

Heading to the Barn: Lessons from Rural Church Leadership, Theory U, and Leading Change

Thesis: As a theoretical construct, Theory U (developed by Otto Scharmer) can be helpful for understanding the dynamics of change leadership in a rural church environment. By examining a particular context (Chestnut Level Presbyterian Church) and Theory U, it is possible to learn about change leadership in a rural context.

Abstract:

Rural America has unique contextual features as an environment for leadership and church change. There are enormous needs for change to live faithfully in today's world. There are social and economic pressures from an increasingly globalized world and pulls to a past that increasingly does not exist. The question is how to lead in this environment that can both need enormous change and have enormous resistance to change. This paper looks at a particular context in rural America through the lens of Theory U in order to see if this particular theory can be helpful in leading change in this context. According to Theory U, "the theory and methodology of the U have a great deal to say about leadership, especially leadership in times of great turbulence and systemic change." (Theory U, xvi) Through listening, "presencing," and experimenting it is possible to lead profound innovation, according to Theory U. Chestnut Level Presbyterian church was founded in 1711 and is located in a rural area of Lancaster County, PA. It has a history that dates back to before the Revolutionary War and a present ministry in a rural context. Theory U can give insights into how to lead in this context by attending to relationships, listening across cultures, and working at the margins. Because Theory U is not grounded in Christian theology, it raises interesting questions about how to talk about the role of the Holy Spirit in leading change. Overall, there is much to be learned and also grounds for more research by attending to this theory.

Heading to the Barn



Looking over the landscape of rural America, particularly the landscape of southern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, one would be struck by two images. There are, of course, fields. Lots of fields. Fields filled with corn, wheat, barley, soybeans, and other crops. There are also barns. Barns that dot the landscape and are often the tallest buildings that one sees (especially if one includes the silos next to the barn as part of the structure.) The fields are interesting – they contain the agricultural wealth of the community as it grows. But it is the barns that capture my attention, always. Each one is unique. Each one has a story. And each one has a particular function for its location.

Barns define the landscape of a rural community and are spaces of significant transformation for these locations. One doesn't see a barn if visiting an urban area. And when barns are seen in a more suburban area, they likely blend into a former farm that is now a housing development. But in southern Lancaster county? You see barns. And then you drive down the road. And you see more barns. Inside those barns there are cows being milked, calves being born, tobacco being dried, and hay being stored. If one is willing to enter these places (which can be quite uncomfortable for outsiders because they are dirty and contain obviously dangerous equipment but mainly because they smell and there is no smell

like the smell of manure!),¹ there is a lot to learn. If one looks closely and listens deeply in a barn, there are matters of life and death, ethical issues that would perplex the wisest of us, and the most mundane occurrences of life transpiring – all in the same place.

Out of the fields and barns of Southern Lancaster County, I want to reflect on the patterns that help to cultivate congregational transformation and lead change in a complex cultural environment. From fields where wheat is growing to barns where cows are being fed to church buildings where members gather to figure out what is next – there is a pattern of change, growth, and renewal that can be observed and from which there is much to learn. In this paper, I want to do this through the lens of Theory U in order to reflect on leadership, be in dialogue with this significant theoretical framework about how to lead change, and to raise questions about what is next for this (and other) congregations.

The Context



Figure 1: Chestnut Level Presbyterian Church Sanctuary

Sometime in the early 1700s, a group of Scot-Irish settlers arrived in what is now southern Lancaster County, PA. They cleared land, they planted crops, and they started a church. If one visits Independence Hall in downtown Philadelphia and goes upstairs to look at the exhibit, there is a map of the pre-Revolutionary War colonies and in southern Pennsylvania. On this map there is a marking for the “Chestnut Level Presbyterian Meeting House.” This is a congregation that has been around for (in American terms) a long time! It pre-dates the Revolutionary War. The story around the congregation is that the land was granted by William Penn because Quakers would not fight Native Americans in the “west” (across the Susquehanna River) or Roman Catholics from the “south” (which is now Maryland). Since the Scots-Irish would fight, they got land². In 1711 these settlers started a Presbyterian congregation. Later that century, the members built the present church sanctuary but left it without a roof as the men went off to fight in the Revolutionary War.³ The cemetery (one of three) is adjacent to the church property and some members walk out of worship and see the gravestones of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and cousins.

¹ One farmer tells me, “Manure is the smell of money!” But this isn’t what most people say when they initially encounter what it means to be close to agriculture work and life.

² The story is supported by historical research, see below. The point here is that it is a live story in the congregation – not only can it be told “about” the congregation, it is told “by” the congregation. And it is told, with pride, to indicate why they might be people who resist authority, do what they want, and act with independence.

³ There are actually two stories told about the building of the sanctuary. One is that it was completed in 1765. This other is that it was under construction at the beginning of the Revolutionary War (which would date it about a decade later). Because of a fire in the 1980s that burned records, it is impossible to adjudicate these stories. The more popular one in the congregation is the “Revolutionary War roof story” because it connects the building to a piece of American history which the congregation appreciates.

In the middle of the 1800s, a group from the surrounding community began a school across the road from the church sanctuary. This school eventually became the Chestnut Level Academy, which was run by the church and had students until the early 1900s. As public schools began to take root in the community, the school was closed and the buildings from the Academy eventually became the “Church House.” This repurposed space was the location of the social and educational life of the congregation. The sanctuary and the Church House stood as the “barns” of this congregation for



Figure 2: Church House

generations – the places where people gathered for safety (literal and figurative), transformation, and to make decisions about their future as a congregation and a community. In the early 2000s, there was a flurry of change – a change in worship style, the addition of a worship service, the hiring of staff, and the building of a Family Life Center that meant that the 150 year old Church House was torn down. It was a new “barn” for a new day.⁴



Figure 3: Rendering of Chestnut Level Family Life Center

Theory U is an excellent lens through which to view those changes. This theory gives some insights into what happened, what might be transferable, and why people responded in the ways that they did. The events also raise a few questions about what else might be explored in change leadership theory as it interacts with Theory U. In order to best explore this, there are a few contextual dynamics that it is

⁴ The architect repeatedly told the Building Committee that the plans weren’t meant to look like a farm house and a barn; they were meant to look like a farm house and a “New England Meeting House.” The Building Committee repeatedly told the architect, “It looks like a farm house and a barn. And that is great news to us.”

important to note. These dynamics include the toughness and independence that pervades the area, the impact of rural poverty, and the present changes swirling in and around the areas itself.

Toughness and Independence

Historically, the area around Chestnut Level Presbyterian Church was settled⁵ in the early 1700s by people with a Scots-Irish background who were given land grants from William Penn. The expectation of these particular immigrants was that their presence would be a deterrent to the Native Americans who already lived in the area and the Roman Catholics who were encroaching from the south. Because the Quakers were pacifists (Penn among them), he was willing to have some independent, fighting, Scots-Irish stock in the area to deal with intruders. These people came to the area because there was tremendous poverty and insecurity in the 1600s in Scotland.⁶ As a result, it is

difficult to imagine anywhere, in the world of 1717, conditions more attractive to discontented inhabitants of the Old World than those which prevailed in the province of Pennsylvania. Here immigrants would find a hearty welcome from officials, readiness to assist newcomers in their search for lands to farm, easy financial terms for the purchase of land, and countryside fertile beyond belief (especially by comparison with Ulster), an equitable climate, an ordered community with courts and a high reputation for honesty and justice, towns and villages in which one could acquire necessary supplies, complete religious toleration, with neither Established Church nor compulsory tithes.⁷

In many ways, that long quotation perfectly describes Chestnut Level – honesty, justice, toleration, non-compulsion (they do not like taxes, no matter what the reason!), and beautiful land – this is the people and place of southern Lancaster County. While not everyone descends from those roots these days, the culture of those early immigrants continues to influence the area, the thinking, and the behavior, and the present occupants are certainly not ashamed of this past.

This kind of history has a number of implications. The first item to note is a propensity to settle matters through either active conflict or by withdrawing. When then the original settlers came to Lancaster County from the Ulster area after 1704,⁸ it was because James Logan, William Penn's land agent and provincial agent, "wanted a warlike people to fight the Indians and he got them."⁹ (There is some indication that this eventually became a problem as the immigrants who were supposed to not get along with Native Americans and Catholics also turned out (not surprisingly) to have problems getting along with other people. In other words – they didn't get along with anybody and were fiercely independent from everyone). Their first instinct was to settle matters through fighting. To put it mildly, this strategy doesn't work very well in a world where negotiation, compromise, and conversation are the expected strategies for conflict resolution. My observation is that when people who are skilled in working things out with their fists are confronted with a world that works things out through words, they have a couple

⁵ "Settled" is, of course, a word that is loaded with history and with justice issues. The reality is that the land already had people living in it with these Scots-Irish immigrants arrived. This paper doesn't explore the implications of exploring or unpacking these stories, which would be fruitful (and perhaps quite challenging) work to do with the congregations that now dot the landscape of the area.

⁶ James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 3-5.

⁷ Ibid., 186-187.

⁸ Born Fighting, pg. 131.

⁹ Ibid., pg 135-136.

of options. One is to learn a new world (which is scary). The other is to continue to use the strategies that have worked in the past. They can fight (but fighting these days is met with the coercive use of force from the government). Another strategy is to withdraw – which works for at least a while, and which I certainly observed in my work in this area. People steeped in the stories of the Scots-Irish immigration to this part of America face a difficult transition to a different world.

Another implication of these stories is the toughness of the people. But this I mean their resiliency and ability to work hard. I've been alongside women and men who can simply outwork anyone else I have met. They can start earlier, work harder, and keep going longer with difficult manual labor. It is a way they define themselves. I've seen it on the farm, in the church kitchen, while chopping wood. One of my practices was to arrive at the church early on a Sunday morning to finish worship preparation and get myself ready for the morning. There are a number of ways to narrate this – it could be that the pastor waits too long. It could be that the pastor doesn't work all week and squeezes it in on Sunday morning. In this context, the story for them was a good one – our pastor gets up early and works hard. And that story builds credibility in a world where hard work is valued. There is, however, a downside to this work ethic. J.D. Vance, in describing his upbringing in Appalachia, writes these words, "I believe we hillbillies are the toughest goddamned people on this earth. We take an electric saw to the hide of those who insult our mother. We make young men consume cotton undergarments to protect a sister's honor. But are we tough enough to do what needs to be done to help a kid like Brian? [Brian is a young man whose mother died unexpectedly and has few prospects for emotional and social support.] Are we tough enough to build a church that forces kids like me to engage with the world rather than withdraw from it? Are we tough enough to look at ourselves in the mirror and admit that our conduct harms our children?"¹⁰ The toughness that leads to incredibly hard work and an unending ability for physical labor can also prevent people from developing social and emotional skills to navigate an increasingly complex world. One of the ways I saw this was that women who had been to college and found professional positions would say to me, "My husband is backwards." That was their language to describe his physical toughness, but lack of skill in social situations.

Tough people who have been storied in ways to solve conflict through fighting have incredible gifts to bring the world. And they also face a lot of changes in a late modern world. Here is James Webb's description of people like this:

The Scots-Irish (sometimes called the Scotch-Irish) are all around you, even though you don't know it. They are a force that shapes our culture, more in the abstract power of emotion than through the argumentative force of law. In their insistent individualism they are not likely to put an ethnic label on themselves when they debate societal issues. Some of them don't even know their ethnic label, and some who do don't particularly care. They don't do for group-identity politics any more than they like to join a union. Two hundred years ago the mountains built a fierce and uncomplaining self-reliance into an already hardened people. To them, joining a group and putting themselves at the mercy of someone else's collective judgement makes about as much sense as letting the government take their guns. And nobody is going to take their guns.

All of this toughness, independence, and "fierceness" put a particular spin on the work of leadership in this rural context.

¹⁰ J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, pg. 255.

Presence and impact of rural poverty

The area around Chestnut Level is a mix of generational poverty, middle class professions (mainly teachers), and farm families (who can have significant financial resources but very little cash flow). The presence of socioeconomic challenges and significant class divisions is a defining piece of this area. This is little racial and ethnic diversity (at least on the surface). There is a heritage of deprivation and financial struggle. In terms of the history, James Webb puts it this way

they came with nothing, and for a complicated set of reasons, many of them still have nothing. The slurs stick to me, standing on these graves. Rednecks. Trailer-park trash. Racists. Cannon fodder. My ancestors. My people. Me. This people gave our country great things, including most of its definitive culture. Its bloodlines have flowered in the veins of at least a dozen presidents, and in many of our greatest soldiers. It created and still perpetuates the most distinctively American form of music. It is imbued with a unique and unforgiving code of personal honor, less ritualized but every bit as powerful as the samurai code. Its legacy is broad, in many ways the attitudes and values of the military, of working-class America, and even of the peculiarly populist form of American democracy itself.¹¹

J.D. Vance grew up in rural America more recently in a poor family with a mother who struggled with addiction issues. His relationships were unstable and he moved often. He says it more simply -- “poverty is a family tradition”¹² I saw this dynamic played out time and time again – the impact of generational poverty and its implications for family systems, access to higher education, and the (limited) opportunities for children. Finding ways to help people cross the barriers created by socio-economic levels became a theme of the ministry there (especially as the congregation began to engage in ministry to the area as it actually is as opposed to ministry in the ways that people wish it would be).

Changes swirling in and around the area

In *Hollowing Out the Middle*, which is a sociological study of life in rural Iowa, the authors say that “the biggest question facing anyone who grows up in a small town is whether he or she should leave or stay.”¹³ What these authors noticed was the “hollowing out of many of the nation’s small towns and rural communities.”¹⁴ What happened was “young people from the countryside (just like the ones from the city) who have talent and earn scholarships get air-lifted out to fulfill their potential somewhere else. Back home, those with the fewest options and resources face trying to compete in an economy in which the rules keep getting changed in the middle of the game.”¹⁵ I saw all this in rural Lancaster County as well. I had an elder once say to me, “The game has changed. It used to be that we would fill up this sanctuary in the next generation from our own kids. But our kids are now in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. The future is going to have to be different.” To this can be added the economic changes in the area – fewer people farming, manufacturing jobs that have left, and more

¹¹ James Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 8.

¹² Vance, pg. 3.

¹³ Patrick Carr and Maria Kefals, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*. Pg xii

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 1

¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 25.

people commuting (which means that there are “new” people in the area who have come for the bucolic countryside and who bring different perspectives on life and faith.) And these people, like the rest of America, are dealing with an increasingly digital world in which parents struggle to navigate parenting children who know more about their “devices” than do the adults.

James Webb says that these Scots-Irish immigrants are people fight, sing, drink, and pray¹⁶ and that they are poor but proud and “stubborn as hell.”¹⁷ All of that describes Chestnut Level quite well – people who hunt, fight, sing, drink, pray, are proud, and demonstrate a stubbornness that they cling to and will not give up. It involves a number of paradoxes – people are independent but are unsure if they have agency in this late-modern world, deep issues of poverty in an area where some of experience land values that are at a historic high, rapid changes swirling around and through an area that has a story of valuing stability and calm.

This context of toughness, independence, poverty, and change has a number of implications for leadership, I think.

- 1) Leaders arrive without trust from the people they will serve. Pastors arrive from systems that value advanced degrees and professional demeanor into a system where there is suspicion precisely because of those attributes. Rather than coming into a congregation where the attitude is “Thanks for being here. We are grateful for the presence of someone with education and experience,” pastors arrive into a system where outsiders are viewed with mistrust and people wonder about whether or not the “educated class” is out to get them.
- 2) The system is under immense pressure from the outside – dynamics that seem out of the people’s control. These are people who have a history of farming and agriculture – they are used to being able to define their own future and to take care of themselves. I had more than one elder say to me something along the lines of “When we were growing up here, we were all poor. We didn’t know any different. And besides that, we were fine. We had enough food. Really, things were OK. There wasn’t a lot extra, but we didn’t go hungry.” Now in a world where their kids are moving out and more people travel to other locations for their jobs, there is a deep anxiety about a loss of control over the future.
- 3) The traits that worked in the past might be exactly the traits that are an impediment for a good future. J.D. Vance says it this way -- “I’ve learned that the very traits that enabled my survival during childhood inhibit my success as an adult. I see conflict and I run away or prepare for a battle. This makes little sense in my current relationships, but without that attitude, my childhood would have consumed me. I learned early to spread my money out lest Mom or someone else find it and “borrow” it – some under the mattress, some in an underwear drawer, some at Mamaw’s house. When, later in life, Usha [his wife] and I consolidated finances, she was shocked to learn that I had multiple bank accounts and small past-due balances on credit cards. Usha still reminds me that not every perceived slight – from a passing motorist or neighbor critical of my dogs – is cause for a blood feud. And I always conceded, despite my raw emotions, that she’s probably right.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Webb, 253.

¹⁷ Ibid., 258.

¹⁸ Vance, pg. 246.

In the midst of all of this, the question becomes – how to lead? In the language of barns, we’ve now got a picture of the landscape around the barn and the construction of the barn – the question is what to do with what we’ve got? How do we lead in this particular place? Much of the leadership and transformation that I experienced there I have now viewed through the lens of Theory U, which will be unpacked with an eye to implications for this context.

Theory U

Theory U has five convictions which are interesting to explore in the complex, adaptive environment like southern Lancaster County. The underlying assumptions, the focus on the intervenor, the importance of listening, the insights of “presencing,” and the explanation of “shadow space” all give insights into leadership for change in the particular environment of rural Lancaster County.

Beginning Assumptions

Theory U begins with this conviction:

We live in an era of intense conflict and massive institutional failures, a time of painful endings and of hopeful beginnings. It is a time that feels as if something profound is shifting and dying while something else, as the playwright and Czech president, Vaclav Havel, puts it, wants to be born. “I think there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is being painfully born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying, and exhausting itself – while something else, still indistinct, were rising from the rubble.”¹⁹

It goes on to say that

The crisis of our time isn’t just a crisis of a single leader, organization, country, or conflict. The crisis of our time reveals the dying of an old social structure and way of thinking, an old way of institutionalizing and enacting social forms.

Frontline practitioners – managers, teachers, nurses, physicians, laborers, mayors, entrepreneurs, farmers, and business and government leaders – share a sense of the current reality. They can feel the heat of an ever-increasing workload and the pressure to do more. Many describe this as running on a treadmill or spinning in a hamster wheel.²⁰

In terms of being an accurate descriptor of what the community around CLPC is experiencing, this, as would be said in Southern Lancaster County, “hits the nail on the head.” There are signs that what once worked (at least for the people living there presently) is either already not working well or is soon not going to work well. Naming this dynamic seemed to help people be more calm about it. No longer was this enormous transition something mysterious that couldn’t be understood. It was (and is) something for which there is language. While this doesn’t mean it can be controlled, it does mean that it is possible to manage oneself and the group in it. We regularly talked about both the changes going on in the community and world and also people’s emotions about those changes. When the leadership of the

¹⁹ Otto Sharmer, Theory U, pg. 1.

²⁰ Ibid. pg. 2.

congregation found language to talk about what they were experiencing with their children not living in the area, the loss of what was for them a good past, and the anxieties that they were feeling – it helped.

I would note that Scharmer's description is both about "thinking" and "feeling." On the thinking side, the world is changing in massive ways. And on the feeling side, there is the experience of "pressure" and "spinning." It was important to allow the leadership and the congregation to do both thinking and feeling. One of the most important ways that we engaged this was through a planning process in which the congregation was involved. We (the leadership) invited the congregation to an event where they could help to dream about the future. One piece of advice I was given as I planned was that rather than the pastor showing up as "the expert" and telling them all the changes that had happened, I should invite them to name these changes and describe them. This way they were naming and discussing their own experience, rather than having an expert tell them what to do (see below). It was far more effective for the congregation to name its own reality than to have them receive a lecture than allowing the lecturer to feel intelligent and important.

Importance of the Intervenor

Theory U is a conceptual framework on change that puts a high level of importance on working on self. It notes that the "same person in the same situation doing the same thing can effect a totally different outcome depending on the inner space from where that action is coming."²¹ This is not a theory of change that calls for the leader to know and define the future. It calls for the leader to acknowledge that the future is emerging, unknown, chaotic, and will not be discovered by an expert showing up and telling people what to do. This can be profoundly counter-intuitive to persons who have gone to school (for a long time) in order to learn how to explain the world and tell people what to do about it.

In order to do this, the leader needs three things:

- 1) Open mind – We need to develop thinking that will "deal with objective facts and figures around us."
- 2) Open heart – We need to learn to "empathize with others" and "to put ourselves in someone else's shoes."
- 3) Open will – We need to "access our authentic purpose and self."²²

In order to move to a space of openness, leaders will need to let go of

- 1) Voice of Judgement²³ – Suspending one's Voice of Judgement means "shutting down (or embracing and changing) the habit of judging based on the experiences of patterns of the past in order to open up a new space of exploration, inquiry, and wonder."²⁴ Another way to put this is that this means a leader needs to stop thinking that he or she is the one who already knows the answers. This is incredibly difficult for people who have continued to

²¹ Ibid, pg. 27.

²² Ibid. pg. 41.

²³ Ibid, pg. 43

²⁴ Ibid. 393.

education themselves in original languages of the Bible, historical criticism of texts, technical words for theology, and the technical aspects of preaching and public speaking.

- 2) Voice of Cynicism – This means that the leaders let go of “all type of emotional acts of distancing.”²⁵ Emotions of “disconnection such as cynicism, arrogance, callousness”²⁶ are recognized and released. This seems very important in system where social distance is already established with words like “Reverend” and “Pastor.” It is a world where the people with whom the leader is working already experience a lack of agency in the world, so activating their cynicism is often a danger.
- 3) Voice of Fear – Leaders acknowledge that it is difficult to enter into the act of “letting go of what we have.”²⁷ We are afraid – afraid of what will happen in the future and afraid of what people will say about us. In order to lead well we must cease to listen to the voice that speaks of the “fear of letting go of familiar self and world; fear of going forth; fear of surrendering into a space of nothingness.”²⁸

I found that I often had a choice between focusing on process and focusing on outcome. And that to be an effective leader for change, I often had to let go of talking about outcomes and be a person who focused on the process. To be honest, the biggest mistakes I made seemed to be when I became so clear about a certain outcome that I stopped focusing on process and communication. Twice we had a volunteer church leader who was not longer functioning in his²⁹ position. Both times the leadership decided (rightly so in my opinion) to ask the person to step down. And both times I made the move from “process” to “outcome” and missed the “open heart” piece of the change. On the positive side, I distinctly remember an elder telling me as we were navigating adding a worship service that what the congregation needed from me was not instruction on what to do because they would be figure that out themselves. What the congregation needed from me was hopefulness, creativity, and courage (which corresponds almost exactly with letting go of fear, judgement, and cynicism.)

I once remarked that sometimes it seemed like the most important thing I could do in order to pastor in this environment was to be emotionally and spiritually healthy. While I said it slightly “tongue in cheek,” in retrospect it seems quite true. Judgmentalism, anger, despair, cynicism, fear – these emotional blockages were far stronger threats to a good future than the knowledge based threats of “not-knowing” or “not understanding.” Another way to put this is that pastoral adage that “people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” But the twist on that adage in our present transitional age is that no one “knows,” and the key is to find ways to be co-journeymen into an unknown future.

On the leadership development side, I discovered that when it came to training emerging lay leaders in the congregation, the most important thing I could do for them was to ground them in biblical stories of hopefulness and resilience. They didn’t need principles for church growth; they needed spaces that

²⁵ Ibid. pg. 43.

²⁶ Ibid. pg. 246.

²⁷ Ibid. 44.

²⁸ Ibid. 246.

²⁹ Chestnut Level Church regularly had men and women in leadership and is committee to that. In both of these instances, the leader was male.

helped them trust God and move into areas of confidence and courage for themselves. This focus on the interior condition of the leader became a theme of the work at Chestnut Level Church, because to do the kind of work they were called to do, they needed to be people who were creative and resilient.

The best example I saw of this was a time when I walked into an evening supper and saw a group of deacons meeting with the adults in a family who had come to request financial help with rent. In the past, there was a temptation to either give some money or to “write off” a family like this as “people who just wanted money.” Instead, these deacons were gathering to listen and to discover more deeply how to help the family – support for the children, training for the parents, emotional support during a job transition. The deacons had let go of their own cynicism and fear and were working hard to create a space where something genuinely new could happen in the family’s life. And the way the pastor knew was because I happened to show up when it was happening!

Learning to Listen

Otto Scharmer talks about four levels of listening:

- 1) Downloading – In this type of listening people say things like “yeah, I already know that.” When they do this type of listening, they are only “reconfirming habitual judgements.”³⁰ When people listen like this, they are positioning themselves to argue for their own perspective, but not to work together on a solution for everyone involved.
- 2) Object-based or factual listening – Here people say things like “Ooh, look at that!” They are able to “focus on what differs from what [they] know”, ask questions, and gather facts that help them make good decisions.³¹
- 3) Empathic listening – At this level, people say to one other “Oh yes, I know how you feel.” Their perception shifts and they “move from staring at an objective world of things, figures, and facts into the story of a living being, a living system, and living self.”³² Rather than want just their own outcomes, people move into a space where they want something that works for others as well.
- 4) Generative listening – In this deepest level of listening people say “I cannot express what I experience in words. My whole being has slowed down. I feel more quiet and present more my real self. I am connected to something larger than myself.”³³

About these types of listening, Sharmer says

“When you operate from Listening 1 (downloading), the conversation reconfirms what you already knew. You reconfirm your habits of thought: “There he goes again!” When you operate from Listening 2 (factual listening), you disconfirm what you already know and notice what is new out there: “Boy, this looks so different today!” When you choose to operate from Listening 3 (empathic listening), your perspective is redirected to seeing the situation through the eyes of another: “Boy, yes, now I really understand how you feel about it. I can sense it now too.” And finally, when you choose to operate from Listening 4 (generative listening), you realize that by

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 11

³¹ Ibid. pg. 12

³² Ibid. pg. 12.

³³ Ibid. pg. 12.

the end of the conversation you are no longer the same person you were when it began. You have gone through a subtle but profound change that has connected you to a deeper source of knowing, including the knowledge of your best future possibility and self.”³⁴

It our work at Chestnut Level Church, it was crucial to find ways to get leaders to listen – to one another, to the world, to God. Without that, we simply kept having the same conversation over and over again. In some sense, I think that this was the primary work in the “barn” of the Sanctuary and the Family Life Center. These places were at their best when they were holding environments for people to listen deeply. Scharmer doesn’t say this, but I would say that the key ingredient in moving through levels is trust. We had to learn how to trust one another. This involved two intentional commitments in our leadership meetings, structural work around our decision making, and ongoing diligence in terms of trust for the moderator/pastor. Our internal commitments in the leadership had to do with how we attending to one another. There was a clear commitment 1) not to have “parking lot meetings” and 2) to build relationships in the leadership team. Parking lot meetings were defined as “going outside after the meeting and saying to just one or a few of the people “well, that was a bad idea” or “can you believe they decided to do that?” We decided we wouldn’t do that to one another. And more than once, someone took a breath (and the risk) and said, “I disagree” or “I think differently.” Almost always this led the group in a very different direction and to a different conclusion. And almost every time it felt very scary to the person who was speaking up. Our leadership groups (Session, Deacons, staff, etc.) also spent intentional time in relationship building. I arrived to groups that started either with a brief prayer or with a devotional read by a member. When we shifted to having people listen to one another’s lives and to pray for one another, we shifted the dynamic of the meetings and the relationships – and people started listening to one another’s perspectives on the decisions that were being made.

We also had to figure out ways to modify the structure of our decision making. The Presbyterian Church operates according to Robert’s Rules, which in some sense pushes people towards level 1 listening. Robert’s Rules calls for people to debate a proposal from one person. Modifications are possible but cumbersome and involve saying directly to another person “I don’t agree with what you’ve proposed.” As we developed ways for a proposal for action to be put on a piece of newsprint and then have people talk about it and modify it and strengthen it, people were able to let go of their initial ideas, offer improvements and not be so closely identified with any particular thought. This, however, requires different skills from the moderator (me!) because I found myself synthesizing opinions and data, offering ways to bring things together, and pointing out gaps where we needed more conversation. I wasn’t just pointing to the next person to speak and making sure that people didn’t talk over one another. And I certainly wasn’t pushing my own agenda. This shift in leadership style leads to the third move that occurred to facilitate “Theory U levels of listening.”

To develop the level of trust in the groups to listen at these deeper levels meant that there needed to be profound trust in the moderator. If the moderator makes a proposals of about **how** the group is going to work together, the groups needs to believe that this is not a subversive way of getting the people to move to the moderator’s unspoken and hidden outcome. In an environment where there is a deeply rooted story of suspicion of authority and also a lack of confidence that people have the skills to move through conflict with words and ideas, it took years of listening and pastoral work before I was trusted

³⁴ Otto Scharmer, Theory U: Executive Summary, pg. 3.

when I said, “What about if we use this process” or “how about we list all the ideas and then see if there is a way to combine them.” I had to listen for a long time (individually and corporately) before they trusted that I was genuinely asking them to listen to one another and that I wasn’t just trying to force my will upon theirs.

Presencing

For Scharmer, presencing (a word of his invention) “denotes the ability of individuals and collective entities to link directly to their highest future potential.”³⁵ It is his ability to describe genuine creativity when a group comes up with something new. He says that it is different from reacting (which is when we “respond by operating on existing habits and routines”), redesigning (“changing the underlying structure and process”) or even reframing (“rethinking and reframing one’s fundamental assumptions about the situation at issue”).³⁶ While responses of reacting, redesigning, and reframing can be the proper response to some situations, they reflect on the past and are inadequate “to succeed in an unprecedentedly turbulent, complex, and rapidly changing global context.”³⁷

Often, it seems to me that it is quite slippery to talk about this concept (hence the new name!). It involves at least these two items:

- 1) The power of intention – I think that he means determination and a group of people committed to making something happen.³⁸ Two things are present here – it must be a group who wants something new. And they must genuinely want something different.
- 2) Letting come – He calls for observation, retreating and reflecting, then “old attitudes must die in order for new ideas to move into the picture more clearly and more fully”³⁹

In terms of this concept, I find a number of things important about it:

- 1) It acknowledges the challenge of doing something genuinely new. It is rare and a lot of work to do something that is not just a repetition of an old idea. My own experience was that even when we were trying to do something new, it often didn’t happen. And then genuine newness sometimes occurred when we were not looking. Chestnut Level Church worked for a long time to develop a mid-week meal with children’s programming. This is hardly a new idea. It wasn’t until I walked into a room of 150 people eating supper together and realized that 45 of them were not people who came on Sunday morning that I realized that we had done something genuinely new in terms of outreach – that there were truly people there who were not part of a previous church community (and might not be interested in being part of one then – but they were there).
- 2) It highlights the importance of space for non-directional and non-linear thinking. We developed a habit of starting leadership retreats by sending people on walks to think about the life of the congregation and what would be good for us to address. The instructions

³⁵ Scharmer, Theory U, pg. 51

³⁶ Ibid, pg. 51.

³⁷ Ibid, pg. 51.

³⁸ Ibid. pg. 197.

³⁹ Ibid. pg. 199.

were broad and non-specific. We didn't say "Go off and think about whether or not to add this staff position. Or go consider how to get this particular program started." (These kinds of conversations were important at some point, but not at the beginning.) This kind of open thinking space was unusual for leaders to experience. It had them thinking of their own ideas and not just evaluative ideas of staff. And it seemed to me one of the only ways for them to enter into spaces of creativity and newness.

- 3) This idea highlights a significant move that we made in terms of the place of Scripture in our leadership conversations. When I arrived, it seemed to me that Scripture was either absent from conversations about the future of the congregation or it was present as a "club." By this I mean that people would show up and say "We need to add this program because the Bible says this." And then if people disagreed with the particular program, they were disagreeing with the Bible. What I discovered was that this doesn't actually get people to agree with the proposal, it just gets them to be quiet in the meeting and vocal afterwards. And, honestly, if the choices are "scripture as club" or "no scripture," it doesn't surprise me that people stay away from coercive behaviors. So we developed practices of "Dwelling with the Word," where we read Scripture and then had people talk about what they heard God saying in that passage. There was not a long list of questions that led to certain conclusions. And we tried to pick passages that helped us do the above work (attending to relationships, listening, being creative). This became a way for us to interact with God's story and make connections to the story we were living.

Mostly, though, the concept of presencing has helped me to articulate that we are hoping and searching for ways for genuine life and newness to enter through our work of leadership and change. And in an environment where there is so much change pressing in from the outside, looking for this kind of space is crucial.

Shadow Space

No leadership for change works without addressing issues of resistance and negativity. Frankly, one of my questions about some perspectives on leadership is their lack of attention to this dynamic. I have no stories of leadership where something emerged easily, was universally embraced, and went on to be an amazing success with everyone pleased with the process, the outcome, and the relationships (no matter how success is defined). One of the reasons I value Theory U is that it attends to this dynamic of struggle (even though I have questions about this description as well). Scharmer calls this space of resistance "abscencing" and says that it is the "cycle of not seeing and of destroying rather than creating."⁴⁰ He says that the "bigger the gap between exterior system complexity and the interior capacity to access the deeper streams of emergence, the more likely a system will go off track and revert to a destructive space of "anti-emergence."⁴¹ When we are manipulating, abusing others, or stuck in old patterns of thinking,⁴² then we are in this shadow space and what is genuinely new will not emerge. To add to this, Scharmer says that "we can flip or revert from the social space of deep emergence into the dark space of antiemergence anytime, anywhere. It happens whenever we lose our

⁴⁰ Ibid, pg. 247.

⁴¹ Ibid. pg. 247.

⁴² Ibid. pg.345.

full attention and wakefulness and or firm grounding in a selfless and serving intent.”⁴³ Acknowledging the ability of a person or a group to flip like this is sobering. It is also helpful. It gives a groundedness to change leadership and gives the ability to talk about what is going on inside each of us as we seek a new future.

I saw this shadow space emerge quite clearly whenever we tried something new. Whatever we did always activated anxieties. And if we were unprepared for it, it derailed us. When the leadership decided to propose the addition of a pastor to the staff structure, they also informed the congregation of plans to add screens to the sanctuary. In terms of cost and congregational impact, adding staff is far larger. But in terms of emotional story, adding screens to a sanctuary that was built in the 1700s is far more likely to send people to a shadow space! Afterwards, one of our leaders said to me, “Well, if you want to do something big, just propose something else bigger at the same time. And you’ll get one of them!” What this theory names is this reality – that we need to attend to our own fears as well as the fears of others. And that we need to attend to the ability of people to manipulate, abuse, and coerce – hence the importance of making a commitment to no parking lot meetings!

Early on in my pastorate at Chestnut Level, I started getting anonymous notes with opinions about actions that I or the Session had taken. The Session decided that they would deal directly with anyone about any matter, but that they would not receive anonymous correspondence. I remember literally shaking with anxiety when I announced that to the congregation – wondering whether I was going to unleash a tidal wave of resistance to my leadership. Looking back, I realize that I was acknowledging the reality of this kind of shadow space, naming it, and give people a way to address their concerns in a healthy and positive way. I think that this attention to the dynamics of how we were going to relate to one another was far more important than any particular programmatic idea that I or any other leader had.

Chestnut Level Presbyterian Church has been able to engage its context in creative new ways – some of them the common strategies of changing worship style and strengthening children’s and youth programming. But the deeper ways have been the openness to an older couple to give up a long cherished pew to make way for a sound board, the ability of deacons to enter in to the lives of an impoverished family, and the ability of a congregation to welcome people into an ongoing weekly supper without expecting anything from them in return. There is increasing trust in leadership, a sense of agency in the world, a willingness to talk instead of withdraw, and an engagement with poverty in the community. These markers are more difficult to quantify than giving and attendance, but they might just be more important in terms of seeing a congregation enter more fully into the Kingdom of God. And how does that happen? It seems to me that the insights of Theory U – particularly the ability to acknowledge the massive cultural shifts occurring around and to us, the attention to the emotional and spiritual health of the leadership, learning to listen, looking for newness to emerge, and attending to the reality of resistance – these are clues into how this can happen. Like any theory, this doesn’t tell the entire story. In order to push our knowledge forward and to develop how congregations can think about leading change, I was to pose four questions to Theory U.

⁴³ Ibid. pg. 269.

Questions for the Future:

- 1) How does Theory U function in a system that requires votes and values a particular set of parliamentary rules? The Presbyterian Church functions according to Robert's Rules, which was developed in the social world of the mid-19th century. Theory U is never specific about the threshold at which a proposal becomes approved for action. There seems to be some sense that there will be consensus in the group, everyone will "know" this is the right idea. However, if the rules say that "over 50%" means that we are permitted to move forward, what do we do? It seems to me that most congregations function with an informal set of assumptions – no one does a building project with 55% approval. Would anyone hire a staff member if 33% of the board is opposed? It could be that this means that the system needs to be changed. It certainly needs to be discussed.
- 2) Given the phenomenological approach of Theory U,⁴⁴ what do we say about the role of Scripture? Another way to put it is – what do we do with our narrative from the past that we say informs the present narrative? In my perspective, Theory U gives great room for the Holy Spirit (in our language). It orients us positively towards the future and opens us to try new ideas and want new initiatives. However, Otto Scharmer is very suspicious of monotheistic religion and calls it an absolute that leads to direct violence and cultural violence.⁴⁵ He identifies the belief in "one almighty, omniscient, and omnipresent God" with "religious fundamentalism" that causes "terrorism" and the idea that "infidels must be killed."⁴⁶ At the very least, this raises questions about what people who say the Apostles' Creed (I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth...) say to this understanding of how the world works. It may be that both the theory needs deepening in terms of how it deals with religious belief and those of us who are religious believers need to deal with (at least some) of the implications of our beliefs.
- 3) Dealing with competing values – I'm wondering how this framework helps us to navigate the kind of adaptive work where there are multiple values and the group needs to decide which one takes precedence? I think that this theory is very helpful with barriers to internal and external change like cynicism, fear, judgement. It helps to help us embrace the future with hope and anticipation, but I think that it is fuzzy about navigating competing good ideas.
- 4) Finally, in conjunction with Theory U, what do we say about human fallibility/limitation and about human sin? In other words – how do we account for the conviction that not every idea is going to be a good idea and that even when we have good ideas, people get sideways with each other. There are two issues here – there seems to be an assumption that when there is presencing and experimenting, the new future is going to emerge. But I've got a story about an entire process of coming up with a building concept that almost made it to a congregation vote that was not, in the end, a good idea. It seems like there has got to be an ability to say that our human capacities have limits – sometimes we all work together and the concept is not a good idea, even though it seems like a good idea every step of the way. When I add in the theological concept of the sovereignty of God, I can make sense of these kinds of experiences – God is up to something different than what I/we conceived. God saw things that I/we didn't. I/we have a

⁴⁴ See page 19 and 30-31 where Scharmer identifies this philosophy as foundational to his thinking.

⁴⁵ Scharmer, Theory U, pg. 249.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pg. 249.

finite perspective. I don't know how to explain that inside the conceptual framework of Theory U. Another way to unpack this would be to ask the question of what Theory U does with failure – does it simply mean that the person/group didn't work the process correctly? Or can there be other stories about what happened? To add to this, I want to engage the theological concept of sin. To some extent, Theory U has language for resistance and negativity. There is “absencing.” However, this seems mainly to be externalized and runs the danger of making anyone with questions about an idea into a person who is in the “shadow space.” In Theory U it seems possible, to me, to sideline anyone with concerns about an idea into a person who is unwilling to embrace the future. Another concern in this regard is the mixed motives of someone advocating for change – it seems to me that Theory U runs the danger of making a hero into the person or persons advocating for what they think is the emerging future and making those who have concerns into villains. Theologically, I think that answer to these concerns is a robust doctrine of sin that recognizes the mixture of goodness and self-centeredness in everyone who is involved. If this is the case, we can then move to the theological resources of forgiveness and reconciliation when a group runs into relationship trouble that can occur when there is genuine difference in perspective and opinion.

Broadly speaking, I think that Theory U has excellent insights into work with congregations, particularly in areas where there is rural poverty and a history of independence and lack of trust. It helps to identify issues of deep change and gives clues to the way leaders navigate through lack of trust, engaging

genuine creativity,
and addressing issues
of resistance. As

church leaders work
to integrate their own
perspectives on how
God works in the
world for a new
future to emerge, we
can start to see ways
that Christians
concepts of Scriptural
authority, sin,
forgiveness, and
God's sovereignty can
inform the ways that



Figure 4: Barn and Field of Member of Chestnut Level Church

Christian leaders

work with others for God's good and new future to emerge in God's time and in God's way. At Chestnut Level Church, people came into the barn to talk, figure out the future. And they have emerged to care for the fields.

Works Cited:

Carr, Patrick and Maria Kefalas. *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.

Leyburn, James G. *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962.

Scharmer, C. Otto. *Addressing The Blind Spot of Our Time*. An executive summary of the new book by Otto Scharmer *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, 2007.

Scharmer, C. Otto. *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publishers, 2009.

Vance, JD. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2016.

Webb, James. *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*. New York: Broadway Books, 2004.