
REAL MINISTRY: LEADING CHURCH CHANGE BY TURNING TO THE REIGN OF GOD

JEAN HALLIGAN VANDERGRIFT

Abstract

This article focuses on optimal leadership for transforming congregations that are facing severe decline as they cultivate new life and faithfulness. It derives from practical theological research within three congregations that navigated this cultural change and adopts the label *real ministry*, used by the pastors, for the kind of leadership that fosters this outcome. It argues that the telos of real ministry is to lead congregations away from internal self-preoccupation and toward witness to the reign of God happening: the good news of Jesus Christ, exercising leadership that is consistent with this end aim, like a dance of three turns to God—discerning, integrating, and bearing witness to the reign of God.

“For me as a pastor, what keeps me going through really tough times is that we’re doing real ministry. We have the opportunity to do that, to really make a significant witness for Christ in this community.”

Sheila Smith-Dugan’s motivation in accepting the call as minister of Hilltown Christian Church was to do *real ministry*, which for her includes “meeting peoples’ needs where they’re really hurting,” a definition to which she later added “a change of life for individuals.” Twenty years ago, Hilltown Christian, a 110-year-old, predominately Caucasian congregation was in severe numerical decline and on the fence about whether to stay in Hilltown, a struggling urban village in the shadow of a major Northeastern city, or relocate to a distant and mono-culturally white suburb. Dealing with the dilemma of its internal condition and its external social context, the membership had also slipped into a corporate depression, unable even to muster the energy to search for a new minister. Upon their regional

minister's recommendation, the leaders interviewed Smith-Dugan, and when she asked why they stayed in Hilltown, she resonated to an elder's response: "Jesus has called us to be here."

In partnership with its new pastor, this congregation decided to remain in place and do the type of ministry that would truly welcome new people. To that end, it came to be multicultural, more accurately mirroring its surrounding community. Hilltown church also responded in faith to the increasing youth violence in its town with multiple outreaching projects and ministries of hope. By 2010, the ratio of people of color to Caucasian at Hilltown Christian had grown to forty/sixty, reaching fifty/fifty in its leadership. It has held its own financially, although average attendance numbers have decreased slightly. At the same time, its spiritual health is strong and inspirational. Indeed, Hilltown Christian Church is now considered one of the most vibrant churches in its region. Its guiding vocational statement carries three marks for its real ministry: "Interracial, Intergenerational, and Into Jesus."

The other two pastors of the three case studies that I researched on congregational transformation¹ use the exact same phrase for the reasons they agreed to pastor their respective faith communities. Dave Hartley said that he wanted to do real ministry, which meant to him being able to assist in the transformation of individuals—"changing lives"—and growing the congregation. He found the leaders of River Ridge Christian Church, which had undergone an intentional interim ministry before they found him, to be ready and "teachable" to this end.

Prior to its interim work and Pastor Hartley's arrival, this Midwestern congregation in a small cluster of towns had not been able to decide whether to stay in downtown River Ridge and continue "to age in place," or to move further away in hopes of changing its trajectory of decline. Hartley cast a third option, a vision the congregation adopted: to

¹In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), this phrase denotes the work of congregational revitalization or redevelopment in declining congregations and is one of four objectives of the denomination's vision for the year 2020.

leave its historic building, even before it had a buyer, and become nomadic,² renting space in the surrounding neighborhoods as would a new church that was just getting started. Another goal was to attract younger generations and families, so among the many changes during their five years of transformation, one was to modify its worship style to an entirely contemporary one. The demographics of the congregation have indeed turned younger; worship attendance has increased, and the group has diversified economically. Though it has worked on being more welcoming, River Ridge Christian has remained predominantly Caucasian. The statement of vocation by which it steers its real ministry is “Praise God, Serve Others, Grow in Christ.”

For John Curtis, to carry out “real ministry, where people’s lives are changed” has always been his heart’s desire, and upon taking up the pastorate at Cityside Christian Church, he envisioned it becoming “a change agent” in its community. During the years of racial segregation, the church had no say in its location; it was planted south of downtown by an ecumenical group of Caucasian church leaders from this mega metropolis. Even when the laws changed and neighborhoods opened, this middle-class African American congregation stayed where it was. Once the apartments next door were converted to HUD housing units, however, the new lower-class residents did not find themselves welcome at Cityside church, nor did the accompanying social problems meet their match in corresponding congregational ministries. According to Pastor Curtis, Cityside during those years abandoned its vocation as “a church for all people.”

By contrast, under the transformational leadership of Curtis these last eleven years, the congregation took extraordinary measures to heal its internal conflicts and relational dynamics, turned from protecting itself from reaching out to its troubled next-door neighbors,

²Bill Easum and Pete Theodore, *The Nomadic Church: Grow Your Congregation Without Owning the Building* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2005).

reconceived itself as the “heart” of Cityside, and as a result, has turned around its decline from just twenty in average worship attendance to a high of 130. Due to these intentional changes of congregational culture, this faith community, like River Ridge, has also become somewhat younger and more economically diverse. As a synopsis of its real ministry vocation, Cityside Christian recites weekly in worship: “We are Disciples of Christ, preaching, teaching, and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.”

Sheila Smith-Dugan, Dave Hartley, John Curtis, and their congregations are quite different from each other in geographical setting, numerical growth, ethnicity, gender, religious heritage, and theological leanings. Of the three ministers, Smith-Dugan is the only woman and the only one raised within the Disciples denomination. She considers Hilltown to be moderate to liberal on the theological spectrum. For his part, Hartley started in the acapella Churches of Christ, moved to the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and settled among the Disciples branch of the Stone-Campbell movement.³ He tags River Ridge Christian as “eclectic” theologically, but evangelical to moderate. The only African American among the three, Curtis also chose the Disciples, after a Methodist beginning and a “Bapti-costal” adulthood, as he refers to it. He calls Cityside conservative to evangelical in theology.

Despite their marked diversity from each other, before they embarked upon their real ministries of transformation, all of these local churches were struggling with severe numerical and spiritual decline, suffering from varied forms and degrees of conflict and angst, and demonstrating

³The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is one of three Christian groups indigenous to the United States that trace their beginnings to the Stone-Campbell Movement of the early nineteenth century. The movement is named for the founders, Barton W. Stone of Kentucky, leader of the “Christians,” and Alexander Campbell of Virginia, leader of the “Disciples of Christ.” The intent of both groups on the Appalachian frontier was to restore Christian unity by returning to the principles of the early church in the Bible and doing away with creeds as tests of inclusion. The two other groups of the Stone-Campbell Movement that parted company across time are the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, and the Churches of Christ.

precarious states of institutional viability. Amid significant divergences from each other in theology and specific choices of strategic practice, all of these pastors led their congregations into an enduring change of congregational culture to the same stated end. Doing real ministry was their motivation and the magnet that drew and attached them to their respective congregational sites, as compromised and confused about church as these congregations had become.

From the ministers' own words, we can compile certain descriptive characteristics of *real ministry*: welcome, changed lives, meeting community needs, congregational vibrancy and growth, and witness for Christ. In addition, the term *real ministry* connotes the high value that these pastors put on authenticity and the integrity of belief and practice. They were longing to experience and enact the satisfaction that eludes other ministers and congregations: coherence among the gospel, ministry, and being church.

While these earmarks give us hints as to the nature of real ministry in the congregational setting, my study dug deeper and asked what real ministry looks like on the ground as the clergy and laity led their congregations in this direction, out of decline and into vital faithfulness? What changes took hold in their corporate beliefs and everyday practices that over time established a new, different, and enduring culture of church? In other words, what actually changed about their *lived* ecclesiology,⁴ and what kind of leadership ushered in this new ecclesial identity⁵ that they

⁴For supporting background to the concept of lived ecclesiology, see *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); James R. Nieman, "Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6(2002): 198–225; Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 20–1, who defines "local theology" as grown from the dialectic between gospel, church, and culture.

⁵"Ecclesial identity," as it is framed here, is not only the formal, doctrinal verbalizations of the nature of the church, or the touchstones of denominational polity, but the informal, indistinct, and sometimes spotty fragments of a theology of church, of which some parishioners and some

call *real ministry*? These questions will be addressed in this article.

Method of Investigation

This treatment draws upon practical theological analysis that I carried out with these three circles of faith within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination. Committed to theology on the ground, I followed a practical theological discipline of research. It is the particular work of practical theology to: (1) carry out in-depth, empirical, descriptive analysis of situations, organizations, or the current cultural context, (2) engage in hearty consultation with theologically authoritative resources, and (3) propose robust implications for strategic practice that integrate theology and practice in relationship to surrounding contextual realities.

The general offices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) had not published at that time benchmarks for success in transformation ministries. Therefore, I designed a systematic selection process, contacting each of the thirty-three regional ministers plus other leaders in the denomination for recommendations of congregations that had made “significant progress” in transformation, according to the recommenders’ ideas of success. Of the total of ninety-four recommended congregations, I narrowed the list to twenty-nine by research on their Web sites, and then examined their congregational statistics, which condensed the list to sixteen. Further nuances reduced the list to six, five of which agreed to be considered. Upon interviewing their pastors and key leaders by phone, I settled on three that met the project’s criteria and agreed to enter a research covenant with them.⁶ In order to guarantee

parishes are only dimly aware. The amalgamation, though, melds into an overall, operating ecclesial self-understanding for a congregational circle, which changes over the course of a process of congregational transformation from decline into renewal.

⁶ The broad criteria of suitability for study was to: (a) self-identify as involved in congregational transformation, (b) be recommended by at least two witnesses, for instance, a regional minister or denominational staff or clergy colleague, (c) be engaged in this work long enough to register a measure of

honesty and openness on the part of participants, I granted them anonymity and employed pseudonyms for persons and locations.

I took up residence in each locale for forty-five days, conducting ethnographic observation and qualitative research through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. More concretely, I interviewed ninety-four persons: eighty-one parishioners (averaging twenty-seven per congregation) and thirteen denominational leaders. My interview guides privileged narrative, allowing the case study congregations to tell their own stories of change first, without presupposing findings or trying to fit them into a preconstructed thesis. Through retrospective verbal interpretations, the interviews covered a dozen questions, including what had changed from before to the present about the way they were living church, particularly within their beliefs, practices, and relationships to the surrounding communities, plus what had been the key stages of change, the points of conflict and surprise, who had led the proceedings, how the congregations had known they needed transformation in the first place, and what results would tell them that they had been successful.⁷

The Ecclesial Nature of Real Ministry

I discovered that the nature of real ministry in transforming congregations is wrapped up in the changed ecclesial identity that they negotiate over time in their internal theopraxis,⁸ and this in relationship to God and to

quantitative and qualitative progress, (d) be located in the same or similar regions, yet contrasting in either local context, size, or ethnicity, (e) be able to remember the state of decline and verbalize how things have changed with the transformation process, and (f) be willing to be studied and work with me.

⁷Sally K. Gallagher and Chelsea Newton, "Defining Spiritual Growth: Congregations, Community, and Connectedness," *Sociology of Religion* 70(3) (Fall 2009): 236. This article employs the method of retrospective verbal interpretations, which captures my "before and after transformation" queries.

⁸I coined the term *theopraxis* to signal the unique combination of prevailing corporate beliefs (theology) and practices (praxis) that, like strands, weave together and shape the way of life in a congregation. A congregation's distinct

the surrounding context. The pastors within these sites, in partnership with the lay leaders, executed multiple cultural adjustments within twelve areas of congregational life, including that of their missional relationship to their neighbors and their spiritual communion with God, according to the vision of a customized, guiding vocation statement. Their changes resulted in an overall shift of lived ecclesiology—the grassroots way a local congregation practices church.

Before their intentional changes, all three congregations demonstrated an everyday ecclesial identity in which the church was conceived as an end in itself, created primarily for the members and their needs, while *afterward*, their understanding of what church is supposed to be and the manner in which they lived out this ecclesiology was less preoccupied with just themselves and meeting their own needs, and more about bearing outward-reaching witness to the benefit of others. As Janet, a former board chair at River Ridge Christian put it: “Then, we were like, ‘Hey! We have our community and this is all we really need,’ but now it’s like, ‘No! This isn’t really what God has put us on this earth for.’” I, therefore, labeled the transformation of lived ecclesial identity that occurs over time in such congregations as one from “Church for Us” to “Church for Witness.” In sum, after a number of years of being engaged in transformation, the three are now carrying out the *real ministry* for which their pastors had yearned, a ministry manifested by an ecclesial identity of outward-reach and welcome, through which lives are being changed, community needs met, dynamic spiritual growth reported, and the good news of the reign of God celebrated.

Two of Twelve Areas of Changed Congregational Life

Space does not allow me to describe the twelve areas of congregational life that dramatically shifted,⁹ much less in

theopraxis is the mix of what the people in the parish do and what they say they believe.

⁹The twelve areas are, in alphabetical order: (1) the congregation’s attitude toward change; (2) its identity, purpose, mission, and vision—vocation; (3)

their nuance, or to report the respective alterations in corporate beliefs and practices that comprise them, but for their pertinence to the focus of this article, I will highlight two: Leadership and Spirituality. One of the things that changed from before to the present, and is in ongoing development in all the sites, is the style and nurture of leadership, both clergy and lay. The Leadership code was the most prominent arising from the data.¹⁰

During their prior existence as Church for Us, the three congregations relied upon a small cadre of lay leaders, overworked and undernourished spiritually, plus a beleaguered minister, to maintain the current program and practices, and merely keep the doors open as long as they could. The nominating process had become a chore; new leaders were few and their contributions thwarted, adding to the climate of anxiety. While the laity depended upon the minister for specialized duties and said that they wanted him or her to lead, this leadership was questioned and resisted at every turn, creating a distrustful tension that permeated the system.

With concerted transformation efforts, the Church for Witness congregation now benefits from strong servant leadership that works as a team toward the discerned congregational vocation. They have given attention to cultivating spiritual gifts and connecting lay leaders to corresponding ministries. The pastor, staff, and laity exercise authority in the congregation within its norms, which they have taken time to articulate, clarify, and uphold. The pastor is directive in leadership when it comes to initiating changes that contribute to the agreed-upon vision, but remains collaborative and communicative. The congregation now

institutional viability and numerical growth; (4) leadership; (5) quality of congregational life and interpersonal relationships; (6) relationship to God—practice of spirituality; (7) relationship to the church beyond the congregation; (8) relationship to the context; (9) structures of organization and decision-making; (10) teaching and learning; (11) welcome, hospitality, and diversity; (12) worship, music, and preaching.

¹⁰In the project's master code list, "leadership" ranked number one, used to describe text 504 times. This header code was augmented by 443 related, subsidiary codes.

takes time to appreciate the leaders, and the clergy and lay leaders practice spiritual disciplines to connect to God and corporately discern this divine direction. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of members recognize the hand of God at work in their rebirth, and this is a significant cultural shift, thereby organically connecting Leadership to another area of congregational change: Spirituality.

To elaborate, *before* its intentional labor in transformation, the Church for Us congregation would engage in secularized conversations and practices without explicit attention to its relationship with God. Parishioners considered this relationship to be a private, individual matter, and uncomfortable to broach, with talk about and with God limited to the context of Sunday worship and liturgy. *Afterward*, the interviewees identified as a significant change that the congregation now believes God to be active in their transformation and particularly concerned that the congregation meet its call in mission, working out a greater purpose and plan through it—calling, empowering, and leading them through the Holy Spirit into the future. Adopting spiritual disciplines and varied forms of prayer, the Church for Witness seeks God’s leadership for the decisions they must make and the proposals for ongoing change.

These two areas of changed congregational life are intertwined and reinforcing. Presently, congregants affirm that the Divine is leading their changing life and witness as church, and they are partnering with God to this end. Participants called this loving Transformer “God,” “Jesus Christ,” or “Holy Spirit,” mixing these names freely and implying that all three holy manifestations were in relationship, even dancing with each other, guiding the congregational bodies into the future. While human leaders did indeed lead in these congregations, it was understood that together they are living into the experience of God as the actual leader of real ministry—the leader of the ecclesial dance and the agent of their transformation.

To What Does a Church for Witness Testify?

I put the data details of what actually changed about their corporate beliefs and practices into conversation with biblical texts that participants cited and with documents from Disciples tradition concerning the church.¹¹ Theological reflection upon this scriptural testimony and church tradition helped me name the telos that was all along embedded in this massive change of congregational culture and, as such, ought to serve, I contend, as the explicit goal of real ministry.

The participants in this study, true to the ethos of the Disciples of Christ denomination, place a high premium on the Bible, holding it to be “the major authoritative resource for Christian life and practice.”¹² Interviewees, clergy and lay, identified 145 Scripture texts that informed and helped them interpret their journeys of transformation, with thirty-one of these repeated across the cases; I exegeted three of these. The uppermost theme in the selected passages from Isaiah, Acts, and Revelation is the ultimacy or sovereignty of God, with the two New Testament readings identifying this as the “kingdom” or “reign of God.” Upon closer inspection, the understanding of *sovereignty* therein is more verb than noun, that is, God ruling more than the territorial realm of God, and the three texts describe the divine way of leading as loving and countercultural. When compared to other gods or earthly monarchs, the God of these books of the Bible acts for the divine purpose in new and unexpected ways.

A second, integrated theme surfacing from these texts is that the vocation of the people of God and of the church is to be witness in the world to God’s rule, and for the church to witness to this rule in the manner that Jesus embodied

¹¹Is. 43–44, Acts 1:1–14, and Rev. 1–3. The primary denominational documents consulted were: *The Christian System* (1835, revised 1839) by Alexander Campbell, *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (1969), a collective of denominational reports entitled *Words to the Church on Ecclesiology* (1979); *On Witness, Mission and Unity* (1981); and *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to Be Truly Church Today* (1998), *The 2020 Vision* (2001), and *The Disciples of Christ Identity Statement* (2009).

¹²Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Maturing of an American Religious Movement* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1992), 53.

and taught it.¹³ The reign of God that Jesus lifted up is an eschatological yet present reality that often works in hidden, ordinary, and surprising ways.¹⁴ The nature of the “*basileia ton theou*”—his gospel message—is enacted in his own servant leadership, and to be distinguished from a leadership exercised in a hierarchical or patriarchal manner in which power is exploited to intimidate and control. Given human frailty and contextual change, a church identity as witness to such a rule also means always being in process, freely and continually turning to God, and apprenticing through the Holy Spirit.

¹³Concerning the scholarly consensus that Jesus taught and lived the reign of God, see Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God*, preface, in which he footnotes the “eight decades of scholarship” on the Kingdom of God as Jesus’ kerygma, along with stand-out authors on this point.

Excerpts of perspectives on Jesus’ portrayal of the reign of God: Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 119–22, points out that Jesus’ version of the reign of God does not invoke the Davidic messianic hope, but “seems to express a radicalized view of the concept of a coming reign of God as a time of vindication of the poor and the oppressed,” in which the last are first and the first, last, and in which, as per his prayer, domination is overcome without revenge, daily needs are met, and harmony with God and each other is experienced; Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2007), 12, introduces Jesus’ proclamation of and summons to receive the reign of God as “a radically new order that comes to put an end to the age-old patterns of wealth and poverty, domination and subordination, insider and outsider that are deeply ingrained in the way we relate to one another on this planet”; Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God* (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 1984), 4, connects Jesus’ gospel of the reign of God and its character to the proclamation of the Jubilee, which involved the cancellation of debts, the emancipation of slaves, and renewed access to the land; Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 191, lists Jesus’ key attributes of the reign of God as: freedom of the forgiveness of sins, transformation of social and personal structures of existence, gracious inclusiveness toward all peoples and nations, and abundance of the natural world,” plus, “To live in anticipation of the reign of God is to be open to an unexpected mode of justice and love in society.”

¹⁴David L. Tiede, “Acts 1:6–8 and the Theo-Political Claims of Christian Witness,” *Word and World* 1(1) (Dec. 1981): 41–3 and Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, 186–7.

In Acts 1:8, when Jesus commissions the disciples, saying: “You shall be my witnesses,” Luke is quoting the Septuagint version of Isaiah 43:10 in order to give it the original punch and connect being Jesus’ witnesses to being God’s witnesses.¹⁵ Luke’s theology thereby expands the vocation of the church so that it is: (1) bearing witness to that which Jesus bore witness—the reign of God, (2) bearing witness to *him*, (3) bearing witness *in* him, and (4) ministering *in his name*. Luke’s commissioning also underlines that when the resurrected Christ had forty days to further instruct his followers, the curriculum he employed was the “Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

In 2001, when the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) took action to address its problem of significant numerical decline and increased congregational closings, it turned to Acts 1. Its vision for change by the year 2020 is anchored in becoming “a faithful, growing church” that bears witness to “the good news of Jesus Christ” in outward-reaching contextual circles. The 2020 Vision also mandates establishing one thousand new congregations and the transformation of one thousand existing congregations, developing leadership to this end, and becoming an anti-racist/pro-reconciliation church.

It is clear that Scripture and denominational documents support the cultural shift that these three local churches navigated from Church for Us to Church for Witness. I conclude that the theological reality to which Hilltown, River Ridge, and Cityside aspired to bear witness, and that to which the real ministry of congregational transformation ought to be targeted, is the living, loving, leading God, otherwise worded, “the reign of God happening: the good news of Jesus Christ.”

Leading Congregations with End-Means Integrity to Faithful Ecclesial Witness

If the telos of real ministry is becoming witness-bearers to the reign of God happening here and now, how does this

¹⁵James A. Sanders, “Isaiah in Luke,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 36(2) (April 1982): 146, 149.

genre of transformation unfold? The Scripture passages and the denominational documents that I studied clearly reiterate that the nature of transformation and its leadership is a relational process. Leaders and churches are transformed into faithful witnesses over time in relationship with God/Jesus Christ/Holy Spirit, but *how*?

What if the end of real ministry is also the means? If so, individuals and congregations become faithful witness-bearers to the good news of Jesus Christ—the reign of God happening here and now by following or practicing the reign of God themselves. Then, when clergy and lay leaders follow the lead of God together, dancing to the leadership of the Divine, they become different people, inspiring and instilling the same change in the congregation as a whole, successfully showing the very good news of the living God that the church is called to embody and express to others. This theopractical description, I contend, does justice to the change of church that these three bodies of believers have and are navigating. In fact, the transformation that the leaders wanted to bring about in each church matched the manner in which they led the change, giving a satisfying end and means integrity to their leadership and coherence to the real ministry of congregational transformation. Thus, this good news is visible, tangible, and believable in its own time and place.

The process-relational theology of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki¹⁶ provides further theological conversation with the congregational findings and offers a more detailed, systematic, theological account of how following the lead of God transforms the follower into a witness to the reign of God. Hers is a contemporary and feminist voice, sufficiently compatible with the guiding theological framework of the countercultural, verb-like nature of the reign of God established earlier. Her theology speaks of the church as being in the process of becoming what it is called to be.

¹⁶Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

Suchocki builds her theology upon the metaphysical philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead,¹⁷ who explains change as a process of “becoming,” also called “concrecence,” a change that takes place in relationship to God’s “primordial vision” for creation. Whitehead posits that becoming unfolds in four stages: prehension, selection, satisfaction, and superjectivity. To oversimplify, creation’s basic units, which he called “actual occasions,” first lean in to *prehend* or feel the potentialities for the future within the hand of God. This includes the particular aim, or “whispered word” according to Suchocki,¹⁸ that God is continually communicating to actual occasions at the deepest strata of consciousness in order to usher in their optimal becoming. Surrounded by all these choices, actual occasions next sift and sort through the past realities of how things have been—the powerful status quo—and the possibilities from the divine voice that could become its immediate future. In complete freedom, actual occasions *select* an option. As the actual occasion incorporates its chosen aim into itself, it thereby becomes a new actual occasion (satisfaction). In one seamless, organic instant, this new actual occasion thrusts itself into the immediate present (superjects), automatically influencing the next cycle of the occasion’s becoming.

Suchocki helpfully condenses Whitehead’s four rhythmic stages to three and gives them more accessible labels. She says that we “receive” the aim of God, “integrate it,” and “give” it out into the world.¹⁹ Her rhythm of the process of becoming pertains to individuals and to congregations, and it certainly echoes the stories of transformation of the three case study congregations. To more closely correspond to what I observed in them, and to better match the nuances of transforming congregational life along the ecclesiological

¹⁷Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

¹⁸Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1999), chapter 1.

¹⁹Suchocki, *The Whispered Word*, 41, 82, and Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 55.

telos of witness, I renamed the three moves *discerning*, *integrating*, and *bearing witness*. To expound, these transforming congregations started changing in the divine direction by: (1) discerning the lead of God for their specific vocational call in the world, (2) living into this ecclesial vocation over time by intentionally changing and integrating corresponding beliefs and practices in the twelve areas of congregational life, and becoming a new ecclesial culture, and (3) organically giving witness verbally and physically to God's active leadership. I conclude that pastors and congregations change into witness-bearers to the reign or lead of God happening in the present by discerning God's lead, integrating it, and bearing witness in their person, time, and place to their experienced good news of God's leadership.

Three Turns Toward the Reign of God

During my research sojourn in each of the three communities of faith, I noticed occasions when a significant group within the congregation, or sometimes virtually the entire congregation, collectively paused, paid attention, and then shifted their shared direction. I detected this behavior most often in their decision-making meetings or within their worship services, likening it to the synchronized movement of a flock of flying birds, and attaching to this behavior the tag "turning." The phenomenon of turning also evokes the tag "turning." The phenomenon of turning also evokes the kerygma of Jesus Christ and John the Baptist before him: "The Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!" (NRSV)

Turning to Discern

Many questions call for spiritual discernment during the early stages of a congregation's transformation from a Church for Us decline to a Church for Witness revival. Leaders of change, working at real ministry, usually take up goals such as coming to terms with the past, healing from conflict, redeveloping lay leadership, including spirituality and giftedness, raising awareness about the surrounding context, and discerning the particular vocational call of God

to the congregation for its future.²⁰ Toward these goals, the clergy leaders of each of the three profiled congregations called together and nurtured a small steering group of lay leaders for transformational oversight and “deep listening” as the practice was called at Hilltown. Back to the process-relational schema of becoming, discerning is like the prehension or receiving stage of feeling/hearing the aim of the Divine.

Eventually the pastor, in conjunction with this steering group, spearheaded by different methods the spiritual discernment of what would become the guiding congregational statement of identity and mission—earlier referred to as its vocation statement. At River Ridge church, it was Pastor Hartley who took the initiative to craft this vision. Building upon former congregational statements of purpose and condensing them, he cast the new statement to the congregation’s acclamation. The minister at Cityside, Pastor Curtis, involved the entire worshipping congregation over the course of several Sundays in articulating its consensus statement of identity. At Hilltown, it was a visiting consultant who projected two of its three eventual marks of vocational vision based upon what he saw the congregation being and doing, and Pastor Smith-Dugan, along with the lay elders, added the Christological rationale, “into Jesus.” In all cases, the vocational vision adopted by the congregation served as the “north star” to their ongoing transformation.

Turning to Integrate

Living into God’s vocational vision was the next major turn of real ministry, and the longest, for the three congregations. It was crucial that this, the customized statement of each, be understood and woven into all aspects

²⁰The aforementioned list of goals is also usually associated with the specialized ministry of intentional interims and transitional pastors. Among other resources, see Roger S. Nicholson, *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry* (Herndon, Va.: The Alban Institute, 1998), and *Transitional Ministry Today: Successful Strategies for Churches and Pastors*, ed. Norman B. Bendroth (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

of church life, including the congregation's missional relationship with the wider community, so that they practiced this vocation and sponsored an enduring change of culture. The clergy and lay leaders shepherded numerous changes within twelve areas of church life, helping the congregation to integrate new beliefs and behaviors, and to let go of others over time, until this new theopraxis took hold and became second nature to the church body.

One of the key leadership practices during this phase was defining for and against different features of congregational identity and practice. To hearken back to the process-relational model of becoming, what I have just described is the work of selection to satisfaction, or in Suchocki's language (and mine), *integrating*. The pastor served as the primary framer of whether or not a church practice or belief was in keeping with the congregation's vocational vision, though this leadership was flexibly and collegially exerted. He or she might initiate a change in culture toward becoming more welcoming, for example, by defining *welcome* as a theological value through sermons and/or by actual practices of greeting before and after the worship service. Reinforcement for welcome also comes as the leaders define against exclusionary beliefs and behaviors toward visitors. This work of defining identity and practice for and against is another example of congregational turning—turning away from one mode of identity and action and toward God's leading as the congregation discerns it.

Turning to Bear Witness

The superjectivity phase of Whitehead's model of becoming, which in Suchocki's schema is "give," corresponds to two kinds of witness to the leading of God that emit from real ministry through a transforming congregation: (1) that which is intrinsic to its new theopraxis, and (2) that which is intentionally outreaching and amplified. In the first case, as congregational culture shifts from decline into new life, observers can notice the changes and the overall difference, interpreting it however they will. An example of this first type of witness at Cityside

was that the pastor brokered meetings between the congregation and its former ministers with whom there had been unresolved ill will. The congregation did not advertise that they were engaged in potential moves toward reconciliation, but when these meetings resulted in mutual forgiveness, the word spread in the larger community and the congregation's reputation greatly improved.

In its twentieth year of real ministry, a young man who came to Hilltown's Palm Sunday service unfortunately suffered a psychotic break during worship, which tested the congregation's identity as "the welcoming people of God." The incident culminated in a physical struggle, some bloodshed, and an arrest, after which the church followed up with the perpetrator. It was frightening to those gathered, but for the most part, the elders of the congregation who had been equipped over the years responded to this visitor in ways that de-escalated the drama. Meanwhile, the media had stationed itself outside the sanctuary door, and Pastor Smith-Dugan says that she found words through the Spirit: "I was glad he was here today. If he had had a psychotic episode in the grocery store, at the bus station, people could've been hurt, including him, but he came to the right place, because he was met with love here." This, the church's witness, made the evening news.

In the second type of intentional, amplified witness, the congregation takes special steps to project itself and engage the context in a manner that coheres with its statement of vocation. For instance, toward its vision of "serve others," River Ridge reached out and formed a relationship with the women's shelter nearby. Church volunteers made repairs to its facility, eventually offered transportation to residents who wanted to attend worship, and later invited them into the women's small-group ministry. All three sites also gave more time and attention to getting the word out about who they are and what they are about through new technologies and networks, amplifying their witness abroad.

Another related trait of the second type is that transformative leaders keep abreast of the changing cultural landscape and continually ask after the needs of the

surrounding community. Smith-Dugan periodically poses the question: “Are we still doing the things that this community needs us to do the most, and that the Lord needs us to do the most in Hilltown?”

For example, in the year 2000, a resident of Hilltown went on a shooting spree, randomly killing three individuals, one just two blocks from the church. Racial tensions had already been running high, and Hilltown had developed a reputation for violence that had earlier fueled the flight of several Caucasian churches. On this occasion, though, Smith-Dugan proactively enlisted neighborhood congregations to, among other events, sponsor an interracial and ecumenical prayer walk that followed the route of the shooter. Instead of derailing the transformation process or spawning a mass exodus from Hilltown Christian Church, the witness it made in the aftermath of the shooting matured the members and increased their resolve to remain in town and grow in faithfulness. In an interview, Sheila Smith-Dugan described with pride that the lay leaders in her congregation now attend specifically in order to do significant ministry in the life of this community, seeing their church as a “Mission Church/Mission Outpost.”

The ongoing turns of real ministry, in its three-fold, repeating rhythm, take on the character of a congregational dance with the Divine, the members and clergy with each other, and the congregation with the world at large. Real ministry in the congregational setting then, is a group dance, and while the leaders cannot control it, with the cooperation of the dancers, they can all follow the lead of the Spirit, experience the transformation of the reign of God firsthand, and become its living testimony.

Jean Halligan Vandergrift serves as interim minister of Trinitarian Congregational Church in Concord, Massachusetts.