
GAINING PERSPECTIVE ON THE THEME OF CHANGE

CRAIG VAN GELDER

Abstract: The annual 2008 spring conference of the Academy of Religious Leadership took up the theme of change. Meeting planners felt the issue of change and the dynamics associated with it lie at the very heart of leadership being effectively exercised in religious organizations. The conference format involved a number of plenary presentations, reviewing pre-conference writing assignments, some group work for helping persons identify their own social location in relation to the dynamics of change, and extensive discussion. This volume of the *Journal of Religious Leadership* presents the results of the work done by the members participating in this year's conference. The intent of this opening essay is to provide the reader with an introduction to these results.

Introducing the Essays in this Volume

This edition of the JRL has five essays, all of which are associated with the theme of change. This first essay provides an introduction to the rest of this edition of the journal. The next two essays are edited versions of plenary addresses delivered at the conference by Terri Elton and Lisa R. Withrow. The final two essays come from submissions by ARL members Scott J. Hagley and Jannie Swart, who attended the conference and wanted to contribute further to the conversation about change.

As noted above, this first essay summarizes the key themes that emerged from the discussions taking place at the conference. Six specific themes were identified by the participants during the conference as being germane to the discussion about change. These themes include:

Craig Van Gelder is professor of congregational mission at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

(1) identifying one's social location; (2) diversity, difference, and multiple layers in contexts; (3) chaos and complexity; (4) the place of typologies; (5) interdisciplinary perspectives, and (6) theological framing of the issues. Key aspects of each of these themes are provided in the final section of this essay.

The essay by Terri Elton set up the conversation about change at the conference and provides some of the same value for this edition of the journal. Elton argues that change has always been part of God's storyline in the world and that Christian leaders need to gain an appreciation for this notion if they hope to be intentional in responding to our ever changing context. She notes that not every change is helpful and that some are even destructive, but also that there is much about change that involves the work of God in our midst. She calls Christian leaders to develop a theological view of change so that they can better navigate the journey—unfortunately, few have. She also calls for these leaders to focus on the day-to-day lives of actual faith communities to better understand the dynamics of navigating that journey—unfortunately, most don't. This essay provides readers with insight into and examples of what Christian leaders need to do: think biblically, think theologically, think contextually, and think theoretically in relation to change—and to do so in an integrated manner.

The essay by Lisa R. Withrow builds on the framing work done by Elton in that Withrow explores matters related to the pedagogy of teaching students about the theme of change. She sets up her discussion by noting a current pattern in society of increasing discontinuous change. This is change that is unpredictable and impossible to plan for in advance. Her argument is that our dramatically changed context introduces pedagogical challenges for those seeking to teach about change from any perspective, but especially a Christian perspective. She introduces our changing context through the four themes of globalizing economics, politics, church, and the academy. Drawing on various schools of change theory, she utilizes the concept of *hybridity* to invite an

integrative approach to teaching the theme of change. This integrative approach, she feels, is best served when students become active participants in the learning process and are allowed to share their expertise toward interpreting experience and knowledge creation.

The essay by Scott J. Hagley introduces the reader to the dynamics of how change works within the processes of culture creation and identity formation as leaders seek to guide the work of organizations. Hagley offers the image of *improv* as a way of conceiving of a different approach to these processes. Drawing on his experiences of attending weekly improvised jazz sessions, he argues for an approach to Christian leadership in relation to change that is an “improvisational and rhetorical practice of cultivating a fluid, public, and gospel-shaped identity.” The biblical/theological argument he uses draws substantially from the recent missional church literature, and especially the work of Lesslie Newbigin. But he significantly modifies Newbigin’s view of public truth within a pluralist context by noting the importance of the church dynamically interacting with and learning from the forces at work within that context. Such vulnerability becomes part of the improv character of church life and Christian leadership. To help leaders live this out, he employs theoretical insights from both the recent practices literature and the organizational sensemaking proposals of Karl Weick.

The essay by Jannie Swart invites the reader to consider cultivating a *communion imagination* as the way to address change when providing leadership in organizations in the midst of change. Swart does this by first bringing ecclesiology into conversation with organizational theory, and then by drawing on recent developments in communion ecclesiology. His purpose is to construct what he calls a “theo-cultural” theory that can help Christian leaders engage in the public networking of local churches with other organizations in society. The dynamic inter-play that occurs within such networking requires openness to change and a nimbleness of approach. The result, however, is that

congregations which shape their ministries around serving as public companions with other organizations in civil society are, in fact, congregations that are participating more fully in the mission of God in the world.

Examining the Key Themes about Change

As noted above, discussions among the members at the spring conference identified six key themes related to the issue of change. This section provides an overview of these themes. The reader is invited to use this summary as a type of hermeneutical lens for reading the essays that follow.

Theme #1: Identifying One's Social Location

The perspectival character of discussing the theme of change came quickly into play within our professional society at our spring meeting. Participants began to readily interact with the presentations, as well as with their pre-conference written submissions that dealt with different aspects of change, but, in doing so, quickly added to the complexity of the discussion. The dynamics of this interaction were further amplified in a work session that took all the participants through a series of exercises that differentiated aspects of their experiences, social location, and world view. One suspects that the theme of the conference could have been almost any topic and this same set of dynamics would have emerged, but it was interesting to focus it directly in relation to the theme of change. The clear point that emerged in the discussions, especially in relation to trying both to teach about change and to deal with the dynamic of change within organizations, is to recognize what might be labeled as the hermeneutical challenge.

The hermeneutical challenge involves the multiple lenses that are always at work in providing interpretations. Conference participants noted it is important to name this reality in allowing for different voices to be heard. In relation to teaching about change, the question was raised as to whether some type of personal-based

pedagogy should be considered. Such an approach would allow each person present to identify his/her location, but to do so in a way that helps the person recognize the larger complexity of other views. A further question that was raised concerned whether or not it might be possible to develop a theological anthropology that could help guide the development of such a pedagogy. Might such a pedagogy help to both affirm the distinctiveness of each individual, but to do so within an understanding of shared community?

*Theme #2: Diversity, Difference, and
Multiple Layers in Context*

This theme obviously is related to the one named above, but there seemed to be enough going on in the conversation to justify developing it as a separate issue. Of particular concern to the conference participants was bringing the discussion about change into conversation with the dynamics of power in regard to where one is situated within an organization or community. It makes a profound difference whether voices are being exercised from above, from within, from below, or from the margins; and it was noted that whether such voices are heard is often directly related to who is managing the conversation.

Significant theological issues are at work in this aspect of the discussion. Numerous persons were quick to point out that the work of God through the Spirit is often from the margins or from the underside. This is especially the case when there are oppressive conditions at work within an organization or a community. Maintaining a complex perspective, both theologically and socially, that enables all involved to hear voices from diverse locations is crucial both for teaching about change and also in seeking to provide leadership in guiding organizations through change.

One image that was identified for helping to conceive more clearly of the complexity of this task was that of an iceberg. In a typical iceberg, the vast majority of the mass is below the water line and is not visible. Such is also

usually the case within organizations when there is consideration of any particular topic—much remains hidden below the surface. Persons teaching about change or providing leadership in guiding organizations through it need to be cognizant of this reality. They need to find ways to bring that which is currently not being named or acknowledged to the surface.

Theme #3: Chaos and Complexity

Discussion during the conference identified that the multiple layers of perspectives needing to be unpacked when dealing with issues of change seem to have become more complex in recent years. Access to the globalized world we now live within has been made readily available to all of us through information technology, especially the internet. Within our globalized world, there is an ever increasing inter-connectedness where the speed of change continues to accelerate and scope of change continues to expand. This is leading most persons to realize that understanding and engaging such global dynamics increasingly exceeds our local perspectives and capacities. The irony is that this global inter-connectedness is occurring at the same time that the local and the particular are being privileged within a postmodern worldview.

This situation often results in feelings of ambiguity or uncertainty for many of us as we encounter realities that appear to be beyond our immediate control. A discussion of chaos theory was introduced to help frame this situation. This theoretical perspective assumes that there are actually patterns within the complexity we encounter, but it also assumes that these patterns are not readily visible to most persons. A proposal was offered that we need to take advantage of a multi-perspectival approach to understanding and interpretation within our communities in order to *re-pattern* our shared orientation. Learning to cultivate such communities of discourse was identified as a key characteristic of effective leadership today.

Theme #4: The Place of Typologies

In seeking to re-pattern our own conversation about the dynamics of change, it did not take long for various typologies to begin to surface. The value of a typology is that it provides a framework for differentiating between various dimensions of a complex phenomenon. The potential problem with typologies concerns whether they sufficiently capture the fuller realities of what is being studied. The following typologies were offered, stemming both from the presentations that were made and the discussion that resulted:

- **Speed and Scope of Change**—this typology was used above to discuss the dynamics of globalization. It offers insight into why many organizations today are suffering a crisis of identity.
- **Continuous and Discontinuous Change**—this typology builds on the point made earlier about identity. As change becomes more disruptive within a context, organizations are increasingly overwhelmed in knowing how to respond. This type of change is said to be “discontinuous” with the patterns and assumptions of the past, where tried and true methods of response no longer work.
- **Circumstantial and Intentional Change**—this typology distinguishes between change that occurs in the normal course of events and change that is planned. The former requires leaders to respond, while the later requires leaders to intentionally plan and design interventions.
- **Technical and Adaptive Change**—this typology differentiates types of interventions that are made, noting that some operate within the current values where they are usually introduced by persons with expertise (technical) and those that require a fundamental reframing of the values of the organization and which usually require a more collaborative and integrative approach to implement (adaptive).

- **Incremental, Transformative, and Revolutionary Change**—this typology seems to be inter-related with several of those listed above. The focus here, however, is primarily on the amount of the change taking place, where there is an increasing scope as one moves from the former to the latter.

The question was raised as to whether our typologies have kept pace with the growing complexities that we are encountering in our efforts to provide leadership for organizations in the midst of change. Are the typologies listed above, and others like them, sufficient to name, frame, and re-pattern our present orientations? To what extent might they actually hinder our ability to deal with change today by limiting the way we are conceiving of reality within organizations and social systems?

Theme #5: Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives

The value of thinking about change utilizing an interdisciplinary approach became evident at the conference both in the presentations and the discussion that followed. Most of the themes outlined here call for, even require, the use of multiple lenses for trying to understand the phenomenon of change. But more than just utilizing multiple lenses is necessary in order to gain a fuller understanding and to develop a more helpful stance in relation to change. These multiple lenses need to be brought into conversation with one another in ways that invite fresh perspectives and deeper understanding. Two concepts were offered to give expression to what this might look like.

Hybridity was one such concept. Simply put, it means there is a “mixture.” Although the history of this concept is fraught with some baggage in terms of nineteenth century racial theories, some in recent years have reclaimed it for use in describing the realities of the globalized and postmodern world. In this context, the word is helpful for being able to frame how things that appear to be dissonant can, in fact, be brought into juxtaposition for a fuller exploration of meaning.

Convivencia was the other such concept. Its historical reference point is Medieval Spain where Jews, Muslims, and Christians learned to co-exist as a community within a type of shared harmony. Today, in our dramatically changed world that is globalized and postmodern, where particulars are privileged in the midst of the expanding forces of homogenization, we need to find new ways of living in harmony with one another. But this needs to be a harmony that respects the uniqueness of each person within a shared community of the whole.

These two concepts invite our engagement of what is known as sensemaking. Leaders of Christian communities need to practice the skill of sensemaking on behalf of God within their various communities. This requires an inter-disciplinary approach to understanding and interpreting the complexities of life. This also requires that such leaders are able to creatively incorporate God's story into our story.

Theme #6: Theological Framing of the Issues

Two other things became evident at the conference through all the presentations and discussion about change. On the one hand, almost everyone concurred that there needs to be some type of theological framing of the issues and dynamics associated with change. On the other hand, little consensus emerged, at least within the conference conversation, as to what such a theological framing might entail in terms of approaches and categories. A few suggestions surfaced, however, which are worth some further discussion.

- **Creation and Redemption**—creation as the first aspect of this pair of concepts invites an understanding of the world as being God's, where change is a normal aspect of life within God's world. Redemption as the second aspect of this distinction invites an understanding that there is a need in the world for a type of change that is redemptive through the grace and power of God.

- **Missio Dei and the Kingdom of God**—this pair of concepts follows the same logic as the one above where the understanding is that God has a mission within all of creation in light of being the creator, but that God also has a particular work within all of creation that is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- **Pneumatology**—utilizing an understanding of the person and work of the Spirit of God in the world and in the community of God’s people provides interesting possibilities for thinking about change. The Spirit’s activities, as made evident in Scripture, are as much about interruption and disruption as they are about intentionality and planning, leading us to accept some change as possibly being the provoking work of God’s Spirit in our midst.
- **Eschatology**—understanding that the Kingdom of God is both *already* and *not yet* provides a helpful framework for inviting the church and congregations into change in positive and constructive terms. As we pray “your kingdom come,” we are acknowledging that God is about transforming that which has been redeemed and that we are continuously being invited into the process and dynamics of change.
- **Holy and Human**—understanding communities of faith as being created by the Spirit helps us comprehend that they are both holy (through the presence of God’s Spirit) and human (in the midst of our shared humanness) and can also help to set up a useful way for considering change.

This need of developing theological frameworks for thinking about change and interacting with its dynamics is an area of significant challenge and of great potential to the work of the ARL. The following essays begin to offer some suggestive ideas along these lines for us to consider, but there is much work still to be done.

Summary

This essay has provided an introduction for the reader to the essays presented in this volume, noting some of their shared themes. The reader is encouraged to use these themes as a framework for interacting with these essays, and is also invited to expand on, as well as, to further revise this framework. Finally, it should be noted that all of the book reviews in this volume also reflect the theme of the spring 2008 conference about change. It is hoped that an introduction to this literature through these reviews will both expand and deepen your capacity to develop a theologically-informed, multi-perspectival approach in dealing with the dynamics of change.