

## Embracing the messiness

*"If you want to build a ship, don't summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs, and organize the work, rather teach people to long for the endless immensity of the sea."*

*- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

**M**ore and more churches contact us expressing a desire to be a transformational presence in their communities. Churches often begin this kind of engagement simply by building relationships in their community. As a next step, some feel called to offer a more engaged ministry; at times this develops into a formal program that serves a specific community need.

The planning of such a ministry is where churches struggle and where we find ourselves trying to help point the way. In order to sustain a ministry, churches know they need a plan.

I've had an ongoing conversation with Heidi Unruh in recent weeks about our experiences of how churches plan and organize community ministries. She describes the value of an ongoing process of spiritual and relational preparation followed by intentional learning and reflection. Here's how she described it: "The temptation for churches is to jump right into the nuts-and-bolts planning work without investing in the more spiritually grounded, indeterminate, 'messy' aspects of ministry development. I've learned from the wisdom of many that we can't avoid (or control) the messiness of life. If we don't make room for the mess in our planning process, the mess will come back to confront us later on."

About the same time, I rediscovered a similar perspective in a fascinating book where Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers describe *A Simpler Way* to approach planning. They list several characteristics of this approach and, in the midst of these, I see Heidi's suggestion and a few other lessons of value.

Here's a part of what they offer: Change is life's only constant; life's so-called messes are full

of possibility; new possibilities and opportunities abound in life; living entities create order as a buffer to change; interdependence strengthens our creativity.

And here's what I think this means for churches. Change is all around us, for better and for worse, and in the midst of life's changes, God continually offers new possibilities as we work together. I hear Paul's voice from his letter to the Romans reminding me that God is at work in all things for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose.

People of faith are quick to say that only God knows the final result. What is more meaningful to me is our recognition that the God who creates and calls will be faithful to continue the work that God has begun in us – in our churches and in our communities. In the lines of II Timothy 1:12 and Daniel Whittle's 19th century evangelical hymn, we can say it this way: I know not what predetermined goals and objectives ought to be, or how the messiness of life will affect me. I know not what we might achieve as a final result,

*"But I know whom I have believed  
and am persuaded that He is able  
To keep that which I've committed  
unto him against that day."*

We have to listen to the voices in our community, we have to recognize their strengths and not just their needs, and we have to take time to assess and design before we jump in, but the key to this messy process is listening to where God is calling. As you plan and seek to strengthen the ministries of which you are a part, we hope to be a voice that encourages you to listen along the way.



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