

Stories that Shape an Understanding of God's Mission in the World: Visionary Leadership in the ELCA

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ABSTRACT

STORIES COLLECTED THROUGH INTERVIEWS with thirty visionary leaders in the ELCA give us a glimpse at how leaders understand God at work in the communities they serve and the way they lead. Through these stories, a theological claim is heard loud and clear: God is up to something in the world and we are called to participate in God's mission in some form as faithful, hopeful ministry leaders. These sacred stories, filled with faith and doubt, hope and fear, courage and vulnerability push and pull the leaders interviewed into a life with Christ to be a transformative presence to and with others. These voices describe a different picture of church than much of the current data showing a decline in denominational adherence. Findings from two of the themes explored in this project will be share in this article: community and leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, data measuring denominational adherence and attendance has shown a consistent and rapid decline. Trends toward no religious affiliation, a declining commitment to church membership, generational differences, and denominational preferences are all contributing factors (see Jones 2019). These trends are even more sobering in my own denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA).

The ELCA formed in 1988 through a merger between the American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran Church in America. With 5,251,534 baptized members at the time of the merger, ELCA numbers dropped to 3,668,034 by 2015 (Research and Evaluation 2017). If the current rate of decline stays constant, the ELCA will be obsolete in thirty-five years. When looking at the same trends around church attendance, the statistics are even more sobering. At the current rate of decline the number of those attending worship services in the ELCA will cross the zero marker in twenty-three years (Research and Evaluation 2017).

Our capacity to produce leaders is not promising either. A few years ago, a report predicted that by 2019, the ELCA would have just over 9,000 congregations, 6,800 of which could afford a full-time pastor. With only 5,800 pastors to fill those pulpits, over 1,000 pulpits with the capability to pay a full-time salary would be left open. That figure does not include open pulpits needing part-time or shared calls, which would add another 2,000 pulpits (DeHoek and Inskeep, 2016).

Is the church dying? This data would leave us to believe it is. However maybe it isn't the church that is dying, but the structures and forms that we measure are dying. Perhaps a more accurate claim is that the church is changing, and God is up to something new. Statistics such as these need to be put in conversation with other stories to more fully understand what God is up to in and through these ever-changing communities we call congregations.

THE PROJECT

In early 2018, Villanova University's Center for Church Management granted this researcher a fellowship to explore the stories, metaphors, and texts that shape a ministry leader's understanding and practice of visionary leadership in the ELCA. The intent of this project was to use storytelling to get to the heart of how these leaders understand their call, their leadership, and the communities they lead. And, more specifically, how they talked and reflected on the presence and activity of God in and through these stories. Key leaders in the ELCA were contacted later that fall, including bishops, faculty and leaders of seminaries, synods, and churchwide officials. Each key leader was invited to nominate one or more rostered¹ leader in the ELCA that they would categorize as a visionary leader. The invitation intentionally did not define what a visionary looked or acted like. Instead, nominators were asked to articulate in a few sentences the rationale behind their nomination. Nearly fifty nominations were received. Thirty leaders were interviewed.

Interviewees were contacted and invited to participate in a ninety-minute interview. In addition to the interview, each participant was asked to complete a ten-question online survey to gather demographic data. Interviewees represent a variety of backgrounds, including but not limited to years in ministry,² geographical locations of organizations currently serving,³ and types of communities served.⁴

1. The ELCA currently maintains two official rosters: Pastors, set apart through ordination for public ministry of Word and Sacrament, and Deacons, set apart through ordination for public ministry of Word and Service.

2. Approximately 14 percent of those interviewed have been in ministry less than five years, 14 percent five to ten years, 38 percent eleven to twenty years, and 34 percent more than twenty years.

3. Interviewees represent eleven different US states from four regions: East coast, West coast, the Gulf, and the Midwest.

4. Approximately 14 percent of those interviewed described the context of their organization as rural, 35 percent as urban, 31 percent as suburban, and 20 percent as other.

This project and its methodology serve as an experiment in practical theology, starting in “human experience and its desire to reflect theologically on such experience,” with the ultimate goal “to increase our knowledge of God and to enable us to live more loving and faith-filled lives” (Swinton and Mowat 2016, xi–xiii), in particular faith-filled lives as visionary ministry leaders for the sake of the world. The role of this researcher is more than to serve as a collector and curator of stories. Through these stories and reflections, this researcher hoped to discover new ways of understanding and interpreting the *missio Dei*, and even perhaps affirm long held instincts about a disconnect felt far too often between those who believe God is present and acting in the world, and those that lead in a way that shows they believe God is active and present in the world: “What people say, what people do, and what people say about what they do are entirely different things” (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 5).

Interviews were convened through a mix of face-to-face meetings and ZOOM live conferencing. A set series of questions were asked of each interviewee, inviting them to draw on personal experience, sacred texts, images, and metaphors. The practice of inviting them to reflect through stories “itself enacts and names theology” (Campbell-Reed and Scharen 2013, 241).

Of the thirty people interviewed, sixteen identified as female, fourteen as male. Over a quarter of those interviewed self-identified as a person of color, a percentage higher than that of the ELCA (Bullock and Peru, 2018). Twenty-nine of the participants are rostered. Seven of the thirty provide leadership in a non-congregational, but ELCA related settings (i.e., synods academic, or nonprofit organizations). Of those in congregational settings, some are part of a multi-staff congregations, some lead multi-point parishes, and others lead mission development or other ministries uniquely designated by ELCA nomenclature.⁵ All leaders inter-

5. The Church Vitality Unit of the ELCA has established vocabulary to describe non-traditional ministry settings, terms which were used by leaders interviewed in the project to describe the structure of their worshipping communities. Communities were labeled as mission development (new church communities), redevelopment (a church that is in an intentional ministry to

viewed have at a minimum an MDIV or other related theological graduate degree.

The data gathered through these interviews are holy stories. Participants shared moments of loss and hope, success and failure, uncertainty and clarity. In their vulnerability they showed enthusiasm and an openness to share their thoughts, along with an eagerness to learn from others in the study. In fact, this researcher was surprised by the overwhelming positive response to invitations to be interviewed and their generosity in opening up. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and manually coded looking for themes in three areas. The interview question protocols were created and organized around those three areas: call, community, and leadership. Findings from community and leadership are shared in this article.

COMMUNITY

The word community is ambiguous and keeping its use undefined in this project was intentional. With each interview, participants were invited to define community in the way it is understood with regards to their current leadership role. Each leader talked about community from the vantage point of one's own position and responsibilities. Leaders used the word community to describe things like congregations, synods, or ministry organizations. In addition, they also spoke of the communities they serve as broader than the organization paying their salary. For these leaders, community didn't stop at the walls of the office or worship space, it included neighborhoods near and far. Membership language was rarely used to describe the people they lead, neither were categories such as baptized members or worship attendance. Participants was a more commonly used word, but even then, it was more often used to distinguish a person's particular commitment to ministry

reimage their identity in a particular context), a restart (a second go around of a mission development site), and a new wine ministry (a new worshipping community that was formed by a group breaking away from another ELCA church).

related to the church or organization. People were more often identified through touch points and relationships.

Visionary leaders in this study consistently articulated the belief that *God is active and present in the communities and neighborhoods they lead*. One synodical leader put it this way, “God is at work daily . . . changing lives . . . extending life, healing, restoring, so I see the community as vibrant. God is opening us up to new possibilities.” There is a pervasive expectation that God will not only show up, but God was there ahead of them all along. One participant, our only non-rostered leader in the study, has spent extensive time interviewing people in the community she was asked to serve. She explains that experience this way:

So, it wasn't even until like in the third year that I began to see what was really happening in the patterns. The listening takes depth and time and repetition before the themes emerge. You begin to have an understanding of where God is in the midst of something. . . I've prayed about that. I wrestled with that a lot. I feel like it is primarily about leaning into God, leaning into the Spirit noticing where the Spirit is. Because when we're in a confidence space we don't have that need. But when we're not sure where we are, we're on our knees.

One mission developer, after serving the community for more than ten years, exemplified the passion that many of the leaders showed when talking about God's mission in the world:

And I get that not everybody is called into full-time ministry, but I think all of us are called into living as followers of Jesus. Let's believe that God is a living God. Let's believe that the kingdom is here now and not yet. And let's believe that God's at work in this and God is crazy. God [will] work through us to accomplish what God wants to accomplish. I think we just don't lift that up enough, that we have a role in what God is doing and that gives us purpose.

God breaks down silos separating church from its neighborhood and calls all people together into a ministry of mutual relationships.

Leaders interviewed in this study do not distinguish between their work in the church and their work in the community. Community leadership is ministry leadership. A second career mission developer shared a story of how he found himself serving on a community council even though he was a pastor of a currently forming local Christian community—all other council members were business leaders in the community. His new role on the council helped focus the priorities of the ministries he leads in a way that better serves the immediate needs of the local neighborhood.

Another leader just starting a new call talks about her role in facilitating mutual relationships this way, “I think my job is to get out the way. It’s to make it available and then to help people connect the dots as to why this matters in their lives. And to [help them] find their story mixed with God’s story.”

There is a distinction made in the stories of these leaders between doing things for a community and doing things with a community. Leadership then is about inviting, encouraging and supporting those who do identify as part of the regular worshipping community to connect and engage with people in the community, through both intentional touch points and in their day to day lives. Participating in what God is already doing is about connecting the church to and within the community for the sake of the community. These visionary leaders didn’t separate this from being a pastor or synod leader or diaconal minister. One seasoned pastor with nearly twenty years leading a congregation in an urban context explains it this way:

All of the world is God’s beloved community, but the whole world doesn’t get treated that way. And so the work of the church, my work, is to proclaim the Kingdom of God- that’s God’s beloved community-especially to those who have not received that message so that they might experience God’s beloved community. There are those who are called to be the proclaimers of that message. And so when you talk about the community I serve, [sometimes] they’re suburban partner congregations, what we do helps to liberate them to see the Kingdom of

God . . . in those places that they see on the news as . . . of no value, of fear, and all those things.

Hospitality is the primary focus for a new wine start worshiping community in rural Midwest to engage with its small town. “Our core value here is radical hospitality. . . . Our official slogan is being great neighbors in [town name] . . . some of our best ministry is with our neighbors across our fence.” Neighbor for them is an operating metaphor that shapes how they prioritize ministry and resources. “We just want to love people,” he claims. Another leader talks about that same kind of expectation this way, “And once you’ve come to faith and you’re living in that faith it’s not about you it’s about the next person.”

One new young leader, serving a rural multi-point parish in a diverse rural area uses this kind of language to describe the relationship between her congregations and the community, “I feel like it’s a mission field God is calling us in, to surround ourselves with people who think differently and try and learn and grow from that and find ways forward. And so I feel really passionate about doing ministry in that way.”

The third theme in the area of community is *God is at work in and through communities changing lives*. Ministry leadership was ultimately about making a difference in the everyday lives of the people these leaders encounter. It wasn’t measured through programs or church attendance. Changed lives don’t show up in parish reporting structures. It is ultimately about the transformation of individuals and communities, which includes all lives. It begins at a very basic level, conversation.

One leader with more than two decades of ministry experience serving as the senior pastor of a large historic church in the Midwest shares this story to illustrate the importance of starting with conversation. “You know just going beneath the surface in that conversation is where God happens and it’s usually in sharing our foibles or what we would consider weaknesses that we opened the door for someone to share their weakness and in that God meets us. I try to help people do that in lots of different ways. We try to do that as a congregation.”

Living and leading in a way that shows you believe that the grace and mercy that Christ offers is available for all directs many of the choices these leaders and their communities make. One leader, during the first year of her current call, had a tragic murder take place in her congregation's neighborhood that made the national news. A couple of friends of the victim who were part of her congregation asked her to step in and help the family with the victim's three young children. Together with the congregation, they led a vigil in the neighborhood walking the block, reclaiming the home where the woman had been murdered. "We kind of reclaimed this as a place of love and safety for these families and these kids because they all went to school together." Her church literally showed up. Over three hundred attended the vigil. They raised over \$40,000 for the family and in response to an invitation from the victim's family, this leader took point in leading a celebration of the victim's life.

Through this experience, her congregation helped her realize that she was called to the neighborhood. "I didn't realize my pastoring was much more than just a small little church. . . . When did I see you hungry, when did I see you thirsty." Matthew 25:17 informs the identity of this church within their neighborhood. "That's been a beautiful shift to move toward mutuality and accompaniment."

One leader, who had recently ended her time leading a ministry for individuals transitioning from incarceration to a new life outside of prison spoke to this idea of changed lives using these words, "We really help people to see their potential and that we help them to understand that they are loved and they have worth and that there's nothing that they have done or will ever do that will take the love of God away from them." She goes on to tell this story of one particular individual that illustrates this commitment: "So to see him come from not being able to look you in the eye just to answer the simplest of questions to being able to stand up and be on camera and talk about his experience coming out of prison and the support that he received from the ministry was just wonderful."

Ultimately, changed lives is about mutual relationships. One second career leader with previous experience as a teacher operates out of the philosophy that we are called to make a friend before we make a convert. “It is easier to quit on a denomination than it is to quit on a friend.”

The Emmaus story was a common text that shaped many of these leaders’ imaginations around the kinds of relationships taking place in and through their communities. One leader tells it as the story of two friends beaten down and broken. And Jesus was there. The world had changed as they knew it. And Jesus was there. They couldn’t recognize him. But Jesus was there. The importance of this text shaping her community’s understanding of discipleship is shared here:

The whole seven miles Jesus is walking with them. They’ve just experienced the heartache of watching their savior be tortured to death on a cross and they’re so overwhelmed with what they’ve seen with their eyes that now they’ve been blinded to the resurrection walking with them which is an event, right. I think about that text and that sometimes even speaking to the rationale won’t open your eyes to who God is, sometimes you need to experience God as an event, a Jesus event to be inspired and motivated to run back and tell everyone he’s alive because that’s what they do; they recognize their eyes are open to the event of the risen Christ and they run back to tell everyone—the women were right!

Another leader, when describing the suburban community he has been serving for nearly three years as faithful, audacious, and courageous, claimed the Emmaus story as the community’s primary and guiding biblical story. Through this story, “they really believe in walking the road of faith and discovering Christ in the stranger and in the breaking of the bread and that is primary.”

One interviewee, a self-identified restart pastor in an urban context is drawn to Acts 2, where they were “breaking bread together and praying together and gathering in each other’s homes and just sharing their lives together.” This breaking of the bread

theme so shapes their identity as a community that they gather as a dinner church. The eating and fellowship that occurs over the table creates a shared identity centered in Christ. It should be no surprise that this same leader was drawn to story of the Last Supper in the Gospels:

Jesus in that final dinner with his friends and followers said as often as often as you drink of this cup and eat this bread is anytime you're sharing food together. You know I'm there, remember me, remember what it is that this is all about that is made full in your sharing and being together for me. It's all connected to that sense of God being in and among and active. . . . This is a central piece to who we are, right? That we gather around a meal . . . that meal reflects who are.

One synodical leader, who describes his community as multi-geographic, sums up what God is up to in and through these relationships of mutuality, being in community and changed through community with these words:

I'm in love with what God is doing here. The ability to see communities change and transform and be a part of that including building redevelopment and seeing people read what the Gospel is in those communities and change like that just excites me so I exhaust myself by going to meetings and engaging community leaders and engaging our mission developers who I'm encouraging and coaching to do the same and to grow these faith communities. I'm seeing the gospel of Jesus Christ reach areas and places that it never would. And I believe that we as Lutherans have the best theology in the world. It's affirming. It's loving. It's caring, and it breaks down. It's almost like our theology is a medicine that can help the church to reshape itself to what I consider being what the gospel of Jesus was intended for us to be.

These three themes, God is active and present in the communities and neighborhoods they lead; God breaks down silos separating church from its neighborhood and call all people together into a ministry of mutual relationships; and God is at work in and through

communities changing lives, give purpose and direction to the ministries these leaders are called to, in and with the communities they find themselves. Insight into how they lead in that way can be found in our next area.

LEADERSHIP

The titles and roles of each of these participants vary as much as the communities they serve. Some are solo pastors of multi-point parishes, some are executive pastors of multi-staff churches. Some are leading newer worshipping communities in store fronts, art galleries, or elementary schools, while others gather in 150-year-old historic churches. This diversity of roles also includes leaders of synods, non-profits, and even a few leaders in transition between roles.⁶

How do they, their varied roles with their varied responsibilities understand themselves as a visionary leader? And, more importantly, how do they articulate what God is up to in and through their leadership? Three prominent themes emerged in the stories around this area of leadership.

First of all, none of these leaders see themselves as long rangers. *God is at work in and through these leaders, their co-leaders, and the raising up of new leaders.* While visionary leaders take their authority and responsibilities seriously, they lead in, and on behalf of, community. Mentors, mentoring, partnerships, identifying and raising leaders drive much of the time and intention of these leaders.

One Midwest mission developer employs coaching as a metaphor for the way he leads ministry with others:

There's also a willingness to let the coach shape the program. And I think there's a lot of good in that idea

6. Among the thirty interviewees, there were thirteen different job titles listed in the survey data. Seven of the titles contained the word pastor, which represented twenty-three of the interviewees. Twenty-nine of those interviewed are rostered leaders in the ELCA, in "Word and Sacrament" or "Word and Service" ministry.

especially as we talk about decentralized leadership or you know permission giving leadership. The other image I've got isn't an image or a metaphor exactly but it's a framework, it's the idea that lay ministry really is ministry. . . . We don't try to put people in leadership positions on the basis of what the church needs, we try to do it on the basis of the gifts that God has sent to us. So, you know a phrase I learned from my coach was one person, one passion, one position.

Not only does this leader implement strategies for identifying leaders and coaching them, he is also being coached in the process. This idea of the leader being coached, or mentored, isn't unique to him. One pastor of a congregation in a small town shared how pivotal it was when she experienced seeing a woman leading a church for the first time. "I really think the Holy Spirit was putting the right people in my path along the way to just say yes, see this is here, or hey-look here's just a little piece of hope."

Another leader of an historic church on the verge of living into a new identity was not only coached by others but considers it a part of her call to raise up and coach other leaders for ministry:

I've been really sitting with the story of Pentecost in Acts. The church is getting its start and the people are giving up all they had to those in need. I think as a leader right now I'm really leaning into that, not just like physically of what I have, but of what I have in the way of my gifts and what God's entrusted to me and how I am being invited to share those. But then more than that, how I am calling up others to do the same? Like when I think about my passions in ministry, one of my big ones is raising up leaders. It took me a just a month here and I can already say I think that person could be a pastor.

Guided by Luke 10:1-12, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, another leader, who started worshipping with a congregation because of a passion for mentoring young men, explains the distinctiveness of his pastoral leadership of the same congregation through the apprenticeship model. "Duplication of leadership is our DNA":

Once we establish a ministry, once we are clear that there's a need, before we are able to go on to other places, we have to publicly identify an apprentice. Typically, we lead in two-year intervals, though you can repeat. But I think what people talk about is the apprentice model that there are no questions in ministry about who's leading and who's next. . . . So just so you know we have one year of class time, two hours a month. We meet with a cohort of people discerning a leadership role. Typically, those cohorts are anywhere from three to six people.

Secondly, visionary leaders see leadership as a process of discernment, communal and individual. *God speaks to God's people and guides them in their ministry.* Discernment here is more about listening for God's voice than it is decision-making. Communal discernment looks different for each community. For some it focuses on regular practices like prayer and lectio Divina. Others take more structured approaches.

Discernment within one mission developer's non-traditional community happens in what they call clarity circles. Four to five leaders of this community gather weekly to "huddle" and listen for God's voice. Through this process they were able to discern that they were not being called primarily to the place they had started. As a result, they started exploring alternative forms of sustainability that would foster Christian community at the same time . . . "We are very careful" this leader explained, "to bring everything we do into conversation with scripture and with our Lutheran understanding of how God works in the world."

Another of the interviewees, the lead pastor of a large suburban congregation talked about the necessity of communal discernment with her staff:

I think that a person can do crazy things if they think God is speaking directly only to them. But it's the community of faithful people who walk with you that you have the ability to test ideas and wonderment with. While I carry a title there is no question that the work that we do is a "we." It's this entire staff that works together. On the crappy days the buck stops at my office. But what I've

always sensed ministry as a group of people together trying to figure out where God is calling us.

Part of communal discernment is creating an expectation with additional ministry leaders that God will show up. One of the participants asks the same two questions whenever meeting in small groups, “What did you find interesting in scripture this week?” and “What have you heard from God in your listening prayer?” These questions have helped shape an expectation that God actually speaks to us in prayer and has contributed to their ongoing practice of listening for God’s voice.

Leaders also stress the importance of time in silence, whether in prayer or retreat, to listen to God speak. Visionary leaders in this study are intentional about setting aside time in solitude. Where and for how long varied across the interviewees. One participant shared an experience of spending time “doing the Hermitage”:

You’re in a little teeny cabin all by yourself . . . and you don’t see anyone at all. You don’t have any common meal. You are just away with God. They had a beautiful window in a teeny little room . . . very primitive but comfortable. You’re instructed to take your watch off and to sleep when you need sleep wake up when you need to wake up and at the beginning of your time to just write a letter to God and kind of pour out everything that you are in need of, your angst or whatever, and then to just rest with God. I found myself. I was never bored. I was never lonely. I felt full. I ended up reading just one book, but I would just sit and stare out the window for like an hour or two and it was phenomenal. I felt I would sing songs to God. It was sacred and intimate. I didn’t realize that one of the spiritual disciplines I need is solitude until that time.

Another leader describes this time in her life as a pilgrimage. Her first pilgrimage was right before entering her call as a restart pastor. “Because I knew first call was gonna be crazy . . . so I wanted to know that I could still hear God’s voice, that I was ready to hear God’s voice.” This practice of pilgrimage continues for this leader,

but never to the same place. “I haven’t ever been to the same one twice because I think there’s also something about the newness and freshness of an experience. I think if I went to the same place twice, I would have at least unconscious expectations to experience God as I had before in that place or in that journey. And it has been my experience that that is not how God and I work.”

One seasoned synodical leader goes on a pilgrimage to the same place each year, to the Garden of Gethsemane in the Holy Land:

I’m there once a year doing some things with groups there. The Garden of Gethsemane overlooks the city and that to me is like Jesus is for real. Not just that Jesus is something spiritual and mental for me, but Jesus is a physical presence for me when I’m there because it’s almost like I’m standing with him in the garden . . . literally the same trees that were there when he was alive, they’re like they’re trees that are over two thousand years old, or you know are seedlings of them . . . it’s almost like I have to go there to be recharged or re-engaged in my mission for the next year.

Another visionary leader in this study sets aside an entire month each year to spend in discernment and listen deeply for direction as to how God is calling the community he leads to move in the upcoming year. Just prior to leaving for the month, he spends time with the leadership looking at plans for the upcoming year. When he returns at the end of the month, he is ready to engage them in the upcoming year’s theme and priorities:

Meditation and prayer and connecting and hearing from God and learning God’s voice and learning the way that I see God and experience God is very key and important to me. So that has been a consistent factor in helping me to make decisions, helping me to see and speak life into other people and helping people to kind of manage their own lives. It is having a strong connection to what the Spirit is saying, and it’s always confirmed. God never speaks in isolation. God’s word for me has always been

kind of consistently confirmed over and over again. So that's how I know it's God.

These experiences are but a few examples of spiritual practices that are a part of the rhythm of the way these leaders lead and of their lives-time set aside for the sole purpose of listening for God's voice. These times of reconnecting with God are crucial for their own sustainability as leader, but more importantly it centers them in God's work in the world and how they are called to lead in their respective places and times.

The final theme in this area on leadership focuses on planning, vision casting, and effectiveness. *God creates a vision for God's people.* Creating any vision for our leaders is deeply dependent on the ongoing practice of listening for God's voice. Stressing the necessity of the communal nature of this work, a bishop in the study articulates it in this way. "I think in some ways I would say I am more of a vision caster. I know that I don't do this work alone and that if we're going to have impact, we need to have the involvement of a whole lot of folks. That's helping people see a larger picture and helping them begin to wonder and pray how they might be involved in it."

The sower of the seeds parable from the gospel of Mark provides a great image to understand how he frames visioning. "A sower went out to sow. Our call is to be continually planting seeds and God's going to do what God's going to do with them. . . . People's ability to always recognize that or to see the incredible possibilities that God is laying in front of them sometimes is really difficult to see."

"So for me," shares another synodical leader, "it's a team effort and it's a communal task to cast vision and then once I have all that information, my expectation and goal, and the method I'm trying to lay out, I'm going to glean from the people that I trust and respect the most. . . . It's a communal task."

When asked how she casts a vision, a senior pastor of a large suburban congregation shares, "As vulnerable as this seems for me, I don't have it figured out. The vision is God's vision that comes specifically. I know my gifts are called to cast that vision and give

theological framework to it and proclaim and extend grace, but I am just part of a bigger sense of what this is. I think people trust me because I think my presence is authentic. And I show up.” This leader is also fond of the sower and the seed parable, likening her role as vision caster to that of a gardener, always tilling and planting, but ultimately is it God that grows the garden.

Another leader talks of visioning this way, “Anybody can have a dream but to quantify that vision it has to be rooted in scripture and prayer. And I think that’s one thing I would say. Vision rooted in scripture and prayer is a vision, other than becoming just a dream or a nightmare.”

These three themes, *God is at work in and through these leaders, their co-leaders, and the raising up of new leaders; God speaks to God’s people and guides them in their ministry; and God creates a vision for God’s people*, speak to the primacy of the presence and activity of God in how these leaders lead. They give us a glimpse into transparent and prophetic approach to leadership while showing the dependence they have on God’s leading the way in in their ministry.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The stories shared through this study do not provide answers to a problem of declining church. Instead they help us reframe how we think about church and how we understand how God might be restoring and healing the world through the church and through changing lives.

Churches have a future, despite the data presented at the onset of this paper, because this is Christ’s church. Our call is to listen closely to this movement of the Spirit, as these leaders do, to discern communally how God is calling us into God’s future in new ways.

This is the beauty of stories. They provide layers upon layers of meaning, metaphors, and theology—both explicit and implicit—as a way to enter into God’s unfolding story for the world. The beauty and distinctiveness of learnings thus far speak to the inability of any of these leaders to separate their understanding of leadership

and the communities they lead from how they understand and seek to further discover God's work in changing the lives of all people in and through the ministries they lead.

This article serves not as a conclusion and summary of findings, but an invitation for further exploration into how these themes, and others themes shape our understanding of how God works in the world and how God's work in the world shapes our varied calls to lead communities and walk with one. Our task as leaders, is to listen deeply to ways it is changing in our own communities. Our work together has just begun.

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