

Final Project

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Program: Masters of Divinity

Alliance Theological Seminary

May 2, 2020

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Introduction

This paper intends to provide a basic plan of action to a suggested major structural and organizational change in Trinity Grace Church Williamsburg. By providing some insight into the church's young history, analyzing the continuing growth in attendance, and the decision made to address it by Fall 2020, this paper suggests the structural change to a hybrid approach with an emphasis on a house church model. As expected, creating space to these conversations also invites the opportunity to reevaluate some deeper core beliefs about church, community, life in the city, and mission; all topics that will be briefly covered in an effort to highlight the importance of open dialog and how deep the change that actually needs to happen is.

In full disclosure, I am a staff member of this church and have seen this change in a perhaps more unique perspective than most. This proposal has not come forth, only as a couple of very honest, open, and overall concerned conversations I have had with our lead pastor, Tyler Staton. I am grateful to be able to talk about this with him, yet, I also know how careful I need to be about it. Hence, the opportunity to use this paper and study to develop something more concrete, that can hopefully, help share my thoughts in a more tangible way.

Setting

Before I describe the current context of Trinity Grace Church Williamsburg, I believe it is important to share some of the short history that propelled us into who we are today. Trinity Grace Church (TGC), in New York City started about 15 years ago operating on a parish church model, meaning, something like local neighborhood churches under the same umbrella. By 2015, there were 13 different Trinity Grace Churches scattered around Manhattan, Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens. Trinity Grace Church Williamsburg (TGC Williamsburg) was the last one planted

on that same year. In a city like New York, every neighborhood has its own distinct identity, and the parish church model really valued and uplifted that. However, for a number of reasons that are not in the interest of this paper, in 2017, Trinity Grace Church dissolved and each neighborhood church became fully independent.

It is important to highlight this piece of history for a few reasons. First, TGC Williamsburg was only about two years-old when this happened, yet, our church continued to experience growth and favor in the months/years to come. This highlights not the thought that “we were doing something right,” as some would claim, but the interest in the neighborhood and the specific demographic we were attracting (more on this later). Secondly, it is important to highlight this bit of history because it shows how the local engagement of the church was always the center focus, even before it was planted. It reflects the DNA which we carry. Thirdly, and perhaps the most important one, to highlight the true blessing in disguise that the dissolving of the TGC umbrella was to our congregation. One could look at the difficulties of the first years for being a church plant relying on the security of some resources from a network of churches. But one could also see it as the very thing that was on our favor: relatively new to the neighborhood, starting new relationships, not much history involved, etc.

And the one not-so-small thing that really helped us from the beginning is something that differentiated us from many other church plants from the get go: we have a 24/7 lease on a building in the heart of Williamsburg. The point being is that from the very beginning the actual building served as the perfect asset to offer up to our neighbors. From community meetings to dance classes, we wanted to share the resources we had for the common good, and let God use them in order to teach us more about his plans for us in this very place he planted us in; to shape us into the community he wants us to be, for the sake of our neighbors. A missional heart was always the motivation.

Since 2015, the congregation size has grown from about 60 people at any given Sunday morning gathering, to an average of about 350 people divided into two distinct gatherings: Sunday morning and evening. Staff added some numbers as well, and elders and deacons were installed. Everything done for the sake of adapting to the changes and prioritizing growing in a healthy way as a congregation. All of these transitional times—which to be honest, there have been quite a few of them—always felt very organic and Spirit lead. From my perspective, there has never been any alarming circumstance in leadership, any “red-flag” sort of decision making, nor, a one-person driven agenda sort of thing. I have been involved in this church body since I moved to NYC in early 2015. Became a part of staff as Pastoral Resident in mid-2018 and after some more transition, started as Pastor of Justice and Mercy in January 2020.

As the congregation grew in number, it was clear that even more focus had to be given into the ways people were connecting outside the Sunday gatherings. We, as church, always emphasized the importance of the “rest of the week” and that our formation as the people of God was not realized on a Sunday. It is a daily process of discipleship with Jesus, intentional community, and daily extending compassion and mercy towards our neighbors. The phrase we continually use is that “Sundays are *not* the main event” and throughout the years, we have engaged in community building in various different ways, with the intention of creating relationships marked by the very life and teachings of Jesus. *Community Groups* are the primary way people get involved in a small group setting. These are hospitable places of intentional discipleship where people share a meal together and engage in practice-based spiritual formation. There are currently 23 groups spread across Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Long Island City. Each group has about 10-15 people, which amounts to approximately 80% of our church is in some way engaging in a community group. The groups meet every other week in someone’s home.

Problem Statement

Due to the sizable growth in attendance that happened in the past couple of years, TGC Williamsburg has decided to hold 3 gatherings every Sunday starting on September 13, 2020. Two back-to-back in the morning, with Kids Ministry; and continuing the one in the evening at 6:00pm. A new staff person will be added as a Sunday Gathering Coordinator in order to alleviate the pressure and responsibility shared by all other staff members regarding Sunday gatherings. By no means an easy decision. And I fully support it, not simply because I am a part of staff, but because I do know first hand the need for space to accommodate people—specially in a place like Brooklyn, NY. So, as a short-term solution, I absolutely understand¹. On the other hand, one does not have to look too far down the line to see the trend here.

If the growth continues in a similar rate, what will be the solution to this same problem by March 2021? Will adding yet another gathering a feasible approach? Is that still being missional? Where can one draw the line on ‘too much for a Sunday to hold’? Is this still helping us disciple people? Better yet, is the structure we have (the one we currently keep adding upon) the best way for someone to encounter Jesus? What about the possibility of church planting? Is that not what churches should be doing? I would argue that growing in attendance does not necessarily mean the church is ready to multiply. But this is yet another conversation for another time. I will say though that in our short life span as a church so far, church planning conversation has never been at the table as far as I am concerned. Perhaps as we have a short history marked with some institutional division², the thought of “multiplying” might sound too

¹ Easy for me to say as the one who’s role shifted about 6 months ago to be less and less about Sunday planning and more about missional day-to-day activities outside the church building.

² There is another part of the story of TGC Williamsburg that is not so relevant to the issue presented in this paper but nevertheless important to a pastoral understanding of the congregation. Long story short, TGC Williamsburg when created was basically a merge with a new plant from Trinity Grace Church and an old dying congregation of about 15 people from a church called Williamsburg Church, lead by Pr. Rob Elkin. Williamsburg Church had been in the neighborhood for over 10 years, and had an incredibly missional DNA. Unfortunately, things weren’t going so well. Rob and Tyler (our current lead pastor) started together in 2015 and things were going well throughout the first year. Until Rob, had an offer to work for Redeemer City to City with equipping other pastors in church planting—truly something very close to his heart. After a lot of prayer and consideration, him and his family decided to leave,

close to separation to some. Or, going back to a structural issue, the way we think about church planting and multiplying is way too costly and burdensome. The “structure” is way too heavy for a few in leadership to carry (something to ponder about). And what about discipling and equipping the body? At such rapid pace and size, how do we make sure we are equipping people to grow as mature followers of Jesus? On a larger scale level, many gifts are for sure still dormant on any given Sunday because there is only so much interpersonal interaction we can help cultivate, and only so much space within the format of a gathering for them to be exercised.

These kinds of questions and some others should inevitably take us deeper into rethinking overall structures. Not necessarily the values we hold per se, but we should allow these questions to guide us into wrestling with the ways in which we have perhaps automatized things in church and not really decided to wholeheartedly ask ourselves the harder questions. One simple “space issue” situation—if we are open and willing enough—has the ability to lead us into a necessary reevaluation of our understanding of how church should function in this day and age in light of the bare bone essentials Scriptures defines as church.

Purpose

Considering the trajectory of the past few years and how things are gearing up in the near future, I believe a major structural adjustment needs to take place. This is not simply to accommodate more people into a building on any given Sunday—there’s only so much you can do there—but in order to facilitate healthy, long-term growth in the years and years to come, perhaps TGC Williamsburg could use this opportunity and rethink its ecclesiology in a highly densely populated city like Brooklyn, NY. Of course, this is a much deeper conversation than the argument about adding or not a third worship gathering. And a much more time consuming one

and of course, there was some grieving that, we as a congregation had to go through from an early age. A year after this happened, the Trinity Grace Church dissolved, and we became independent.

too. But I strongly believe it is an inevitable one if any major structural change needs to occur. And I believe that indeed it does.

The proposition I present here is to make the structural shift to a hybrid house church model. This would not only address the physical space issue on Sundays, but it would also create opportunity for a much deeper engagement into the communal life of the church in a very missional way. The hybrid approach is basically having both things: structurally oriented towards house churches as its main focus, while also keeping the Sunday gatherings for corporate worship and to sharing stories about the different house churches that form the larger congregation. It would also serve as a place of evangelism—an introduction for people who's only understanding of church is something that happens on a Sunday, and the opportunity to expand this understanding by the different format and the emphasis on the community aspect of church that happens on a daily basis outside of the building walls. For those already a part of a house church, Sunday attendance would be optional.

Another major area that would radically be impacted by this structural change is the dormancy of spiritual gifts. With more room to build intentional relationships (house churches), and as the need to be more hands-on increases, I believe there would be people who will finally discover their God given gifts and realize their role in the kingdom of God. This is the church coming alive! And within that, continue to be driven towards mission as house churches have the advantage to dive even more locally and relationally in the neighborhood.

There are, of course, greatly anticipated impacts on organizational culture. One major one for instance is people's various assumptions and understandings of how a church gathering should function, and the strong corporate culture created by decades upon decades of systematic growth into "Mega-Churches" in the West. The very way we function would completely change as an organization. Many aspects of the church culture created through the Sunday gatherings

will be challenged. Communication, preaching, corporate worship, etc. All would need to be reevaluated. Not for relevancy, but for a more balanced and healthier emphasis.

Description of Change Plan

In the book *Managing Transitions: making the most of change*, William and Susan Bridges offer a very helpful insight on the key differentiation between *change* and *transition*. Change happens quickly, and it is usually external factors. On the other hand, transitions happen rather slowly and take place inside people. Both are unavoidable. Yet transitions take time, and according to the authors, they happen in three distinct phases: ending, neutral zone, and beginning. I will be utilizing Bridges' change theory and its phases to elaborate a basic plan applicable for TGC Williamsburg.

So much can be said about the potential excitement of a new phase and the incredible opportunity to be more missional and discipleship focussed as the church grows. But the reality is that in a culture that has been steeped into functioning in a very specific way, I believe that the hardest part will be the "letting-go" of things. Bridges writes: "It's the losses and endings that they have experienced and the transition that they are resisting. That's why it does little good for you to talk about how healthy the outcome of a change will be. Instead, you have to deal directly with the losses and endings."³

First, this should be openly discussed with elders and staff and a discernment process should be facilitated. Everyone should have a time to speak and openly share their opinions and be heard by all. After one or two meetings of similar matter, I suggest to bring in outside voices, something similar to a pastoral consultant experienced in changes of this matter. It will be incredibly helpful and valuable having someone to guide and facilitate some of the more delicate conversations as a team. This cannot be a top-down decision. Understandably, for the most part it

³ Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions*, 25th anniversary edition (p. 46). Hachette Books. Kindle Edition.

already is (because of how the structure is set) but the more we give voice and space to trusted others in the congregation who are not in leadership, the more we are truly serving one another.

Secondly, set goals for the change and create a potential timeline for them. Only after this has been discussed and agreed upon we can begin thinking of communication. Some of the potential goals can be: develop a core curriculum for basic training to run a house church; start transitioning some community groups to meet weekly and slowly function more like a house church rather than a bible study group; develop stages of transition for community groups in order to facilitate communication and incorporation of new structure; restructure the Sunday gathering aspect of church life; develop new communication strategies for the change plan and for the house churches moving forward; rebranding; create new care teams that will be equipped to respond to the house church specific needs; and so forth.

Thirdly, once most of the goals and timeline has been established, a Transition Monitoring Team (TMT) will be put into place in order to take a pulse of the church while experiencing transition together. As Bridges stresses, TMT must be a group represented by different constituencies within the organization. It has no decision-making power and is not charged with suggesting courses of action. Rather, its purpose is to facilitate upward communication and demonstrates that the church wants to know how things are going for people. An important aspect of this team is confidentiality; they create a sense of trust in listening to ideas and concerns, without causing fear that these conversations will be directly quoted to leadership.⁴ The TMT will help those in a position of leadership better care for the church, and at the same time provide the same with valuable insights into how to communicate things effectively and in a way that shows love, support, and invites people into a new beginning.

In terms of communication, I have always heard that the moment you define a course of

⁴ Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions*, 25th anniversary edition (pp. 77-78). Hachette Books. Kindle Edition.

action (direction), you are also defining who are you loosing; meaning, the moment you tell people where are you going, you are also giving them the option of not to follow you there. With that in mind, I believe that before the first wave of communication is done, some essential biblical teaching should take place. Either through a quick sermon series, or class/workshop on the biblical understanding of church; in some shape of form the relearning of what it means to be church according to the Scriptures has to happen. It's a sort of peeling the first cultural layer—sometimes created by our own actions and unspoken statements, and other times brought in with people's various baggages regarding their own church experience and upbringing. Nevertheless, it is important that before the word 'house church' is shared out in the open, we all have a common language (vocabulary) on what it *really* means to be church and the things that (hopefully) automatically one will start to question along with that.

Once the first wave of communication and timeline has been presented to the overall congregation, it is important to make space for people to grieve, feel seen, to be heard and cared for. Only then, after all losses have been acknowledged—both personally and corporately—they can decide to embark on the change with you or not. Once they are in, then carefully communicate the full transition plan. According to Bridges, this is an optimal time going through the *neutral zone* to allow people to develop creative solutions about problems that might arise. Or, best case scenario, come up with new and creative ways to express the kingdom of God in Brooklyn. Regardless of what comes out, the importance of brainstorming and the creation of new patterns in this time is key.

I sincerely do not anticipate any major conflict coming from the congregation per se. Granted that undoubtedly there will be new responsibilities on individuals—like house church facilitator/leader—that may cause some hesitation and anxiety in some, therefore, and area for potential conflict. However, easily addressed with proper pastoral care and good communication

of expectations—both corporately and individually. On the other hand, the main area of surely anticipated conflict is on the leadership level, specifically lead pastor/teacher. It is said that for those who benefit the most of a current structure (power) have the most to lose when things change, hence, they will also be the ones to oppose the change the most. In this particular change, it has been made clear to me through several very open and honest conversations with the lead pastor, Tyler, that he is willing to listen and perhaps, if you tread lightly, egos won't necessarily be engaged. But in reality, my concern is that there is still something he does not see as an issue tied to the structure: the fact that preaching for 45min every Sunday has grown on him. Perhaps, undivided attention had grown on him.

I am being incredibly honest here, and because I love him, I've had conversations about this before. As I've wrestled with what it means to be church, I've openly and lovingly challenged the current structure and format in which we have our Sunday gatherings. I know this will be the utmost challenge: to help him see what needs to change on his role. Basically, be pastoral to the lead pastor and very carefully walk him through the transition.

One thing I must point out that gives me great hope and encouragement. I have seen through several occasions that regardless of his personal flaws and certainly some pride, when something is clearly for the benefit of what God is doing, Tyler has always given in. He does not dare to stand in the way, even when it has been costly to him. And that is truly the characteristic of someone who is wrestling with pride in a healthy way; open to be shaped by God and to continue to be used for his purposes. I admire this on him—a lot.

Critical Analysis

I believe that out of the different change theories discussed in class, Bridges has the best approach when it comes to guiding people through transition in a very holistic way. I find it

fascinating how pastoral this change theory is and the explanations provided in their book. For that matter, I would strongly recommend its use for this major, yet delicate, structural change.

One very clear positive impact I see with this particular change theory is that, if applied and communicated correctly, there is such an incredible potential for untapped creativity while going through the *Neutral Zone*. This is a perfect time to empower new leaders to rise up; perfect circumstances to give voice to those whose opinions sometimes are pushed to the margins; perfect set up establish a new culture of a more shared leadership; etc. I believe given the space people rise to the occasion. And that is one of the beauties of transition when cared for in the right way. As Bridges puts it, in simple and plain terms, “people can work out much of the necessary business of the neutral zone if you protect them, encourage them, and give them the structures and opportunities they need to do it.”⁵

Conclusion and Reflection

In this paper I attempted to outline a somewhat audacious project that encompass a major structural and organizational change in the life of Trinity Grace Church Williamsburg. This change is suggested as an opportunity to reassess some structural issues in the organization due to its rapid growth in attendance. As a starting point, this paper gives some valuable grounding for discussion about the practical ways to implement such change, and most importantly, how to care well for the people (congregation) being affected by it. Bridges’ change theory was used to frame this proposal and it turns out to be extremely well suited due to its holist approach to change and transition management.

On a full-disclosure-style personal take away, it is obvious that this situation is very close to my heart. My wife and I have prayed about this and have had numerous discussions about it. I love the *Church* (emphasis added on the capital ‘C’), and grew to love it even more through

⁵ Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions*, 25th anniversary edition (p. 84). Hachette Books. Kindle Edition.

wrestling with things like this in my seminary education. But I have to admit that up until this point nothing was as connected as in this project. It always felt like some things in class overlapped with my direct ministry experience, but for the most part, nothing was this hands-on. This feels like an answered prayer (in many ways). I have always wanted to be able to talk more deeply about this with the leadership at TGC Williamsburg but felt like I lacked the tools. And given what I just mentioned in the beginning of this paragraph, sometimes when you are too passionate about something or some issue, if you only go with heart, people might dismiss you too quickly. Going through this project this semester, wrestling with the class materials, readings, conversations, discussion posts—when I did them—gave me the confidence to address this in a way that I wholeheartedly believe to be appropriate, wise, well-informed, invitational, and most importantly, honoring to God.

References:

Bridges, W., & Bridges, S. (2017). *Managing transitions: making the most of change*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.