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PNEUMATRIX JOINS THE HOLY SPIRIT IN IDENTIFYING ADAPTIVE CHANGE AND POSITIVE DEVIANCE

BY JIM KITCHENS AND DEBORAH WRIGHT

FORTY YEARS AGO THE WEST COAST WAS ALREADY COMFORTABLY ENSCONCED IN POST-CHRISTENDOM. Church wasn't working the way it had in the post-World War II boom. Technical fixes that worked 20 years ago no longer helped us solve increasingly complex and daunting problems.

About that same time, both of us — Southern transplants who graduated from West Coast seminaries — were ordained into ministries in the post-Christendom world of the San Francisco Bay area.

We turned to experimentation to try to find the way forward: Deborah through being a corporate chaplain and working with innovative firms like Google and LucasFilms, Jim by experimenting outside the box in parish settings to see what bore “fruits of the spirit.”

Six years ago, we felt challenged with a question of generativity: What legacy did we want to pass to pastors coming up behind us? We both had great mentors who taught us how church works. It was time to pass the baton, but that baton was broken. We understood no one had easy answers: not Louisville, not presbytery leaders, not our seminaries.

Our abiding commitment is this: Whatever the Spirit is saying to the American church today, it is bubbling up from below through the dreams, intuitions and spiritual nudges of our members. Our call was to nurture an incubation space in which the Holy Spirit was already clearly at work.

Theories of challenge and change

As we dreamed and experimented, we discovered two theories that helped us begin to name what we were experiencing: adaptive change and positive deviance.

Adaptive change, the brainchild of Ron Heifetz at Harvard Business School, asserts that we are living through a time of creative disruption in all organizations — including the church.

New forms of Christian community are arising that are better adapted to our current situation of being closer to the fringes of American culture than are our inherited models for being church, all of which assume a time we were at the heart of that culture.

Positive deviance theory was born of a Peace Corps approach to quickly solving infant mortality rates in post-war Vietnam. They discovered that when a community or organization faces what seems to be an intractable challenge, there is likely someone in the “village” that has already figured out a solution — someone who didn’t even understand she was facing a problem. That person is usually lives at the fringe of the community, hence a “positive deviant.”

We decided to launch PneuMatrix as a nonprofit dedicated to helping congregations and presbyteries use these theories to address the adaptive challenges they face. We also wanted to help train leaders within presbyteries who could engage this work along with us and continue after we left.

PneuMatrix process

While we work with congregations of all sizes, some of our most significant work has been with smaller churches.

Why?

- There are so many of them. A third of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations have less than 50 members, two thirds have less than 100 and 77 percent have less than 200.
- They feel their needs are neglected. Eighty percent of all PC(USA) members belong to the top seven percent of churches by size. For the most part, our national resources are still designed for larger staff churches — for the “norm” of the 1970s.
- They know they lack the luxury of doing nothing. Like the proverbial frog placed in a pot of room temperature water, larger churches typically don’t feel the rising heat yet, much less the boil. All churches experience the same post-Christendom decline. Smaller churches tend to recognize the depth of that decline more pressingly.
- They know if they stay “stuck,” they may soon find themselves at the end of their congregation’s life cycle. Pittsburgh Presbytery called their cohort we worked with “the unglued church,” reflecting the reality that many churches feel stuck, endangered and don’t know what to do.
- There is no direct correlation between the size of a congregation and its faithfulness and vitality. We’ve met 30-member churches who are doing amazing things to serve their communities. We’ve worked with 500-member churches who, while nice and welcoming, could be mistaken for a nearby civic organization.

We work with a cluster of 8-10 congregations within a single presbytery. It helps churches step into the unknown when they get to “hold hands” with other area churches. Having a mix of churches — from small to large, from thriving to struggling — also encourages the smaller churches. They begin to see that even “successful” churches are having the same struggles.

We also invite an equal number of leaders from the presbytery (both ministers and ruling elders) who want to learn more about adaptive change and positive deviance theories to serve as “apprentices.”

Mentored in *theory* through monthly cohort classes and in *practice* on-the-job, each apprentice works with one of the participating churches and with us through their process of discovery and discernment during a one-year engagement. Building and leaving a deep bench of local adaptive

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change leadership in each presbytery is key to our generative approach to our work.

Each church selects a team of leaders to work with a PneuMatrix representative and their presbytery apprentice to begin to discern the church's future path.

We lead the church teams through **three phases of discernment, marked by key inductive questions:**

- *What is the deep DNA of this particular congregation?* Culture and context are everything. As the late organizational guru Peter Drucker put it, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."
- *What are the specific complex adaptive challenges the congregation faces?* Framing the questions trumps naming the answers at this stage. If you don't ask the right questions, the answers you come up with will not help you.
- *What are their possible ways forward?* Imagination and listening for the Holy Spirit reign here. Prayerful discernment coupled with rigorous assessments of the dreams the church team begins to imagine lead to a few God-sized dreams rising to the top.

We begin that discernment by looking at the presenting issues the churches bring to the conversation:

- Continuing decline leading a deep sense of anxiety about the future and about survival;
- Aging congregations with few or no GenX or millennial members or adherents;
- Metropolitan sprawl encroaching on rural churches, making them suddenly suburban;
- Churches with "too much building," when treasured sanctuaries have shifted from being assets to being liabilities;
- Older baby boomer leadership who are rapidly tiring but have no younger generation to whom they can pass the baton of leadership;
- Lots of churches whose cultural context has changed dramatically, and who lack the language or skill sets to implement any accommodating change;
- Decreased and transitional presbytery staffing, such that specialized resourcing is rarely available anymore;
- A shrinking national staff, unable to provide resources to struggling churches.

Many of the churches with whom we work have gone through an assessment process (such as New Beginnings or Holy Cow). While these programs provide valuable information and insight to the congregation, they often lack the commitment to walk alongside the congregation over time as they digest that information and try to understand "what's next" for them.

We start with whatever assessment information the church has and meet with its team monthly over the course of a year — sometimes in person, sometimes by videoconference (although the apprentice is always present with the team).

The PneuMatrix representative and the apprentice provide guidance and pastoral encouragement as the team works through their own particular discernment process. We do not offer "magic bullet" solutions or attempt to "fix" the churches. Rather, we help them listen for the Spirit as they step into the unknown and work to discover the faithful options they have for the future

Pursuing these options creates a deep sense of trust in God's leadership. This is true even in those instances when the church discerns that the most faithful option for them is to end their ministry.

Coming to this conclusion allows the team to explore what it would mean to think of themselves as a legacy congregation. With hope in the resurrection, they can begin to talk about how to die well and leave any remaining assets (such as money, people or facilities) to new forms of Christian community.

Holy Spirit at work

We've witnessed an amazing variety of outcomes as we've worked with churches over the past six years.

Churches engaging our ordination vow to serve with "intelligence, imagination and love" discern new directions for ministries rooted in their DNA that meet the real needs of their current neighbors.

A church in upstate New York worked with their history of having been known as the community's meeting house in their early years. They repurposed their facilities to be a shared church/community center, with the pastor being "bivocational in place," serving half-time as pastor and half-time as director of the community center.

Churches are dreaming about creatively repurposing their buildings, both to generate income to support their operating budget and to support their vision for mission. They're stepping out of a landlord/lessee model to invite groups and organizations whose mission they share to become partners in serving their neighborhoods and cities. One congregation called this approach moving to a "bivocational building" model instead of a "bivocational pastor" one.

Churches who have thriving and healthy ministries are learning how to recognize the adaptive challenges that are coming down the road toward them and proactively engage them before the "attractional model" that has worked for them in the past begins to wane in its effectiveness.

We've heard positive deviant insights from the edges of the church. An African-American pastor in a southern presbytery with whom we worked said to one of us: "You white folk are funny. You're going around developing this whole thing called 'bivocational ministry' like it's something new. I don't know a black preacher in 30 years who hadn't had a day job! If you want to know how it works, why not ask us?"

Two small, struggling congregations have found graceful ways of merging into a single, strong and vital church, giving them renewed energy and new resources to multiply their missional capacity.

Pastors realize they lack the gifts/skills to lead a congregation into its new vision and agree to make way for that vision to emerge under new or parallel leadership. **In one church, a 59-year-old white male pastor came to the team and said: "You have developed exactly the kind of vision this church needs moving into the future. I have come to tell you I am not the pastor to lead you into that vision. I have not been trained for it. I need to get out of your way."**

Two years later, that pastor has found a new call that uses his considerable gifts and the congregation is thriving under new leadership more attuned to their new vision.

Contrary to the worry that presbyteries and churches are depressed and giving into the inevitability of decline, we have found that many minister and ruling elder leaders in our presbyteries — and not just their staffs — are eager to support each other's churches and work together to discover new forms of Christian community more suited for 21st century America.

While the changing cultural context for ministry makes many ministers, elders and members anxious, it also offers a critical opportunity to learn to think differently, to listen to all the voices around the table, to discover possibilities of which they hadn't yet dreamed — all while relying on the presence of the Holy Spirit, who nudges us all toward new possibilities and who sustains our hope.

We continue this work even more hopeful than when we began it six years ago. We see signs of hope all around. We find Presbyterians who deeply trust in the promise of resurrection and are willing to dive into the sometimes messy but always exhilarating process of listening to what the Spirit is saying to them. We are thankful for all of you who share that dream of resurrection with us, working in your own context to follow wherever the Spirit leads.

JIM KITCHENS and **DEBORAH WRIGHT** are Presbyterian ministers who founded PneuMatrix to help presbyteries and churches engage adaptive change. Jim has served congregations in California and Tennessee, chaired the Committee on Theological Education (COTE) and staffed the Company of New Pastors. Deborah served a San Francisco church, was development director at San Francisco Theological Seminary and worked as a corporate chaplain, helping companies integrate spirituality into the workplace.



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