



Map the Journey

When it comes to deep change and the willingness to be transformed by The Other, when it is time for a community to reassess their assumptions about liturgy, music, leadership structures, mission and vision, and ministry focus in light of these new perspectives, when a congregation is called to move closer to the margins rather than invite everyone to join them at the safe center—well, this is where rubber hits the road (and where the engine threatens to break down).

How do you walk a different path? Reading the book, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other and the Spirit of Transformation*, will set the stage well. The companion workshop, “A Welcome Change”, should prove a huge help in preparing communities to use a common vocabulary and craft a common vision for radical welcome and transformation, all the while identifying their strengths, weaknesses and fears in a compassionate setting. But after that work, you still need to shape a comprehensive plan for change.

What signposts might you pass on the transformative journey? This map should help:

1. Build and equip your vision team
2. Lay the theological foundations
3. Discern God’s radical dream
4. Study your reality
5. Hold each other’s fears
6. Craft the plan with specific goals
7. Invite broad participation and then match gifts with goals
8. Check in regularly

Some helpful notes about the map:

- **There is no single path, but there are some guideposts**

While congregational development guides abound, it is my belief that there is no sure-fire, step-by-step guide to success or recipe book for mimicking another congregation’s movements to secure the same result. That said, after mining

the treasure trove of resources—conventional congregational development tools and the lived experiences of the radically welcoming congregations, along with my own insights from community organizing, consulting and parish ministry—I’ve noticed a clear pattern emerging, a series of stages most communities travel through on the way to transformed life.

- **Adapt the map according to your context**

Depending on your community’s history and organizational culture, you may need to change the language and sequence or otherwise adapt the journey mapped here. If your power base is smaller, or your congregation is especially resistant to change, you may choose to focus on a single ministry area. That example could then become the salt that seasons the stew, modeling transformation for the rest of the congregation to witness. Feel free to use your wisdom about your community to create an organic, *effective* process for your context.

- **Feel free to pair with other congregational development resources**

This is not the place for an exhaustive how-to; others far more capable than I have already done admirable work in this field. What I hope to offer, as suggested by my colleague Steven Bonsey, the canon for evangelism at St. Paul’s Cathedral and a much-sought-out consultant, is a radical welcome read on the conventional congregational development change processes. “Everyone wants to tell you how to grow your church, how to craft a mission and develop the community,” Bonsey told me. “But there’s so little willingness to say what that mission ought to be or how we ought to achieve it in line with an anti-racist (or radical welcome) dream of God. We don’t want to go into discussions of power, of welcome, of The Other, of identity. Someone needs to go there.”

Let’s go there—together.

Step 1: Build and nurture your vision team

Whether you are the senior pastor or rector or one of several lay leaders, you simply cannot launch into these waters alone. In their book *Leading Congregational Change*, Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem and James Furr suggest pulling together a vision community—or a vision team—to share the load:

The vision community is a diverse group of key members who become a committed and trusting community in order to discern and implement God’s vision for the congregation. The vision community should be a part of the change process from beginning to end. Its members must become personally prepared, understand and clearly feel the sense of urgency, and agree that change is needed. They will help in discerning and shaping the vision, in communicating with the broader congregation, and in designing and carrying out the implementation of specific action plans.¹

As much as is reasonable, the team ought to reflect the faces and voices of the community they are trying to become. Seasoned leaders with new ones. Different races, generations, sexual orientations, classes, physical abilities. The team may be the main leadership group (vestry, church council, etc.), but there are good reasons for setting up a separate group with the specific responsibility and task of charting the course for the future, who will then report to the rest of the congregation, including the top elected leaders.

This group should prepare together in order to develop a common working vocabulary and toolbox. They may decide to work their way through this book and the accompanying curriculum. The bibliography lists several other curricula and trainings.

The point is to cultivate skills for listening, facilitating, healing, equipping and communicating a radical welcome vision *as a group*. In the process, the team will also get used to negotiating some hard conversations about power, privilege and change. These will be the first of many for the entire congregation.

Members of the vision team should understand that their charge is not just to take on a task. In this small circle, they are modeling the mutually empowering behavior and practices of the radically welcoming community they seek. Eric Law’s work on congregational change is especially rich with resources for crafting a faithful, liturgically based group process.² In the same spirit, Gil Rendle and Alice Mann offer up *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice*.

A final word on the vision team: *Do not work in the dark!* The team’s research, reflection, discernment and planning should unfold in stages and out in the open.

1. Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 41.

2. In particular, see Eric Law, *Sacred Acts, Holy Change: Faithful Diversity and Practical Transformation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002).

(Rendle and Mann call this process “extraverting,” or sending energy outward and thinking “out loud.”³) Check in with the congregation in community forums, small groups, regular meetings of particular ministries, online chatrooms, paper surveys given out on several Sundays in a row. They could even craft a worship service so that the sermon is a presentation of the important ideas or questions they are working with, allowing time for members to offer their reflections.

A zeal for God’s reign may auger for speed or efficiency; far better to take time, keep the lines of communication open and the visioning process as transparent as possible. It will save the group many headaches down the road; it also models the trusting, empowering, radically welcoming environment you seek to nurture throughout the community.

How has our community engaged in building and nurturing a vision team?

How could we work further toward this goal?

3. Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003), 40.

Step 2: Lay the theological and spiritual foundations throughout the community

The goal of the vision team and the other leaders is ultimately to invite everyone in the congregation to take part in this radical transformation. That means everyone should be given the opportunity to learn about and internalize the theology and dream of radical welcome. The Rt. Rev. Arthur Williams, the Episcopal Church's Director of Ethnic Congregational Ministries, proffers this nugget of wisdom:

You have to reorient people's theology. Begin with, What does it mean to be born in the image of God? Begin with a basic understanding of human nature and human worth. How does the image of God override our prejudice and fear of differences?

As Williams understood, if the community's theology contradicts the dream of radical welcome, you will go nowhere fast.

So the clergy, leaders and vision team should all take the time to consider the theology and spirituality of radical welcome for themselves. Consult *Radical Welcome*, specifically the chapters titled "The Dream of God," "Living with Arms Wide Open" and "Be Not Afraid," for more on the scriptural and theological sources and spiritual implications of radical welcome. As you shape this theological, spiritual vision for your own use, allow it to permeate the preaching and worship, youth and adult Christian formation, small groups, social action, regular business meetings and special projects.

This is the most authentic way to build a sense of urgency and common cause, one based not on guilt or desperation or a pastor's cult of personality, but on a common and deep yearning for God's reign to manifest.

The work is intentional, involving and time-consuming, but without this strong theological foundation undergirding the leadership and the rest of the congregation, your church will build its radically welcoming house on shifting sand.

How has our community engaged in broadly laying the spiritual and theological foundations for radical welcome? How could we work further toward this goal?

Step 3: Discern God’s radical dream as a community

The key questions that should guide your discernment are these:

- What is God’s dream for us? What would our congregation be like, and what would we be doing, if God’s dream were fulfilled in our midst?
- Who would be here? Consider different ages, races, classes, cultures, linguistic groups, sexual orientations, etc.
- What would our leadership look like? Who would be included in decisions?
- How would members relate to each other and to those beyond our doors?
- What would worship feel and look like? How would we invite new people into the church?
- What ministries would the church and its members be involved in? Consider internal (pastoral care, hospitality, children’s programs) and external (social outreach, evangelism, etc.) ministries.
- What would observers say about our Christian witness and mission in the wider community? What would our impact be?

The chapters titled “Radical Welcome Signs” and “Re-Imagine Your Common Life” include extensive reflections on what it looks like to participate in the mission and dream of God (while the chapter “Beyond Inviting and Inclusion” paints a clear picture of what’s *not* radical welcome).

In addition, the Online Companion features discernment exercises for figuring out God’s dream for your community, as well as “Chart Your Dream,” a handout featuring a comprehensive set of questions for imagining the specific ways God’s dream could be made incarnate in your community.

Whatever means you choose, know that you need not be locked into what seems most reasonable or pragmatic, nor should you allow comments like “We’ve never done it this way before” or (even more dangerous) “We’ve tried that before and it didn’t work” to short-circuit the dreaming process. Naturally, you should base your plans in reality (see the next stage for more detail: “Check Your Reality”).

So the vision team should get to know the trends and secrets in your congregation’s life; claim your gifts, resources and calling; get the demographics and other anecdotal accounts in order to discern who comprises your wider community, especially who is inside the church versus who is outside. Then feel free to imagine with God, recognizing the box well enough to sometimes work outside of it.

More often than not, communities try to abbreviate this discernment process. The “visionaries” find themselves acting as mavericks far out in front of the community, or the congregation charges a small group with figuring it out on the side and reporting back with results.

I have observed this strategy backfiring in two ways: first, the people out front lose their ability to communicate with their brothers and sisters and to grasp just how difficult and countercultural this work can be. In addition, the members may simply shut down or even sabotage the effort if they feel they are being tugged along or herded like recalcitrant sheep.

That said, there is a role for charismatic leadership in the change process. Daring clergy and lay leaders can stand close to the folks in the pews in order to share their own stories and dreams and personally model experiences of the transformation God has in store for the whole community.

In some more challenging contexts, sparking a move toward radical welcome may require direct confrontation with other leaders in the church—remember the powerful fear of change, including a change in the church’s mission. But nothing can replace a dream that members can claim as their own. Building a dream together is worth the extra time and trouble it will undoubtedly take.

How has our community engaged in discerning God’s radically welcoming dream for us? How could we work further toward this goal?

Step 4: Check your reality

In concert with crafting the dream, the vision team should perform a reality check. By this, I mean you are gauging the distance between where you are and where you want to go. This is the time for speaking the truth in love, both in posing the questions and in offering the feedback. The chapter titled “Check Your Reality” explores the reasons and ways to study your congregational reality and shares what many of us might discover if we turned the hard gaze on ourselves, our history and our traditions. The Online Companion handout titled “Study Your Reality” features a detailed set of questions for assessing your congregation as it is.

Only the truth will be helpful at this stage. Be realistic about your gifts, resources and successes, because they are your bread for the journey ahead. Even so, it does not help to say you are inclusive when your history and current image indicate a different reality. Instead, ask questions like these:

- What does it mean for people to feel really welcome, and not just greeted or tolerated? How have we embraced the margins, as a congregation and as a denomination, over our history? How have we been less than radically welcoming, as a congregation and as a denomination, over our history?
- What cultural, generational group holds power and defines our ministries, mission, worship and identity?
- Who is truly “inside” our congregation? Who is The Other on the margins or just outside of our community (there will be more than one group)?
- What does our liturgy communicate about our church culture, what we value and what voices we have relegated to a second-tier, marginal status?
- And (hardest of all to ponder) why have all these patterns come to pass?

Raise these questions and study your congregation as if you were an outsider. Better yet, tap a neutral, respected, skilled parishioner or bring in an outside consultant to perform an analysis and then offer feedback.

How has our community engaged in checking our reality? How could we work further toward this goal?

Step 5: Face your fears

If fear has not reared its head before the previous stage, it is sure to show up now. Why? Because you have moved beyond the dream—which rallied people behind a hopeful cause—and begun to work with a concrete, even critical, picture of the church’s actual life. You have begun to acknowledge the community’s growing edges, and the shields are bound to spring up to defend the beloved institution, its traditions and its members. The fact is, any change, however holy, however necessary, represents a loss, even if it is the loss of the image of your church as perfect and complete as it is. And loss inspires some sense of dread, anxiety, resistance or fear in everyone.

The chapters titled “Be Not Afraid” and “Reckon with Your Fear” should help you to examine the role of fear on the faith journey, as well as introducing ways to sit with your own resistance and anxiety, and to create and maintain the structures and practices that will support others in the journey toward transformation. The Online Companion features several resources—including “The Sound of Fear” and “Practicing Compassionate Awareness”—for reckoning with fear.

For now, it is enough to say that this is the time to intentionally design opportunities for people to identify the kinds of change that bring up their resistance, anxiety, deep concern or fear. It is best to have these pastoral resources—think of it as your “holding environment”—on the ground well ahead of time and to consciously invite people to sit with their fear as close to the reality check as possible.

The church’s main leadership group and clergy should take responsibility for forming conscious, accessible, respectful community spaces (one-on-one pastoral contacts, small groups and even town meetings) where people can hold out their fear of change and their sadness and confusion over what may shift as they walk the road toward transformation. The vision team, as the ones presenting the fresh vision for the future, should also be versed in helping people to sit compassionately with fear.

These practices will help as you move in that direction:

- Learn to sit with your own fears, so that you can provide a truly gracious space for others
- Use and share breath and meditation practices for sitting with fear
- Hone your listening skills with training in pastoral care
- Open up intentional spaces for honest conversation, facilitated reflections and story-telling
- Locate, train and deploy a team of leaders who will sit with fear throughout the community
- Recognize the signs of resistance and, instead of reacting in kind, bring compassion wherever you hear and see them
- Be prepared for the backlash and, when it comes, respond with compassion and wisdom

How has our community created resources and structures for facing our fears? How could we work further toward this goal?

Step 6: Craft the vision and plan with specific goals

It has taken a while, but now you are ready to set out a plan that includes the positive action steps to move from where you are to where God is calling you to be. The bibliography includes resources to guide you step-by-step, in painstaking detail, through various change planning processes. The “Building the Bridge” handout in the Online Companion is designed to help you to begin to identify these change steps—the difference between your reality and your dream—in relation to each area of congregational life.

Whatever the method, you should wind up with a clear description of the steps your community needs to take in order to live into God’s dream during a prescribed period of time. The guiding questions that drive this process are simply these:

- What is our specific picture of God’s dream for our community?
- What specific steps should our congregation take in order to achieve God’s dream?
- What barriers would we need to dismantle in order to radically welcome The Other as part of living into God’s dream? How could we engage in that work?
- If you want to take it a step further, you would add, *Who* will do *what* by *when* and at *what* cost?⁴

The final recommendation from the vision team should come as an answer to these concrete, foundational queries.

FYI: Another option is to have the vision team present a plan, including specific goals, to the leadership body (vestry, church council, etc.). That group would then take on the work of adopting the plan, putting it out for congregational approval, assigning costs and personnel and a specific timeline for organizing the movement to live into the vision.

So look at the mission and vision to see where you are trying to go. Review the assessment of your reality. Given your community’s culture and resources, theological foundation, tolerance for change, you are now ready to chart the specific steps you would take, over time, to live into the dream.

How has our community engaged in crafting a fresh vision and plan with specific goals for living into radical welcome? How could we work further toward this goal?

4. Rendle and Mann, 87.

Step 7: Broaden participation and match gifts with goals

If you've nurtured the congregation's sense of ownership over the mission, vision and plan, you can follow up with this crucial question: "Now that we have laid out our dream and crafted a plan together, what can each of us contribute to see it come to life?"

People shouldn't feel they are half-heartedly supporting the rector or the vision community's pet project. It should be apparent that your community's goal is to partner with God, and that everyone's transformation is at stake. As Cecily Broderick y Guerra of St. Philip's in Harlem put it: "This work should not be a fringe thing, not a thing the priest is doing. It has to be something the whole community is doing as a piece of justice work."

We're all missionaries here.

How has our community engaged in broadening participation and matching gifts with goals, in order to fulfill our radically welcoming vision? How could we work further toward this goal?

Step 8: Check in regularly

This journey never ends. So keep checking in as you move ahead. Acknowledge when you need to reevaluate and recalibrate—key leaders fall away, energy dies, fights break out, the vision gets fuzzy or the plan ceases to match reality. Celebrate the clear steps forward and the insights you gain through shared experiences—a ministry relationship thrives, the choir increases its membership and then develops an expanded repertoire, leaders from once-marginalized communities step forward. Keep walking, keep talking, and know that the God who has already welcomed you also rejoices with you, every step of the way.

How has our community engaged in checking in regularly? How could we work further toward this goal?