspoken expectations for their success. The ministry of a local setting may be in the ecclesial stewardship of a bishop or pastor, but responsibility for its vitality is shared among all members of the body.

⁹ Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, 5.

¹⁰ Peter Block and John McKnight, “The Good Life? It’s Close to Home,” *Abundant Community*, June 8, 2011, https://www.abundantcommunity.com/home/posts/john_mcknight/parms/1/post/20110608_the_good_life_its_close_to_home.html.

Appreciation of our gifts, furthermore, leads to the making of new connections and a stronger spirit of sharing. Our gifts also remind us of “the limitations of money” and we grow less dependent on the notion that before our community can change we need to acquire things we do not have.¹¹

These understandings of gifts and assets were particularly important in the church in Grinnell, which had become separated from its potential and possibilities. There we carefully mapped the resources we had to work with (Appendix 1 and 2). We did this both spatially and thematically. A simple map of the town revealed that most of our existing membership was clustered around two institutions historically connected to our congregation. Many elders, including 23 retired ministers, lived in a retirement community that our congregation had established in 1952 called the Mayflower. A younger generation in our congregation lived in walkable clusters near Grinnell College, which was also associated historically with our congregation. The map revealed that our historic connections to these two powerful local institutions continued to bring considerable resources to our ministry. A second map that we created attended thematically to the network of small groups, civic associations, and institutional resources that surrounded the church.

THE BODY OF CHRIST AS A LIVING SYSTEM

The understanding that congregations are interrelated emotional systems, like families, has been firmly established in the minds of many mainline ministers by the work of Edwin

¹¹ Peter Block and John McKnight, “Community Abundance Is Its Gifts,” *Abundant Community*, April 26, 2012, https://www.abundantcommunity.com/home/posts/john_mcknight/parms/1/post/20120426_community_abundance_is_its_gifts.html.

Friedman.¹² Congregations need time to process big decisions or digest unexpected news. The emotional attachments involved with seeking even small adjustments in the sacred space of worship make faithful pastoral leadership in moments of dramatic change a risky proposition. As a spiritual machine, the congregation has well-established habits of getting its work done—meetings where minutes are read and reviewed, financial reports picked over by a Treasurer, membership rolls carefully manicured by the Clerk. In moments of adaptive change, when some basic functions either show symptoms of disorder or are called upon to evolve, the church reaches first for technical solutions to problems that are defined mechanistically. The room falls silent and the gaze turns to the resident expert, the pastor.

Pastoral authority takes on a distinctive character where participatory leadership is being nurtured. If the church is a living body and not a machine, an important function of pastoral leadership is to help the body adopt life-sustaining practices that are aligned with the gospel. Mary McClintock Fulkerson describes how a congregation might build a *habitus*, or a competency that lives in the muscle memory of the collective body, to guide the church in a manner consistent with its purpose and values.¹³ Her study of Good Samaritan Church in Durham, North Carolina shows how a Methodist congregation applied its commitment to hospitality “improvisationally” in the midst of changing neighborhood and economic conditions.¹⁴

Similarly, a pastor focused on convening the congregation for a deeper consideration of our existing gifts and assets wants to build a *habitus* in the living body. Participatory leadership

¹² Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York, London: Guilford Press, 1985), 202.

¹³ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 43.

¹⁴ Fulkerson, 48.

follows from the cultivation of group competencies for humane connection around the mission of the church. Rather than looking just to the pastor to supply the answers we need from his expertise, we want to build a stronger habit of turning to one another. Could we adopt practices that make it feel more natural to look inside ourselves? To turn with curiosity to the gifts and graces of companion disciples? We need to increase our ability to accept uncertainty about the future of the church and increase our tolerance for taking missional risks. Could it be that practices of participatory leadership contribute to a new *habitus*, so that we might become more experimental as a corporate body and less reliant on the work of a professional? Methods, tools, and processes I learned through the Art of Hosting, which I will elaborate on in the next section, help to build these group competencies.

Art of Hosting principles cast the leadership role in terms of convening collective resources and attention for a conversation that needs to take place. Tenneson Woolf defines the Art of Hosting as

a global community of practitioners using integrated participative change processes, methods, maps, and planning tools to engage groups and teams in meaningful conversation, deliberate collaboration, and group-supported-action for the common good.¹⁵

Woolf is the source of language I use for “participatory leadership” and “conversational leadership.” Events to train facilitators of group process in the principles and techniques associated with the Art of Hosting are held annually around the world. Leading practitioners travel widely to offer training and to consult with a great variety of businesses, academic institutions, government agencies, and churches. They seem to be most densely clustered in the

¹⁵ Tenneson Woolf, “What Is the Art of Hosting?,” Tenneson Woolf Consulting, accessed February 16, 2019, <http://tennesonwoolf.com/what-is-the-art-of-hosting/>.

Pacific Northwest, where I attended a November 2017 event sponsored by Woolf and three colleagues on Bowen Island, B.C. The workbook from that event offers another definition.

The AoH is an emerging group of methodologies for facilitating conversation in groups of all sizes, supported by principles that help maximize collective intelligence, integrate and utilize diversity and minimize/transform conflict.¹⁶

Many practitioners trace the origins of their work to the Berkana Institute, a consultancy founded by the educator Margaret Wheatley.

Leadership and the New Science, Wheatley's book about the tension between chaos and order in the natural world, lays the conceptual foundation for the leadership practices discussed here. Wheatley writes that she had grown increasingly frustrated with management approaches that were authoritative and controlling. She says that the rigid constructs of corporate and institutional life are at odds with recent scientific discoveries and observations of nature. There is "an inherent orderliness of the universe," Wheatley says, one of "continuous change" that still points toward unity.¹⁷ Wheatley distinguishes between the mechanistic Newtonian sciences and the "new sciences" of the quantum age. Using examples from various fields, including botany, medicine, and chaos theory, she argues for a more holistic approach to understanding human systems.

Organizations consist not just of atomistic parts but of relationships in networks. Leadership, therefore, is more than maintaining the functionality of independent parts. It also involves attending to the interdependencies between them. A systemic approach to understanding organizations accepts the mystery residing in dynamic relationships. In ecclesial terms, this is an approach to management that puts faith in God's power to create. Institutions do not live just

¹⁶ "Art of Hosting: Convening Meaningful Dialogue in Our Communities," 2017, 8.

¹⁷ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006), 4.

because they are managed well but because they are sustained by networks of relationship and environmental conditions that give life to them. Relationships, communities of interdependency, and the ecological systems that give rise to church, civic institutions, or commerce are signs of God's providence. While they can be cultivated and nurtured by human skill and activity, they are not mere objects of human manipulation. Wheatley counsels a leadership approach that befriends the mystery of corporate and collective life. Her language is eerily theological for a management consultant. "Curiosity, not certainty, becomes the saving grace."¹⁸ Effective leadership, understood this way, embraces not more command and control, not more technical skill or outside expertise, not necessarily more hard work and labor hours—but rather faith in God's power to give life. Pastors therefore can adopt a "simpler way" of leadership that greets uncertainty with trust, embraces play and creativity, and values humane connection between agents called together for ministry.¹⁹

Wheatley observes that living systems, from the human body to a forest ecosystem, have natural cycles of life and death, chaos and order. The role of leadership, she says, is to facilitate healing connections among the parts related to one another in a living system. "If you want a system to heal," she says, "connect it to more of itself."²⁰ Wheatley trusts that living systems order and heal themselves. The leader is not a "hero," which is to say a fixer of what is broken or a savior of what is lost but rather a "host," one who shapes space and time to maximize relationality where different members of the same body may attend to the wellbeing of the

¹⁸ Wheatley, 8.

¹⁹ Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way* (San Francisco: Barret-Koehler, 1996), 5.

²⁰ This sentiment can be found widely in Wheatley's writings. One example is from this interview: "The Servant Leader: From Hero to Host. An Interview with Margaret Wheatley by Larry C. Spears," November 15, 2002, <https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/herotohost.html>.

whole.²¹ Or to put it in more pragmatic terms, the job of the host is not to supply the right answers, but to help the group manage its anxiety while suspended among the right questions. The host trusts that in the mystery of the living system the body will make the connections that it needs.

Peter Block agrees. He says the task of leadership is to convene the community for restorative relationships and meaningful conversation. “Convening leaders create and manage the social space in which citizens get deeply engaged.”²² In the way that Wheatley describes a transition from the Newtonian sciences to later revelations, Block speaks in purely organizational terms. “In one way or another, we are all trying to make the transition from the industrial era of predictability and control to the service/information era of choice and participation.”²³ Pointing to the political scientist Robert Putnam, whose book *Bowling Alone* discussed the decay of social capital in American life, Block argues that community is more elusive in the digital age but no less critical to our common life. He defines social capital as the “quality of relationships” or the “feeling of cohesion” among citizens.²⁴ He sees the leader not as an expert with special knowledge or skills but rather as a citizen, one among many, “who creates experiences for others.”²⁵ He elaborates that those experiences should reflect the very values that the community desires for its life together. They should model the quality of collective engagement that the community needs in the future. “Relatedness, accountability, and commitment” should be

²¹ “Leadership in the Age of Complexity,” accessed August 14, 2018, <https://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Leadership-in-Age-of-Complexity.pdf>.

²² Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 88.

²³ Peter Block, “Caring About Place,” in *The Flawless Consulting Fieldbook and Companion: A Guide to Understanding Your Expertise*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001), 307.

²⁴ Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 5.

²⁵ Block, 86.

“available, experienced, and demonstrated” every time the community comes together.²⁶ If the church is the Body of Christ, all members of the body participate in the discernment of its action. We need ecclesiological practices that embody our ecclesiological values.

To apply to the life of the church Wheatley’s distinction between mechanistic approaches and the new sciences, consider the structures of governance for the congregation in Grinnell. In Appendix 3, I have included a sketch of the congregation’s governance according to the Constitution and Bylaws of the church. In principle, the ministries of the church are responsible to the whole congregation, which has delegated its authority for ministry through a system of boards and committees. The system of governance had emerged through the Twentieth Century, when the church was healthy and had hundreds of worshippers each week. Congregationalists had established the town of Grinnell as well as Grinnell College. The church was a center of community life with a commanding influence over the culture of the town. But membership plateaued in the late 1900s as the community became more religiously plural. Tragedy struck in 1997, when the pastor was hit by a car while riding his bicycle. Although he recovered from his injury and continued in ministry for another seven years, the congregation was deeply affected by the trauma and he was succeeded by a string of unsuccessful pastorates. (A table of pastoral succession is found in Appendix 4.)

By the time I arrived in 2014, worship attendance had declined to the low sixties. Although the church had changed dramatically in composition and scale, the Constitution remained unchanged. The system of boards and committees still required between 50 and 64 new recruits each year to continue functioning. There were not enough people to fill the slots. Those available for leadership often lacked the spiritual gifts and skills for the positions they held.

²⁶ Block, 86.

Many were overcommitted and did not have time to participate in church leadership. The effort required to maintain the old machine left the congregation feeling exhausted. Members of the church served in ministry not out of a feeling of call or passion but rather out of feelings of guilt and obligation. The system, moreover, was preoccupied with internal conflicts. Because the machine often broke down and required emergency maintenance the congregation was always looking for a fix. The turnover in pastoral leadership between 2005 and 2014 can be explained partially by the stress put on the pastor to make the church work in the way it was designed.

Among Art of Hosting practitioners, Tenneson Woolf has been particularly involved with ecclesiastical institutions. In addition to consulting with my congregation in Grinnell, he has worked with the Episcopal Cathedral of Denver. Several regional judicatories of the United Church of Christ have engaged him and he has joined the faculty of a pastoral development program sponsored by the UCC pension agency. In the United Methodist Church, the General Board of Global Ministries worked with Woolf to engage stakeholders of the church's ministries for higher education and global missions. Woolf's ride in the Wesleyan circuit eventually yielded a publication on "Participatory Leadership" using Art of Hosting methodologies. Careful reading of this UMC handbook may help to explain why Art of Hosting methods have been so well received in church settings.

The authors describe how the Church and Community Workers division grew frustrated by 2011 that their projects faced funding and oversight challenges. "Projects were ending precipitously when budgets were cut, supervisors changed, and priorities were reestablished."²⁷ The institutional machine that had made missional programs possible in the past was now an

²⁷ Kathleen Masters and Tenneson Woolf, "Participatory Leadership" (Church and Community Ministries of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, 2015), 9.

obstacle to the work itself. What had worked in the past, they write, had become “stale.” The structures that emerged in the late Twentieth Century to govern the church’s corporate life were reliable and durable, but not nimble or imaginative. UMC mission agents “were looking for another way” that would connect and empower members of their community. The Art of Hosting gave them simple techniques for reforming the way that they held meetings. “We have released old ways of mechanized, top-down delivery,” they write, in favor of “life-giving gatherings.”²⁸ In the section that follows, I will describe three of the more life-giving processes Woolf used with his Methodist clients that we have also employed in both Grinnell and Chapel Hill.

ART OF HOSTING TOOLS

The Art of Hosting toolkit is remarkably simple. It is so powerful, in part, because it provides the church an opportunity to practice skills it already knows. These are structured exercises built chiefly around conversation. The three techniques discussed here all invite the church to consider in small groups questions that address the life of the whole body. Most church members are doing this already, over coffee in the Fellowship Hall or in the quiet moments before a Sunday Bible study. These techniques help to harvest the insights of people who care enough to talk about important things in idle moments. And they connect people who are not talking to each other but should be. The principles underlying these techniques are known to any middle schooler who has gone on a Youth Retreat or sat around a Confirmation class sharing what is on their hearts. The Art of Hosting calls on existing pastoral skills. If ministers are to be experts, let them master the art of holding space for meaningful conversation.²⁹

²⁸ Masters and Woolf, 8.

²⁹ A senior ecclesial officer in the United Church of Christ joined me for the training event I mentioned earlier on Bowen Island. As we talked with labor organizers, college administrators, and technology entrepreneurs, we found ourselves in a decidedly areligious space. Yet moments after the first session concluded, my pastoral colleague turned to me and said, apparently

These processes of participatory leadership provide just enough structure to hold the group in its work. Each exercise is a container. They provide a minimal basis of order—a given period of time, simple rules to adopt as norms, gathering in a circle or about a table, organization on a visible grid—that hold the organic energy of the group. Applying these principles well takes practice. Experienced hosts continue to gather with each other, at events like the training I attended on Bowen Island, to hone their instincts and to share their experiences. Although these are exercises native to the instincts of many pastors, they bear in them an approach to leadership that is distinct from the acculturation of pastors as expert practitioners. Working through processes of participatory leadership may come naturally to many pastors, but I found that it would take me some time and practice to unlearn a desire for control and an expectation that I should be seeking the right answers rather than the right questions. With processes like these, the minister steps aside as an act of faith in the movement of the Holy Spirit and the self-organizing capacity of the disciples.

World Café

A World Café will organize groups of most any size for conversation.³⁰ The practice trusts that the assembled group contains within itself considerable resources. It is often said at World Café gatherings that “the people in the room have all the wisdom that we need.” Intimate dialogue in smaller units is the portal to access that wisdom, not unlike having a cup of coffee in a café. Effective World Café experiences are convened by a person or group that has put some thought into how to create a hospitable space, what questions the group should consider, and

unimpressed, “It just feels to me like church.” We learned not to mistake the simplicity of design for poverty of structure or skill.

³⁰ Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005).

how to harvest the insights of the café experience. The method is to welcome the group into the space, invite the contributions of all involved, and put everyone to work by asking what Peter Block calls “powerful questions.”³¹ The small table format facilitates the development of new relationships and the appreciation of existing ones. Between questions, the host asks the group to move around and change tables. Usually one person is designated at each table to welcome the next group that arrives. In this way, what is discussed at any table is accessible to the whole network. Individuals are introduced to ideas and perspectives they may not have experienced before. Movement also helps the group to embody openness to new relationships and ideas.

In August 2018, I hosted an ecumenical and interfaith World Café for twenty-one clergy gathered in response to the toppling of an historic confederate monument on the campus of the University of North Carolina. Fearful that Chapel Hill would attract mass protests on the scale of a violent assembly at the University of Virginia one-year prior, religious leaders wanted to discern how to establish a constructive and faithful public presence. With rumors of mass protest spreading rapidly throughout the community, the meeting was hastily convened by email and phone contacts with pastors. As a newcomer to town, the range of my own network was a limitation of our gathering. We made special efforts to reach out the pastors of Black churches throughout Chapel Hill. The meeting was held in the building of my congregation, where we had promised breakfast to the reverend guests. Because the participants were in many cases strangers to one another, we supplied nametags and held space for introductions. The meeting then got down to business, organized around two powerful questions.

³¹ Block provocatively defines a good question in terms of three qualities. A good question should be “ambiguous, personal, and stressful.” Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 101.

- What does Chapel Hill need from Jewish and Christian leadership since the fall of Silent Sam?
- How might clergy leaders influence the character and spirit of public demonstrations if they intensify?

In this case, the small table conversations took place quite literally in the context of a café. With breakfast foods and coffee in supply, the leaders of faith communities strengthened their relationships with each other through dialogue over the presented questions. We were limited by time only to two rounds, but between questions the room was shuffled to facilitate new introductions and broader exchange of ideas. At the conclusion of the meeting, in a plenary conversation, members of the group made commitments to concrete action steps. Outlined further in Appendix 6, those included recruiting additional African American voices in future conversations and organizing a memorial for people killed by racial violence.³² The meeting resulted two weeks later in the publication of a joint clergy statement signed by thirty-six clergy from several denominations and faith traditions.³³

³² As I describe later with my experience in Grinnell, it is possible to mitigate the limitations of a small network by making a number of special invitations. I call them “wildcards” because they are not easily categorized and may be on the margins of the community. The presence of wildcards is critical to introduce a variety of lived experience and diversity of perspective. Including only the same people in a conversation will rarely mean that you ever have a different outcome. Our wildcards in this case were people who brought a needed perspective but did not strictly qualify as clergy. Because we were especially short of Black voices, we invited the President of the local chapter of the NAACP. Her participation in this conversation eventually led to the inclusion of a clergy presence on the Orange County Community Remembrance Coalition, a community board working to establish a memorial in Chapel Hill and surrounding areas in partnership with the Equal Justice Initiative. Students participating in campus ministries are also examples of “wildcard” non-clergy that we included. They brought important information about expected demonstrations and provided contacts for clergy with student groups.

³³ “Clergy Say Returning Silent Sam to Same Spot Would Affirm White Supremacy,” *Durham Herald Sun*, accessed February 12, 2019, <https://www.heraldsun.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/article217852520.html>. An unexpected development took place several months later, which can be partially attributed to the relationships strengthen by clergy through this World

Circle Way

Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea say that the Circle Way draws on instincts that are “basic to human nature.” Everyone has a desire “to cooperate and participate in conversations in which we can speak and listen fully.”³⁴ The circle practice that they describe draws on ancient roots. Humans have always gathered in circles to see and hear each other in conversation. The controlled use of fire, add Baldwin and Linnea, seemed to reinforce our habit of gathering in circles. The fire offers security, heat, and food—and the dancing flames hold a strong center for the group.³⁵ Circles are so simple and commonplace that we take them for granted, especially in organizations that are dealing with complex changes, stressful decisions, or passionate feelings. The circle is democratizing and emotionally intelligent. It puts individuals on an equal footing and prompts their humane attention to each other. If it works for children in church school, youth in a retreat, and elders in a Bible study, why would we not trust it for questions of strategic importance facing the church?

Circle conversation is not a free-for-all discussion but an intentional group practice of speaking and listening. Although the model may be adapted freely or enforced with more or less discipline depending on the context, the basic method asks that the group honor specified norms. The Circle experience usually begins with a process of checking-in. The participants ground

Café experience. Following the deaths of eleven worshippers in a shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue, the network created by the confederate monument gathering was utilized in support of Chapel Hill’s local synagogue. Many of the same clergy present were leaders in a service of remembrance that attracted more than 400 supporters and widespread media attention. While we cannot say exactly how one event supported the other in terms of clergy participation and turnout, we know that relationships summon a greater measure of accountability between neighbors. Time spent in conversation and relationship building around the theme of racial justice increased our collective capacity to mobilize ourselves for a related need at a later time.

³⁴ Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), xiii.

³⁵ Baldwin and Linnea, 5.

themselves in the group by bringing something to offer to the center. Woolf taught me to ask individuals to bring a small item that represents their relationship with the church or a hope that they have for the church. Everyone has an opportunity to speak by way of introduction. Baldwin and Linnea mention three practices that ground every circle experience.³⁶ “Speak with intention,” which asks the group to attend to the subject at hand and speak with relevance to it. “Listen with attention,” meaning that everyone has an equal voice in the circle and all voices are valued. “Tend to the well-being of the circle.” This means that the circle itself is a sign of the group’s wholeness. Individuals are responsible to the group, not only to their own desires and agendas.³⁷

Most every church surely includes groups that meet according to some manner of circle practice. In church meetings where there is a focus on business, such as in a congregation’s Board of Trustees or any group that is keeping minutes or reviewing financial statements, there is a strong temptation to skip the spiritual pleasantries and get to work. In my observation, however, there is an opportunity for pastoral leadership in the first few moments of these meetings that can shift the experience into a more relational and sacred dimension. The pastor should think of herself in this setting as the host of the assembly. She is the guardian of the circle, not the expert in the room. There is probably no time to build a physical center for the circle, but one way to improvise may be simply to ask each person to speak into the center by

³⁶ “The Circle Way,” The Circle Way, accessed December 14, 2018, <http://www.thecircleway.net/>.

³⁷ The center of the circle becomes a visible sign of the group’s shared identity or purpose. Gathered in darkness, notice how people tend to gaze into the fire. Other elements that may make a difference in the quality of the experience, depending on the needs of the group, are a talking piece as a visual aid to protect the speaker or a bell or chime that signals beginnings, endings, or transitions. A “guardian” may be appointed to monitor the energy of the group, prompt the group to return to its purpose, or gently reinforce the values at the center of the circle.

offering a humanizing question before the work begins. “Where have you noticed the grace of God today?” Or “What experiences of today are you bringing with you into this room?”

The host wants to demonstrate early to people who are anxious to speak about the business at hand that they will have an opportunity to participate in the conversation. Because all voices are valued, not just the experts over others, there is shared responsibility for the outcome of the meeting. If the meeting does not have a satisfactory result, it is not because the pastor failed to provide the right answers but because the group could not get where it wanted to go together. Finally, simple questions like this have the power to dull any edge of anxiety in the room by welcoming qualities of personal vulnerability, empathy, and humor. The pastor cannot expect an unpracticed layperson who chairs the board or committee to play this role. I find that lay chairs are eager to welcome simple practices of conversation. Any resistance usually comes from unfamiliarity or stress associated with the responsibilities they carry for the good of the church. People join churches because they are looking for connection with God and neighbor. The business of our meetings does not have to be a barrier to the building of a stronger community.

Open Space Technology (OST)

Of the three main formats mentioned here, Open Space Technology is the most oriented toward action. Using the power of conversation notable in the World Café and the Circle Way, Open Space Technology provides minimal structure sufficient for members of a group to organize themselves according to a passion they hold or a lived experience they bring. Harrison Owen says that he developed the process for OST after facilitating a conference he had painstakingly planned only to find upon reading the feedback that “the truly useful part was the

coffee breaks.”³⁸ Owen says it is effective “in situations where a diverse group of people must deal with complex and potentially conflicting material in innovative and productive ways.”³⁹

As in the formats described above, OST is facilitated by a host who has carefully prepared the space for the meeting. The agenda for the time together is left almost entirely blank, except to indicate the start and end time of sessions, breaks, and perhaps meals. The host prepares a grid showing locations along an x-axis and time along a y-axis. Owen calls this grid the marketplace. This is an example of an empty marketplace that I created for a planning session at United Church of Chapel Hill.

Marketplace of Ideas

	Room 235	Staff Conference Room	Youth Room Downstairs	Room 229
1:30-2:15				
2:30-3:15				
3:30-4:15				

Once the marketplace is established, everyone in the group is invited to identify an idea, problem, or conversation that they would like to consider with others by volunteering themselves to lead a session at a place and time indicated on the marketplace grid. Members of the group are then encouraged to participate in the marketplace according to four primary roles that they might play. These are carefully explained to the participants prior to the opening of the marketplace.⁴⁰

³⁹ Harrison Owen, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), 15.

⁴⁰ Owen, 97.

- Convener: A person with a passion willing to call a conversation that needs to be had
- Participant: Someone who shares an interest with a Convener and joins in the conversation at the specified place and time
- Bumble Bee: They move between groups at will, pollinating the system with their ideas, insight, and perspective
- Butterfly: These are people who feel somewhat aloof from the moment, who are invited to take responsibility for themselves in any way they may need. They may join in the marketplace at any time but are also welcome to take a break, practice journaling, or simply get some space so that they can continue to engage the group later.⁴¹

In the planning session that I am describing here, the church leaders present had been charged by the congregation to lead us in two strategic areas. One of those areas of strategic interest was “Racial Justice, Inclusion, and Diversity.” The other was “Becoming a More Connected Community.” Therefore we invited the leaders present to offer into the marketplace any idea, experiment, or initiative for which they had a personal passion that was connected to those two areas of strategic interest. This is how they filled out the marketplace.

⁴¹ Whereas most conference evaluations are designed around the performance of the presenter and the organizers, Block says that the citizen and participant is in charge of their own experience. He suggests developing evaluations with the participant in mind, with questions such as “When during the day have you been bored or disappointed, and how are you dealing with this?” Peter Block, “How Am I Doing?,” in *The Flawless Consulting Fieldbook and Companion: A Guide to Understanding Your Expertise*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001), 369.

Marketplace of Ideas for Two Strategic Themes:

Racial Justice, Inclusion, and Diversity | Becoming a More Connecting Community

	Room 235	Staff Conference Room	Youth Room Downstairs	Room 229
1:30-2:15	Attracting African American Participation in the Church <i>Convener: Debby</i>		Improving Connections between our Spanish Worship Service and our Two English Worship Services <i>Convener: Nancy</i>	
2:30-3:15		Outreach to the Spanish Speaking Community <i>Convener: Gary</i>		
3:30-4:15	Identifying Themes to Elevate for the Church's Social Justice Work <i>Convener: Kirsten</i>			Ideas for cultivating more Fellowship Opportunities throughout the Congregation <i>Convener: Gaylen</i>

Before breaking out into the groups identified in the marketplace, the facilitator of an Open Space Technology session should layout basic ground rules that reinforce the purpose of the exercise. In my practice, I have referred to five rules that are commonly referred to by other practitioners of Open Space, including Tenneson Woolf.⁴²

⁴² Owen, *Open Space Technology*, 91–95.

Ground Rules for Open Space Technology

- Whoever comes are the right people.
- When it starts is the right time.
- When it's over it's over.
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.
- We follow the Law of Two Feet, which says that if you find yourself in a place where you are neither learning nor contributing, you should move on.

The roles and ground rules for Open Space are playful and whimsical by design. They do not reflect a passive stance of leadership, but rather a posture of openness to the self-organizing capacity of a living system.

If so many congregations are bound up in mechanisms of church governance and decision-making, the rules that govern Open Space give permission for the group to loosen its collective attachment to structures designed for order and control. In a historical moment when the technologies of religious experience are changing, Open Space sets free the interests of ministry participants for further exploration and definition. In Chapel Hill, for example, our worship and community life have been designed historically for a religious experience overwhelmingly defined by whiteness. The convener of the group on African American ministry, a black woman in the midst of a mostly white congregation, has been stymied again and again by offering her initiative in service to our mechanistic structure of boards and committees. Open Space empowers her to freely explore a conversation she has been unable to introduce successfully in the minutes of a board meeting. By welcoming her participatory leadership through planning tools like Open Space, the pastor as convener stands at a threshold between an

older mechanistic model of ministry defined by order and a moment that gives permission for new possibilities to emerge.

EXPERIENCE IN GRINNELL

In late 2014, with Tenneson Woolf's help, we began to devise a discernment process for the Grinnell Church. We decided the work would be accomplished through a series of three retreats taking place on Fridays and Saturdays. The first and third of the retreats would involve a smaller group of church leaders who were responsible for the overall direction of the discernment process. We called them "Stewards," signaling their accountability to the larger body and suggesting the spiritual dimension of their work. The second retreat took place over three days and involved an invitation to all members of the congregation.

The retreat for the whole congregation was the climax of the planning process because our purpose was to value the wisdom of the whole body. Planning for such a large gathering of stakeholders required special consideration of many details and presented numerous tensions that we needed to balance. First, we had to decide how to make the invitation. We wanted to avoid hosting a gathering of the usual suspects. Only a small sample of the whole congregation, historically, had participated in church-wide meetings. These were often individuals passionate about a certain program area or interest in the church and their advocacy was all too predictable. To bring new information into our planning we needed new people in the room. So in making the invitations to the gathering, we included with intention people at the margins of the church and we reached out to people who had never participated before. We called these people "wildcards" because we were unsure how their participation would affect the conversation.

Next, the Stewards had to decide what kind of commitment they were asking of the participants. While a gathering of the congregation should be as widely inclusive as possible,

discussing complex issues central to our common life would demand the full participation of everyone in the group. We needed to set high expectations for the contribution of everyone involved. Accordingly, we decided to require participants to be present for the entirety of the three-day retreat, with modest accommodations for people who had jobs or needed childcare during the day on Friday.

Finally, the stewards paid special attention to how the space was created. The environment needed to reflect the intentionality of our process. The stewards arranged for a lovely meal to be shared. Healthy snacks were available. The dark church basement was transformed with tablecloths, vases, and fresh cut flowers.

The congregational retreat, like the two additional retreats for the stewards, involved a combination of World Café, Circle, and Open Space Technology exercises. We had two goals in mind. The first was to talk about the culture we would like to build in the life of the church. What kind of people do we want to be together? The second goal was to talk about programmatic initiatives aligned with the church's purpose and mission. We wanted to hold these initiatives gently and give ourselves permission to experiment with them. The final report of Tenneson Woolf is included as Appendix 5.

We committed ourselves to three “culture-making practices.” These represented group behaviors that we could return to in future gatherings of the church in any setting, from a Sunday school class to a Church Council meeting, holding them mindfully before ourselves as an invitation to remember our aspirational culture.

- Trust: that all involved in the ministry of the church—board members, officers, and the pastor—have the best interest of our common ministry at heart.

- Listening: a commitment to sharing and honoring authentic stories, as well as to being present to the conversation in the moment.
- Kindness: We discussed the everyday stresses in our private lives and committed to cutting each other some slack.

Secondly, through nine months of work and over the course of three retreats, the congregation committed to five “Strategic Experiments.” These are initiatives of the whole congregation led by one or two members of the church who were committed to acting upon them.

- Christian Education: This has involved the development of a Godly Play classroom that now enrolls more than thirty students. We also engaged a local rabbi and Grinnell College faculty to expand our offerings to young adults and elders.
- Caregiving: We immediately identified a group of laypeople, mostly elders, who wanted to learn more about how to provide care to people who are ill, aged, or homebound. As pastor, I began offering training sessions similar to Stephen Ministry programs. This soon evolved into the Care Connection Team that met with me monthly to review caregiving needs in our congregation.
- Small Groups: In the beginning of this experiment, several individuals with gifts for hospitality simply invited the church to participate in fun events. One family that had an orchard of apple trees invited the church to make apple cider. Another group initiated a Christmas caroling event. In time, this initiative evolved into a vision for a formal small group program for church members.
- Social Justice: This is a generative theme showing up throughout our congregation’s history. Sensing energy behind environmental justice, the Care for Creation Team was born to educate the community about climate change. This team leverages our connection

with Grinnell College to host community workshops and offers an annual Earth day worship service.

- Ecumenical Projects: This team was unsuccessful in identifying concrete ministries to undertake. Nevertheless, the spirit of their initiative has endured through other teams that have focused on building partnerships with sister churches in the community.

EXPERIENCE IN CHAPEL HILL

In Grinnell I worked with a congregation that had experienced several decades of decline and had in its more recent past notable traumatic moments. In Chapel Hill, by contrast, I found a vibrant and healthy congregation. The church had experienced a decade of explosive growth, from approximately 250 members in the late 1990s to 950 members by 2012. The congregation's greatest struggle has been managing growth in a manner that is consistent with the church's values. Rapid growth had left some members sore with a feeling of disconnection. In congregational meetings, church leaders would emphasize the importance of "trust" in members elected to serve on the Church Council. Others, reciprocally, would lament their sense that the church was becoming more "corporate." The growth of the church has been at odds with the Congregational spirit of decision making. These conflicts have left some members wondering whether a large church can hold on to its Congregational identity.

Art of Hosting practices may suggest that United Church's growth does not have to come at the cost of its ecclesiastical traditions. It will be necessary, however, for the congregation to learn new skills for keeping members of the body connected with the mind of Christ. Practices of participatory leadership, like those used in Grinnell, can help to build a greater feeling of connection throughout the life of the church. But because I have served in Chapel Hill only briefly, I want to describe how I have used practices of participatory leadership not for strategic

planning but in a specific program of adult education. Although ministers are often tempted to function as resident experts in congregations, they are usually trained as generalists. Using practices of participatory leadership, the pastor can teach material that is important to a congregation's spiritual growth by facilitating peer-to-peer teaching rather than taking on sole responsibility for content delivery.

When the Equal Justice Initiative opened its National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a tribute to more than 4,400 people killed by lynching since 1870, I joined my colleague, Associate Pastor Susan Steinberg, in sponsoring a pilgrimage opportunity for members of the congregation who wanted to visit the memorial. Our intention was to provide an opportunity for members of the church to learn about the history of racial violence since Reconstruction, especially in our local area, and to frame the pilgrimage as a spiritual journey that would include opportunities for worship, prayer, and practices of repentance.

Because we were both white people, my colleague and I declined to take on the authoritative role of teachers for this experience. We felt that it was important for us to provide a basic structure for our learning and to set boundaries to honor the sensitivity of the material. The group of 46 participants were mostly white and included three African Americans. We wanted to welcome the insights and contributions of everyone, trusting that the group would contain valuable wisdom if only we could access it.

The 46 participants were asked to read *Just Mercy*, the memoir of EJI's founder Bryan Stevenson, and *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, a Christological reflection on racial violence by James Cone. We discussed these books in eight weekly sessions prior to the pilgrimage, inviting speakers for plenary lectures and then breaking out into small group discussion. In plenary session—using principles from the Circle Way—we discussed our goals for the

experience. We adopted a behavioral covenant to guide interactions in the small groups.

Throughout the summer, we used Open Space Technology to encourage individuals to step forward as leaders. Self-organizing teams emerged for several purposes.

- **Local Research:** Led by a University of North Carolina librarian, this team committed to investigate the history of lynching in our home of Orange County. By the end of the summer, they had unearthed newspaper clippings about the killing of Manly McCauley, who is memorialized in Montgomery. The team also developed a database of 187 additional lynchings throughout North Carolina, many of them not represented in the Montgomery memorial.
- **Resilience:** This team was led by a practicing therapist, who led the group in exercises meant to increase our resilience. We recognized that lynching was an act of violence against the body. We would often begin our sessions with a four- or five-minute meditation to notice our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Prior to entering the Montgomery memorial, we stood outside for a “Body Prayer,” acknowledging that members of our group may feel the suffering in their bodies.
- **Worship:** In the evening, following our visit to the memorial, this team led us in worship. They had enriched our experience by inviting us to sing protest songs and black spirituals throughout our journey. Finally, they asked us to bring our reflections recorded in journals to worship, where we drew on them to share testimonies. Worship also involved an act of corporate confession of sin, for our ongoing participation in living systems of racial violence.
- **Snacks:** This team committed to keeping us well fed throughout the journey.

Open Space relieved the pastors of the burden of expertise and brought the pedagogical advantage of giving responsibility for learning and growth back to the student. Participants in the journey were empowered to see themselves as leaders. As much as the pastors, pilgrims were the responsible agents for the group's spiritual growth.⁴³

MEASURING IMPACT

Practices of participatory leadership in congregations should contribute to a greater feeling of social cohesion within the group. Each of the three techniques described here stimulates sustained conversation, introduction to new people throughout the system, and opportunities to connect emotionally and socially with others in the community. Ongoing facilitation of these participatory leadership practices should yield a higher measure of connectedness.

Although I have not conducted formal evaluations of how practices of participatory leadership have influenced social cohesion in the congregations of Grinnell and Chapel Hill, I have included in Appendix 7 a sketch of surveys that we may use in the future. Of the five strategic experiments that we identified in Grinnell, four of them for the duration of my ministry. These were initiatives largely unsupported by the existing governance framework of the church,

⁴³ We considered numerous strategies for respecting the racial disparity in our group. One of the few African Americans in our group was a poet and artist highly respected in our community. He was a key conversation partner for us on the front end of the pilgrimage with whom we were able to have free and authentic discussion about how to honor the black experience in our midst. We recognized that African Americans would experience a memorial to racial terror differently than white people. We needed to be careful, however, not to expect African Americans merely to be our teachers. One way that we navigated this tension was by framing the pilgrimage as much in terms of prayer and worship as of learning. We encouraged each person to tend to their particular physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. We provided journals and built into worship a time of sharing from those journals. Simple gestures like this promoted a spirit of reverence for each person's experience. In keeping with the practices of the Circle Way, our pilgrimage maintained its focus on the wellbeing of the group and asked each person to speak with intention.

yet they proved to be very durable because they captured the existing gifts and passions of members of the congregation. They offered compelling channels for worshippers to follow the call of discipleship. Whereas the congregation struggled to fill vacancies on our existing boards and committees, we noticed enthusiastic interest in participating in what we described as “self-organizing, passion-driven ministries.” While I cannot show here that members of the Grinnell church self-reported a higher level of satisfaction in the quality of group cohesion or the church’s social fabric, the church’s behavior after the Woolf consultation concluded shows clearly that ministry organized by these participatory practices offered more gratifying pathways of discipleship than the board-centric model that preceded it. In early 2018, the Grinnell church adopted a new Constitution organizing its ministry through teams assembled by gifts and passions rather than static and inflexible boards and committees.

A challenging item to measure may be the congregation’s comfort with a more organic style of organization. Rather than operating so mechanistically, could we tell if the church is beginning to function with more trust in itself as a living system? In Grinnell we spoke often about the value of “experimentation.” By that we meant a competency for identifying resources, taking action, and then reflecting on what we had done. Each of the five strategic initiatives was framed as experiments so that we would not interpret them as new parts to our old machine but rather as the shared activity of the living Body of Christ. We might test the development of a new competency, says Mary McClintock Fulkerson, by observing whether the group is able to “improvise” on it.⁴⁴ In other words, the group demonstrates its mastery of a new skill or the

⁴⁴ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 80.

adoption of a new habit by showing that it is able “to do the same thing in a very different way, and to do it in response to a new situation.”⁴⁵

In *Places of Redemption*, Fulkerson shows how Good Samaritan Church was able to act according to values, knowledge, and practices that it had been building over time in response to a new set of conditions. The church organized itself around a commitment to welcome “those not like us,” Fulkerson writes.⁴⁶ The first expression of Good Samaritan’s mission involved deliberate effort to become a multiracial congregation reflective of its diverse community context. Good Samaritan’s practice of hospitality was extended, or applied in a new way, when the church took advantage of an opportunity to welcome residents of a local group home. In both cases, adapting to racial diversity and welcoming worshipers with physical or mental disabilities, Good Samaritan church made costly sacrifices and navigated internal disagreements.

Similarly, the practices of participatory leadership I have helped the congregations in Grinnell and Chapel Hill to learn might be measured by testing whether the congregations are able to improvise on the skills under a new set of conditions. What if the pastor who pressed the importance of experimentation left the church altogether and was no longer around to encourage such a light and nimble approach to ministry?

In February 2018 I concluded my ministry in Grinnell and have observed the congregation at a distance. Sometimes I receive brief emails or text messages from members of my former church, but mostly Facebook and church newsletters are my sources of information. The church moderator mentioned this to me in a recent email concerning an unrelated matter.

A new experiment is to have an area at the front of the sanctuary for the children to play quietly during the service. Two pews were removed to open us this space. It has been

⁴⁵ Fulkerson, 80.

⁴⁶ Fulkerson, 56.

available for two Sundays and is working well. The children have been much more quiet when there than when squirming in the pews.

The moderator's judgmental comment about squirming children aside, it appeared that the staff had used some materials from the Godly Play program that was started when I was the pastor to develop a fresh approach to welcoming families with children into worship. I soon saw pictures in a Facebook post. "Today our congregation began a holy experiment and debuted our sanctuary PrayGround! The kids loved it and the adults marveled that it was quieter during the service than it usually is. What a joy to make our worship space welcoming for these little ones." It is not at all clear from Facebook whether they anticipate this to be a permanent change to the sanctuary, but it demonstrates the ability to apply the same concept under new circumstances. The congregation is improvising on a habit that it has worked to develop over the past four years.

Two other incidents reflect a similar improvisation on the theme. The December newsletter of the congregation shows pictures of a new program called Jingle Bell Holiday. The church provided a venue for a town-wide event featuring the community children's choir and members of the congregation served hot cider afterward.

This was a collaborative effort with the Grinnell Children's Choir and the UCC Community Preschool, and another of our "holy experiments." Feedback has been wonderfully positive and we have already brainstormed some ideas to make this an even more impactful event next year.

I had nothing to do with initiating these recent experiments in Grinnell, but they clearly reflect a pattern that we worked to establish. The congregation continues to demonstrate openness and receptivity to new ideas—even ideas that touch such volatile subjects as physical space in the sanctuary. They also demonstrate a commitment to receiving feedback and evaluating results.

In Fulkerson's framework, recent evidence from Grinnell suggests that the congregation has developed a new *habitus*. It has practiced listening, openness to new ideas, and evaluation

enough to demonstrate those same behaviors on unanticipated occasions. The first five experiments that we took on together prior to my departure were no fluke. Neither were they dependent on my personal influence. They were the first steps of learning, like someone who has taken up a new musical instrument. First the notes are played cautiously and deliberately, but with time and patient repetition the practice becomes second-nature. Measuring the impact of new practices of participatory leadership may be as scientific as designing surveys and tabulating data. But equally so, it is about paying attention to what God is doing in the life of the people. Are they learning? Is the group adopting a new skill? Has a new competency started to emerge? Are new habits forming? The Grinnell experience shows that these practices of participatory leadership do not merely influence the content of a church's programming. They have the power to shape the character of a congregation's life together.

CONCLUSION

The church is not a machine, but pastors are often expected to function as if they are operating one. That is the basic problem identified by my Doctor of Ministry project. The systems that govern mainline protestant churches resemble post-industrial modern machines, like airplanes, consisting of carefully engineered component parts. They are led by corporate bodies known as general boards, judicatories, and instrumentalities. Values of efficiency, order, and control often seem prized as much as the Gospel these vessels were built to convey. But if the church ever was a well-oiled machine, today it is an aging and clunky one. Today the mainline church is living through a moment of adaptive change. The basic structures of the church for membership and financial support regularly malfunction. So my intention is to invite pastors to see their work in a different way. The Congregational Tradition in which I serve has a rich ecclesiology that embodies and makes visible the Risen Christ in the world. The church is a

living system of people called to be disciples. So as pastors we must be healers and connectors more than technicians. We tend to Christ's living body and lead the church by welcoming new life-giving habits that value the gifts God has provided.

Where pastors practice openness to the participatory leadership of the whole congregation, they tend to the social fabric of the church. They are weaving the web tighter. Rather than functioning as experts or ministry professionals, their role is to attend to the connections that animate the community, trusting that the Holy Spirit is alive in the corporate body of the church. Practices of participatory leadership like the World Café, the Circle Way, and Open Space Technology offer no salvation to the church. In themselves they are useless to fix most anything that is broken. But practiced over time in a community of discipleship they honor the Body of Christ by valuing the particular voices that God calls into a local community. These processes depend on noticing and utilizing the gifts God has already provided to the church. They offer hope to a congregation because the pastor who uses them implicitly proclaims that the people already have everything they need to do faithful ministry. Furthermore, they build a collective competency in the Body of Christ, a *habitus* that lives deep in the memory of the body, so that we may instinctively turn to one another in moments of uncertainty, loosen our grip on existing schemes, and welcome an experimental and improvisational approach to our discipleship in community. These are skills that most pastors already practice in some form. They arise from gifts for seeing and hearing, storytelling and conversation, hospitality and facilitation that ministers already exhibit. Any pastoral leader ready to remove the professional veil of expertise can practice welcoming every disciple into church leadership for the sake of a living, breathing, dynamic Body of Christ.

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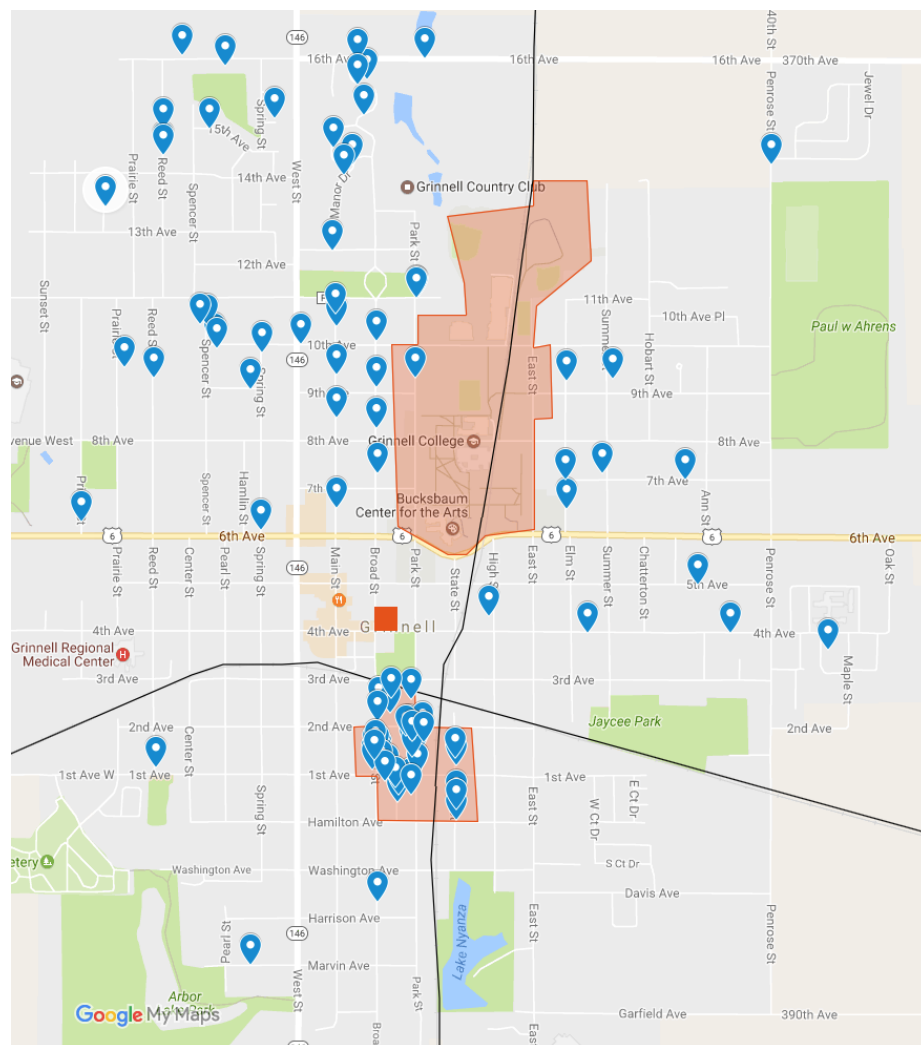
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APPENDIX

1. Map of Membership Distribution

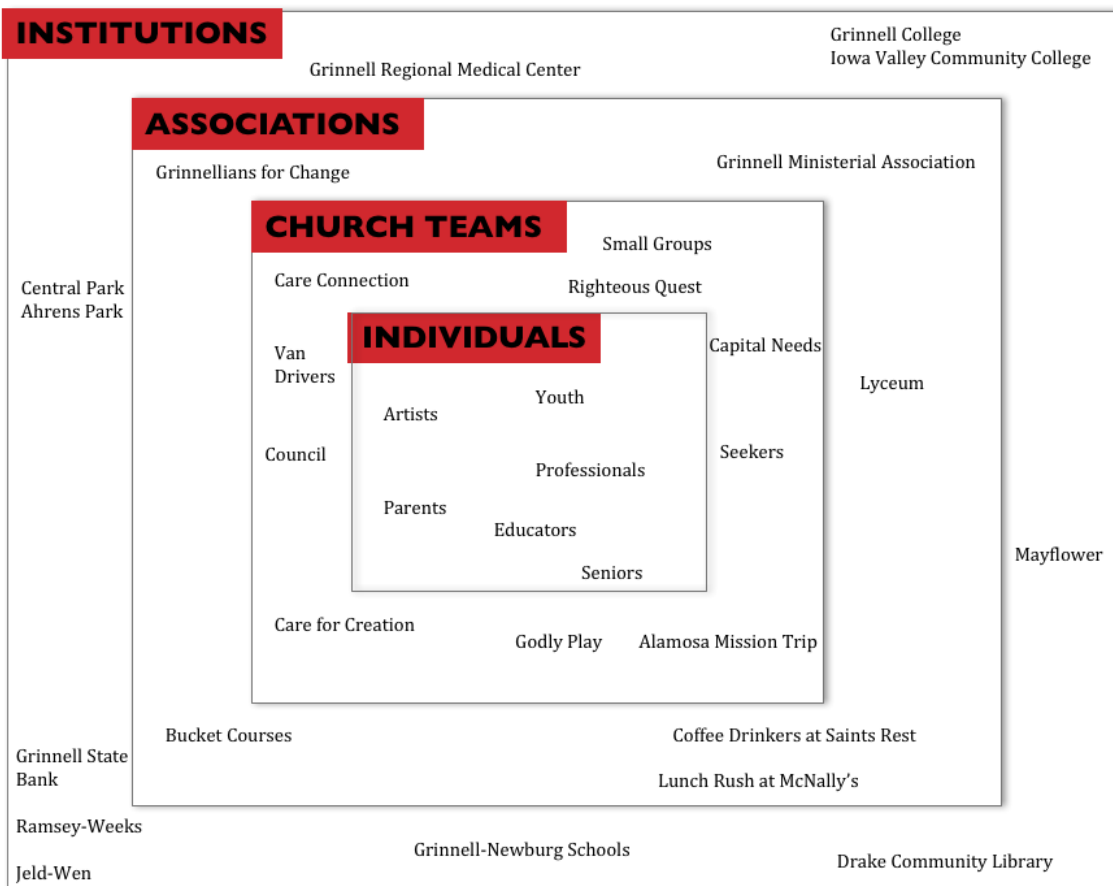
This map shows how the Grinnell church's membership is clustered around the town's railroad junction and two large institutions sharing a historic connection to the church. The church is marked by the deep red square in the center. The rail lines are marked in dark black lines. The light red shaded areas represent Grinnell College, to the north, and the Mayflower Community, to the south. The blue pins are member households.



2. Map of Grinnell Community Assets

Following Kretzmann and McKnight, this is one representation of community assets viewed from the perspective of our church. One can see that our emerging ministry teams are included as assets to the Grinnell Community.

Church Perspective on Grinnell Community Assets



3. Map of Governance Transformation

The following two sketches show the transformation of our governance structure since the Woolf consultation. The first diagram shows our boards and committees under the church's official constitution and bylaws. Those policies required us to recruit between 50 and 64 individuals to serve as board members or officers of the church. Average worship attendance in 2016 was only 82, meaning that virtually the only way to connect with our ministry was to sit in a board room.

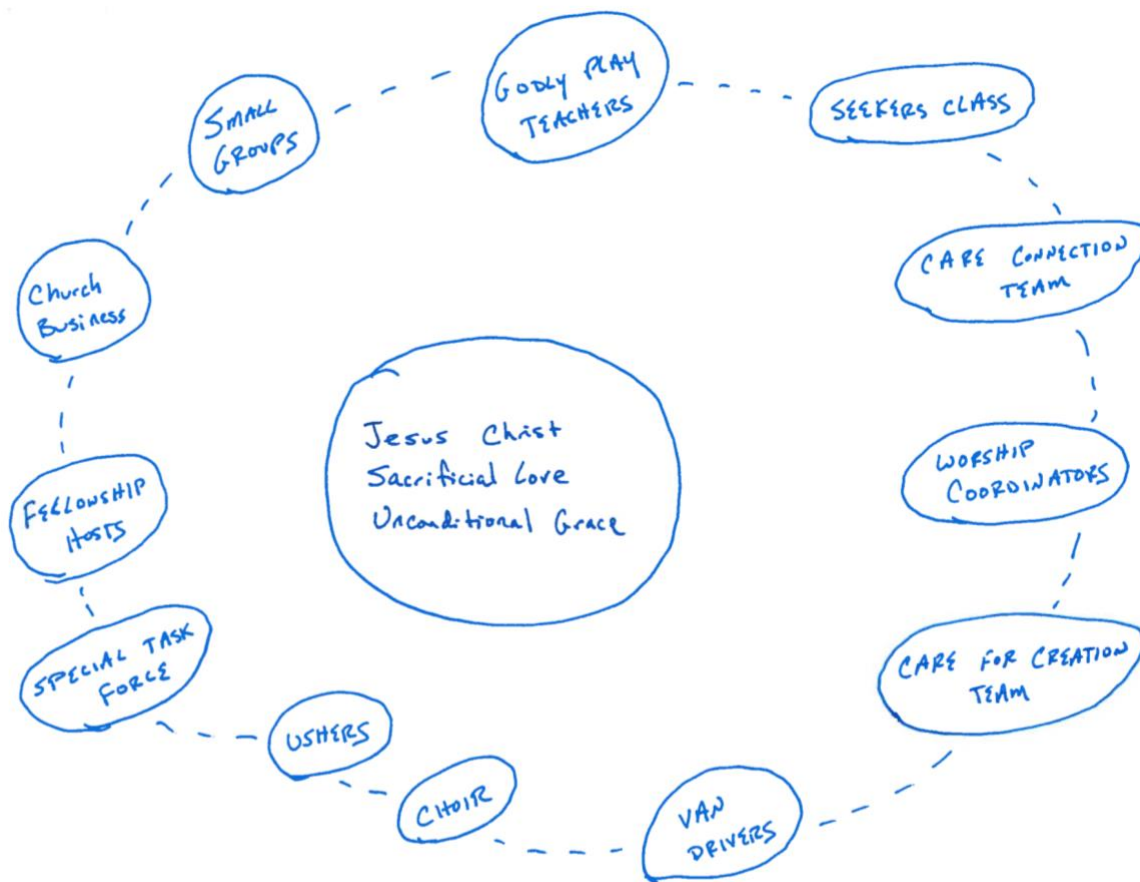


Constitutional Mandate

	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
PPRC	3	5
Officers	6	6
Personnel	5	5
Council At Large	3	3
Nominating	3	5
Preschool	2+	2+
Parish Life	4	6
Worship	4	6
Outreach	4	6
Christian Ed.	4	6
Trustees	9	9
Total	50	64

The Woolf consultation led to the development of “self-organizing, passion-driven ministry teams.” The difference between this image and the one before it is that everyone on a ministry team wants to be there. Rather than serving out of a sense of guilt or obligation, these ministry

teams represent the free and joyful offering of our time and energy. These individuals feel like they are doing ministry. They do the work because it makes their hearts sing.



4. Grinnell Pastors, 1994-2014

Called Pastor A	1994-2005	Traumatic Injury
Interim Pastor B	2005-2006	
Interim Pastor C	2006-2008	
Called Pastor D	2008-2012	Fired by Vote of Congregation
Interim Pastor E	2012-2013	Terminated Following Inpatient Treatment for Alcoholism
Interim Pastor F	2013-2014	

5. Report of Tenneson Woolf

Grinnell UCC-Congregational is known for its commitment to grow in love of God and neighbor. It has been so for 160 years — an anniversary commemorated over the Retreat weekend. Included in that commitment are five core values that give added focus: Excellence in Worship; Social Justice; Education; Open and Affirming; and, Progressive Theology. The October 2015 Retreat was held to help the parish identify six “strategic experiments” that would be brought forward, championed, and implemented by people from the parish over the next 3-6 months or longer. The retreat was also held to choose two “culture-making practices” that could be randomly and deliberately expressed by all people in the parish.



This happened, and more, among the 32 participants over the 2.5 day retreat. There was relationship building. There were stories told. There was honesty. There was dialogue in small and large groups. There was truth-telling that had not happened before. There was difficulty, tough questions that required patience. There was discernment.

The six experiments and the key leaders who offered their skills and passion are below:

- Sunday Service Presentation Flexibility (Merle)
- Ecumenical Projects & Gathering (John)
- Social Justice: Care of Creation (Jean)
- Christian Education and Children’s Programming (Anne)
- Fun Family & Small Groups (Julie)
- Be a More Welcoming Church Community (Dorothy)

The language of “experimenting” is important and deliberate here, in its distinction from “plans.” Whereas plans often connote a kind of certainty and willful predictability not congruent with complex systems like parishes, experiments invite a necessary adaptiveness with one another, both in the work engaged and in the relationships required to support the work. Some experiments simply don’t work. A hypothesis is shown to be incorrect. We can learn much from most experiments, including what not to force. This disposition of experimenting is gateway to a more intelligent, adaptive, and kind community system.

The three culture-making practices, to hold each other accountable too are also below:

- Trust
- Listen
- Kindness

On the surface these seem obvious, and likely not particularly new. What is new is a renewed commitment to observe and evoke these qualities with one another. Virally. By anybody. Any time. Not from a fully massaged consensus of specific meaning, but rather, from a legitimized pause to notice together — “How are we doing with trust now?” “In what way is listening present (or not) here?” “What could kindness also be among us?” This noticing together is for everywhere. It could be in Sunday services. It could be in Church Council. It could be in simple one-to-one encounters. It could be in personal reflection.

The “more” that happened here includes the group process used to arrive at these experiments and practices. This was not a retreat that immediately pointed to end outcomes. Rather, it was a retreat that gave specific and deliberate attention to building relationships and learning together so as to create more meaningful and sustainable outcomes. Nor was this a retreat to create a to-do list of projects to be executed by staff. Yes, staff are and will be involved. However, a primary intent was to further welcome peer-based and passion-based leadership, people offering to take leadership on issues that they care about.

All peer-based leadership requires assisting leadership structures. At Grinnell UCC-Congregational this includes:

- face-to-face and telephone consultation with Cameron as Pastor, who holds big picture focus;
- coaching calls with Tenneson to assist with choices of next steps and big picture;
- interaction and regular updates with Church Council at which updates can be offered, help can be requested, and essential coordination can be arranged;
- continued support from strategic discernment stewards, who are also holding an image of the big picture of dreams brought forward into being.

What follows is a description of some of the insights and process used to get to these experiments and culture-making practices. As it was in the retreat, a primary invitation is to continue to be curious with one another. Not only is the parish supporting outcomes from the experiments, but simultaneously, encouraging a competency of curiosity together — which shapes how the experiments happen.

We have spoken it often in the context of this retreat, and with the stewards team that helped to create this: “Who we are together is different and more than who we are alone.” Finding how to

be together, how to let go, how to trust, how to imagine together is part of the reclaiming needed in most congregations. It furthers mission, acted out from a local parish perspective.

6. Report of Chapel Hill Clergy

Chapel Hill Clergy and other Faith Leaders
24 August 2018

Commitments and Responsibilities for Next Steps

Cameron Barr: Document this meeting

Jen Feldman and Justin Coleman (with Creighton Alexander): lead the development of an editorial

Rodney Coleman: Help with recruiting additional African American pastors to meetings like this
Susan Steinberg: Will investigate training opportunities for the community in nonviolent direct action

Anna Richardson: Investigate status of EJI memorial marker and facilitate connections between groups

University Baptist Church and University Methodist Church: Hosting as needed for clergy/community meetings

Mitch Simpson and Rodney Coleman: Further conversation and fleshing out of the idea for an organized march in Chapel Hill

Ian McPherson: Youth ministry organizing

Marcus McFaul: Opening Binkley Baptist Church for prayer and refuge in the event of escalating demonstrations

Katie Murray: Coordinating logistics as needed for the EJI memorial marker

Fred Joiner: Educate the community and mobilize others to bring the EJI marker to Chapel Hill

HARVEST OF IDEAS

Repeated themes, concrete ideas highlighted

What does Chapel Hill need from Jewish and Christian leadership since the fall of Silent Sam?

- Truth-telling about our history
- Moral guidance
- Education for our congregations
- Language that has the capacity to maintain relationships amidst disagreement, that is not aggressive or escalating, that can build a bridge
- Chapel Hill needs its faith community leaders to summon the moral force of character
- Strong leadership that speaks truth
- We are asked to build a beloved community of protection for the vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed
- Prophetic Pressure
- Public, peaceful, and prophetic witness
- A public ecumenical response that involves speaking out in newspapers and editorials and embraces Muslims, Buddhists, Quakers, and student ministry

- Creativity to draw upon the Biblical narrative, particularly in the Hebrew exodus, and that utilizes the constructive nonviolent examples of King and Ghandi

How might clergy leaders influence the character and spirit of public demonstrations if they intensify?

- Be present
- Presence includes availability before (for conversation), during (for sharing in the public witness), and after (space to process)
- Show up! Exhibit courage not comfort
- Identify non-negotiable principles
- Let people tell their stories and reflect upon them
- Support the supporters
- Listen to the stories of the ones who are afraid or hurting
- Clergy can provide community organizing training with multiple groups
- We can build a database with people willing to participate in public demonstrations and support our response
- Pre-prepping: through the support-intense teaching of faith building *pistis* that in moving forward “God is with us” (Romans 8:31)
- Modeling and facilitating life-giving responses to conflict

Participants and Conversation Partners

Kehillah Synagogue	Rabbi Jen Feldman
Chapel of the Cross	Elizabeth Marie Melchionna (Rector) Tammy Lee (Campus Ministry) Paige Hanks Mike Peterson (Family and Youth Ministry)
Christ UMC	Kristen Hanna Ben Williams
University Baptist	Mitchell Simpson
First Baptist	Rodney Coleman
United Church CH	Cameron Barr Susan Steinberg David Mateo Ian McPherson
University Methodist	Justin Coleman Creighton Alexander
CH Christian (DOC)	Mike Shannon
UPC	Margaret LaMotte Torrence Hillary Cheek Kate Fielder
Binkley Baptist	Marcus McFaul
Church Holy Family	Clarke French
Holy Trinity Lutheran	Will Rose

Students associated with HTLC campus ministry made valuable contributions to today's meeting, but they did not leave contact information for us, so we're relying on Pastor Will to help us connect with them in the future.

Gathering Church	Mark Acuff
Ch. Redeemer	Mark Davidson
Ch. Advocate	Lisa Fishbeck
	Nathan Kirkpatrick
Orange UMC	David Gira
	Kori Robins

Anna Richardson Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP
Katie Murray Orange County Arts Council
Fred Joiner

7. Future Surveys of Group Cohesion

Although we have not conducted formal evaluations of the lasting impact of practices of participatory leadership on group cohesion and connectedness, I have developed some basic survey templates. Over time the regular practice of methods like the World Café, Circle Way, and Open Space Technology should help the congregation to feel a greater sense of connection. One possible design of evaluation would be to take a base measurement and compare readings at given intervals of time. One might craft questions to which respondents could indicate a measure on a scale of 1 (indicating little or no connection) to 10 (indicating a high degree of connection). In my current setting of Chapel Hill, survey questions might include some like these.

- How would you describe your feeling of connection to the mission of United Church of Chapel Hill?
- What is your feeling of connection with other members of United Church of Chapel Hill?
- How knowledgeable do you feel about programs and ministries at United Church of Chapel Hill that *are not* your primary point of connection with the congregation?

Another item that may yield valuable insight about social cohesion has to do with communication. Although we do our best to make communications available to everyone in the congregation, we still often hear that members of the church do not know who to approach with a question, concern, or idea. Any pastor trained in family systems theory wonders if the presenting

issue is really the issue. Sometimes I sense that negative feedback concerning “communication” is actually about something else, such as a feeling of disconnection. If practices of participatory leadership are effective in helping the system feel more connected with itself, we should see improvements in the perception of church-wide communication. So we could devise true/false questions such as these and measure the movement over time.

- If I have a question about church programming, I know whom to take it to.
- If I have a question about church governance, I know whom to take it to.
- If I have a question about church finance, I know who could answer my question.

Measuring social cohesion would provide meaningful data regarding the efficacy the participatory leadership practices we adopt. One challenge in measurement may be isolating the pastor’s convening approach to leadership from other variables that could also affect the measurement of connectedness in the congregation. It is likely that the congregation may be engaged in other initiatives, like a small group ministry, or a reform of communication platforms, that also move the needle on social cohesion.