

Transformational Task Forces: Leading Congregations Away from Minefields

by N. Graham Standish

When I was an associate pastor, I witnessed first-hand how a congregation with everything going for it could let its own growth lead to decline. We think of church growth as a good thing, as a self-perpetuating thing. But when churches grow, they enter new areas that they have no experience with, meaning that they can do what seems to be the right thing in a way that unhinges everything they have been building.

As our church grew, we badly needed to expand our building to accommodate our ministry. So, the senior pastor asked a real-estate developer in the congregation to work with him to envision how we might expand. They gathered information, considered an appropriate area to develop (the church sat on 16 acres, much of it undeveloped), and conceived of possibilities. Then they shared their proposal with the members of council (or the session, as we Presbyterians call it). The elders accepted it appreciatively, recognizing what a good plan it was. The sticky point, though, wasn't the proposal itself. It was what side of the building to build the project on.

Several of the strongest members of the session argued that it should be built on the other side of the church from the proposed area, in a grassy field we called Presbyterian Park, rather than the flat area proposed by the developer, which actually made more sense. What was obvious was that the Park-ers chose their side mainly because they weren't consulted ahead of time. They really didn't care that much, but it was their way of saying, "We should have had more say."

The session got bogged down debating the merits of each side. Over the ensuing months they were split in two, both supporting the building, but each convinced that their side was the proper side to build. It reminded me of a Dr. Seuss book, with star-bellied and bare-bellied sneetches arguing over who was better, or the north-going and south-going Zaxes refusing to give ground.

So, a task force was created to research the problem in-depth. By the time the task force was ready to complete their work, I had left to finish my Ph.D., and the senior pastor had left, frustrated over the continual battles with those who just wanted control no matter how it might impact growth.

Since then the congregation has struggled through a number of pastors, seeing its congregation dwindle from about 525 members down to a little over 200. Reflecting on the incident, I have learned a lot. The senior pastor was really a tremendous pastor. He was the best mentor I could have worked with, and every congregation he has served has grown healthier and larger. In his work with this particular congregation, he had done all the right things before this incident to grow the congregation. Something was different this time, something that taught me an important lesson about congregational transformation. Churches will follow leaders, especially pastoral leaders, but only if they feel as though they have had a say in the envisioning. That say can be either direct or

vicarious, but they want a sense that they have contributed to the chosen direction.

Renovating the Sanctuary

After finishing my doctoral work in 1995, I felt called to return to congregational work as a pastor. I came to Calvin Presbyterian Church in 1996, a church that had been in the midst of a thirty-year decline. During my first year we began to have modest growth, and the attention of the congregation turned to many things that had been pushed aside for years. The pastor prior to me was a wonderful man, and a good pastor, but he held a strong belief that money should be focused on mission projects outside the church. He preached that money spent on the church was selfish and self-focused. Thus, when I came to Calvin Church, little attention had been paid to the church itself.

The sanctuary had been neglected for many years. The lighting was dark, the sound system was tinny, the carpet was wrinkled and threadbare, and the paint was cracked and peeling. Similar problems existed throughout the church: peeling paint and wallpaper, cluttered and messy classrooms, and a décor that had only minimally been updated since an expansion in 1954.

I faced a problem. I still remembered my experience as an associate pastor. It was very clear that doing anything to upgrade the church could lead to conflict because everyone had their own opinions. I didn't want to end up experiencing what the senior pastor did in my previous church, so I decided that the best course of action was to reverse what my senior pastor had done. He had put together plans for expansion, and then when conflict arose, created a task force to deal with it. It occurred to me that perhaps this is backwards. Perhaps the task force should come first. If I loaded it with already trusted church leaders, then they could convince the congregation of the right path to take.

So I went about creating a task force. I spoke to the session about the need to renovate the sanctuary and to possibly do a small capital campaign to raise funds to do the proposed specific renovations. I then asked the session to help me create a task force to lead us. I outlined for the session what I thought the qualifications for serving would be:

- They would represent the different ages and theological positions of our church (we didn't have a very racially diverse congregation, so racial/ethnic diversity wasn't an issue).
- They would have some sort of ability in property, interior design, or at least what seems like good judgment in these kinds of issues.
- They would have a desire to seek what God wants for the sanctuary, a sensitivity to the congregation's needs, and an ability to work well with others.
- They would be willing to serve on a task force for about five months.

The session gave me a list of about eight names and I agreed that I would invite them and explain the process. We wanted a task force of five members. Within three weeks we had our Sanctuary Task Force ready to go. In our monthly newsletter, we explained to the congregation what their purpose was, who was on the task force, and what the outcome would be.

I met with the task force initially and did a short training session that focused on several areas. I explained to them the purpose, which was to renovate the sanctuary in a way that had a clear theological purpose underlying it; a clear spiritual focus on helping people experience God through the aesthetics; and a clear understanding functionally of what we needed in terms of space, lighting, and sound. I also set the agenda. Over the course of five months they would read articles about worship in order to give them a foundation for thinking through what we should do. They would visit other sanctuaries in the region to get an idea of what's possible. My role was to select the articles to read and to suggest the church sanctuaries to visit. I was part of the task force for the first three months, leading discussions on the readings. Their final two meetings were without me. I wanted them to own their decisions, with no one thinking that their proposal was really mine. They had my suggestions, and that was part of the mix, but it was their judgment that I wanted to be put forth.

In the end, their suggestions were better than anything I could have anticipated. They had pretty much thought of everything. They had thought theologically about the sanctuary, reworking our pulpit, lectern, baptismal font, and communion table so that there was an emphasis on Word and sacrament. They proposed getting rid of the lectern, and placing the baptismal font in its place. They proposed putting the communion table between the pulpit and the baptismal font in a way that created a triangular (Trinitarian) pattern between the three. They also said that they wanted the structure to lead everyone's eyes up to the cross at the front. They also suggested that we add theatrical lighting and sound to accommodate a better worship experience, and to be adaptable to our drama program, which used the sanctuary once a year. They also made a number of other proposals, all that became part of our eventual renovations.

What was key was that it was their proposal, not mine. Because I had worked in a way that helped them take ownership, I also enhanced their trust in me. They saw me as empowering the congregation to what was right for them, rather than bullying them into what I wanted. The leaders of the task force ended up leading the congregation through the renovations. I was really pleased at how well this worked; and I now had a template for future transformations of the church.

A Legacy of Transformational Task Forces

Over the years, this template of using transformational task forces (TTFs) led us through many changes: the restructuring of our session and committee system, the purchasing of property next to the church, the restructuring of our Sunday morning worship and education times, the creation of a supplemental songbook, an expansion and renovation project (one task force to suggest what we need, another to work with an architect on plans, and another to work on the decor), and a present task force looking at how we might change our worship services to meet a new generation that isn't coming to church. In each case, the task forces have led the congregation through the transformations with very little resistance, and a lot of success.

Initially, before developing a policy of creating specific, targeted task forces, we had set up a long-range planning task force (LRPTF) much as other churches do. After a few years I realized that I was treating it more like a short-term transformational task force that was in place longterm. I had an epiphany: when looking for long-term task force

members, we were focusing too little on whether they had the skill to investigate a particular possibility for the church, and too much on whether they would agree to a three-year term.

This “aha” moment came to me as the task force studied what we might need to do architecturally if we kept growing at our present pace. The “aha” came during the consulting architect’s meeting with our task force and session to go over possible plans. At the end of his presentation, a member of the LRPTF raised her hand and said, “I have another suggestion. Instead of looking at construction, why don’t we just ask all those people who want the church to grow to leave and start their own church?” I was stunned. I thought secretly to myself, “Wow! If we did that, she and a handful of others would be left with this big building, and 70 percent of the congregation would leave with the staff and me.” I realized that LRPTFs, by nature of being longterm, don’t call forth members who have the targeted skills to lead the congregation through a specific task. They focus on getting people who will serve for three years. Targeted, short-term task forces have the advantage of attracting people with specific, harmonious talents. Within a year we disbanded the LRPTF.

Since then any time we have faced a major transition or transformation, we have created a specific TTF to lead us through. Each time, the process has led to a better way of moving forward.

Setting Up Transformational Task Forces

In originally setting up these task forces, I was going on intuition as to how to proceed. Now, looking back on 16 years of employing them, I recognize basic rules that are important to creating healthy and effective task forces:

1. *Overcoming the Curse of Knowledge:* One of the primary benefits of these TTFs is that they overcome what Chip and Dan Heath, researchers in the field of marketing, call “the curse of knowledge.” This is the reality that “Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has ‘cursed’ us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily recreate our listeners’ state of mind.”¹ All pastors are cursed by their seminary education, the “groundbreaking” books they’ve read, and the numerous conferences they’ve attended. They forget that their members haven’t had this training. What seems like such small steps for us pastors may feel like miles to our members. TTFs bridge that curse of knowledge by exposing members to ideas and concepts that the pastor knows but has a hard time communicating. Having the TTF members spend 8 months reading different resources, they gain knowledge that they can pass along to the members at large when proposing changes.
2. *Pastor as Resource:* One of the great things about TTFs is that the pastor doesn’t have to be responsible for generating the ideas. Instead the pastor becomes the resource person introducing new ideas to the members while letting them generate their own conclusions. Typically, when establishing a TTF, I assemble materials for them to read and then distribute them once a month. I make sure not to overwhelm them with too much (our curse of knowledge can afflict our choice of readings, too). For example, right now we have a Future of Worship Task Force

that is considering changes we may need to make to reach the younger generations, while remaining a multi-generational church. So each month I've had them read selections from books as diverse as *Emerging Worship* by Dan Kimball, *Reformed Worship* by Howard Rice and James Huffstutler, *Turn Your Church Inside Out* by Walt Kallestad, and my *In God's Presence*. In choosing resources, I try to be wide-ranging to look at all possibilities. Also, we have the members of this 15-person task force visit a different church each month. We've sent them to several emergent churches, a few contemporary ones, a very traditional High-Church one, an African-American one, and a Taizé service. I expose them to ideas and services that I already have experienced so that our collective knowledge can become equivalent.

3. *Pastor as Facilitator*: In the actual meetings, my role is not one of pushing ideas. I facilitate the discussions. In the task force mentioned above, we meet for an hour-and-a-half. For the first hour we discuss the readings and the church visits. I allow the discussions to be wide-ranging. My main focus is the question, "What really hit you or touched you in the readings and/or visit?" I emphasize that no one is "right" or "wrong" in her or his perceptions. This is just a time to share. For the last thirty minutes I ask the group to offer "takeaways." These are insights or thoughts that they had from the readings or the visits that they believe might work at Calvin Presbyterian Church.
4. *Turning Takeaways into Proposals*: The assignment for the last two meetings of any TTF is to take all of the monthly takeaways and turn them into a proposal for the session. I push them to turn the takeaways into practical plans that can be implemented over time. The first of these two meetings is a time to look at all the takeaways and ask, "What might work at Calvin Presbyterian Church?" This is a distilling of all possibilities to those that seem to fit with our church culture, our vision, and our community. It is a distilling down. We spend the last meeting refining those takeaways and turning them into a solid proposal that includes a rationale for why. Underlying this process is my asking, "What do you sense God wants us to do at Calvin Presbyterian Church?" The pastor's role after that becomes to be the scribe, writing up the proposal in a format that can be handed out to the session members in written or projected presentation form.
5. *Proposing to the Session and the Congregation*: When it comes time to make the proposal, it is the members of the TTF who make the proposal. As pastor, my role is simply to make sure that they get a fair hearing. I neither push what they say, nor defend it. But I do clarify when necessary, helping to make clearer a proposed point or rationale. I also push the idea to the TTF members that we have to help the session overcome the curse of knowledge. If the session agrees to the proposal and decides to implement it, I then ask them to join the TTF in presenting the ideas to the congregation. Again, my role is to clarify if needed. I really allow the task force and session members be the ones to lead the congregation. I also make sure that any explanation that may go into a newsletter, bulletin, or e-mail is clear. But I am very aware that my role is not to be the defender of the presentation. If the leaders of the church cannot persuade the members, then it tells me that the idea may be right, but the timing may not.
6. *Pastor as Implementer*: A final role I have, if the proposal is accepted, is to be the person responsible for making sure the plan is implemented properly. In some ways I become the institutional memory of the church. Board members may change, the task force may go away, but I am the one left making sure the proposal becomes practice.

Ultimately the point of TTFs is to lead churches through transitions and transformations in a healthier way that allows church leaders to lead the congregation, rather than to put pastors on point, where they are more likely to be attacked. As pastors, this way of doing things calls on us to have a different role—to be teachers, resourcers, facilitators, and implementers. It allows us to let leaders lead members, while we become leaders of the leaders.

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¹Chip and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 20

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