



# Learning and Transformation

RESOURCES FOR CONVERSATIONS  
FROM THE TEXAS METHODIST FOUNDATION

## DOING THE MATH OF MISSION: FRUITS, FAITHFULNESS AND METRICS

### *Monograph 3-* PHRONESIS AND THE TASK OF FIGURING IT OUT FOR OURSELVES

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The *metrics monographs* are a series of five monographs addressing the mission of the Texas Methodist Foundation to support conversations on the purpose of ministry:

1. "Counting Resources and Measuring Ministry" (Released February 2013)
2. "Getting to the Why: Turning Intentions Into Outcomes" (Released April 2013)
3. "Phronesis and the Task of Figuring It Out for Ourselves" (Released August 2013)
4. "Counts, Measures and Conversations: Using Metrics for Fruitfulness"
5. "Be Careful What You Measure"

**The Strategic Direction of TMF:** The Texas Methodist Foundation will help the Church become more purposeful and more clearly focused on her God-appointed mission through the integration of financial and leadership resources.

**Our Intent:** The invitation of the Texas Methodist Foundation is for you to use this monograph to support conversations of learning among leaders within your church or conference.

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# PHRONESIS AND THE TASK OF FIGURING IT OUT FOR OURSELVES

Monograph #3 in a series of five Metrics Monographs on *Doing the Math of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness and Metrics*

BY GIL RENDLE

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*Cat: Where are you going?*

*Alice: Which way should I go?*

*Cat: That depends on where you are going.*

*Alice: I don't know.*

*Cat: Then it doesn't matter which way you go.*

- Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Congregations and annual conferences, like most nonprofit organizations, notoriously don't know where they are going or what difference they are trying to make. Congregations and annual conferences, like all nonprofits, are driven by an ideal. People should be healthy. Abuse should stop. The ecology should be protected. Christians should behave as disciples of Christ. Beyond their stated ideal, it is difficult for nonprofits, including congregations and annual conferences, to get specific about what must change or be accomplished in order for the ideal to come closer to reality. We know what we do (our normal activities), but have lost our certainty about why we do it (our purpose). Having lost certainty about why we are to act, we have simply acted with certainty – and, in the case of the mainline church, we have pursued what we already know how to do with such certainty that we have lost relevance to a world that has changed around us. As Yogi Berra is to have famously said, "If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else."

**In this series of monographs on metrics in the church, a central argument is that a congregation or annual conference must claim their call to make a clearly defined difference in their own mission field in order to be fruitful.** There must be a specific difference to be made. In the previous monograph, the working definition of that stated difference was framed as an outcome: "For the church, an outcome is the difference that you believe God has called you to make in the next chapter of your life."

With a clearly defined outcome before us, we can measure our way toward making that difference; and with an outcome shaped by the presence of Christ in our lives and in our communities, we will find ourselves both fruitful and relevant. Without a clearly defined outcome that describes what is to be, we are left only counting what is – how much and how many we have, how much and how many we wish we had.

## THE NECESSITY OF OUTCOMES

Consider the example of a well-established and vital Presbyterian church in the mid-West with a widely known reputation for its adult Christian Education program. The program was centered around regular Sunday morning lessons taught by regional and national experts which could, at times, include former presidents of the United



States, Nobel Prize winning scientists, or acclaimed and prize winning poets. The church leaders were very proud of their program and the resources they spent on its excellence and reputation.

In the midst of very careful strategic planning in this congregation, some data was brought to the attention of the adult education staff and leaders by the planning team. Over the past five years, two very clear trends had developed in the participation level of people in this church. The first trend showed that participation in the highly acclaimed adult education program was clearly shrinking. The second trend was that the number of children, nursery level through sixth grade, was growing rapidly. The planning team was raising a question informed by the data: there were clearly more and more children in the Christian education program who were being brought to the church by their parents, but there was no parallel growth in the adult program to reflect the participation of those parents. What was going on?

The planning team convened two small groups of parents whose children participated in the Sunday school program but who, themselves, did not participate in the adult education offerings. Yes, the parents knew about the exceptional adult education opportunities at the church. And, yes, after dropping off their children for Sunday School, many of the parents went off to Starbucks as couples, sometimes as small groups, for conversation. When asked why by the planning team, the basic message was: yes, the parents knew who was speaking at the adult gathering, but after a pressured and hectic week of attending to work, family and everyone else's needs, the last thing these young parents were interested in was another lecture to pay attention to. Instead they sought conversation with people who shared their life experience and who could offer understanding and support.

When the results of the conversations with the parents were reported to the adult education committee, the committee's first response was... "Well, we're going to have to get better speakers for our program."

From a distance, it is easy to see that the response of "better speakers" to attract people who don't want to listen to lectures is a wrong answer. **But for our purposes, it is worth exploring how natural the reach for such "wrong answers" is and why clear outcomes and appropriate strategies for effective ministry are so necessary.**

- 1. The propensity to action:** Perhaps one of the most difficult hurdles for leaders to manage is the propensity to move to immediate action. When faced with a "problem" the natural inclination of leaders is to move to action – do something to fix the problem. However, the immediate move from problem to action precludes learning what is new in the situation that might require a different response. This propensity commonly leads to the adage that "When people don't know what to do, they do what they know."
- 2. The power of the priming effect:** In an article by church consultant Jeff Bullock, the work of economist Daniel Kahneman is brought to bear on how congregations make decisions.<sup>1</sup> Kahneman notes the power of the priming effect – that once we have had frequent exposure to a word, concept or number, our thinking is conditioned to recognize that word, concept or number again. "If we read the word 'eat' enough times," writes Bullock, "the next time we see a word that could be read as either soup or soap, we're likely to choose soup." The longer that congregational leaders are exposed to Christian education as the sharing of information and ideas by experts, the more likely the logical fix to a struggling program would seem to be better speakers and better lectures. The leaders were primed to recognize a particular response to their problem, even if they themselves knew that it wouldn't help.



3. **The trap of the focusing illusion:** Here again, using Kahneman’s work, Bullock points to the dilemma of the focusing illusion – the psychological tendency to “substitute an easier question for a more difficult question when the more difficult question has no immediate or obvious answer.” The far easier question for the adult education leaders was how to contact and schedule excellent lecturers for their adult classes. The much more difficult question was how to do Christian formation with young adults who are worried about their families, marriages, careers, and the world their children live in, and who wanted their faith to make a difference in how they live as they manage their concerns. Faced with the difficult question of Christian formation, the adult education leaders easily substituted a more familiar question of Christian education programming for which they already had a known answer.
4. **The wish for an easy answer:** We do wish for easy answers, for silver bullets, for proven programs, for implementable solutions. When paradigms shift, when deep change is needed, our very assumptions, values and behaviors are questioned. The real challenge is to re-invent the very world we live in. However, we have been primed by an earlier time to expect that leadership is about applying solutions and to expect that committees are about making decisions and implementing action. We would much prefer the former way in which someone gives us the answer to our dilemma and let us go to work on what we know how to do.

**Getting clear about outcomes (intended differences), the subsequent strategies (the means of achieving intended differences), and the appropriate use of the metrics of measuring is essential to purposeful ministry, and is the subject of this monograph.** A congregation must actively set itself to align with a difference that God dreams of for the corner of the Kingdom in which the congregation finds itself. Central to the argument is the idea that a clear, specific and measurable outcome is necessary to align the purpose of the church with God’s intention. It was the lack of a clear, measurable outcome that confounded the leaders in the Presbyterian example above and that led leaders down the false path of protecting an established program, rather than set bolder goals of making a difference in the lives of young adults that would require different strategies of them.

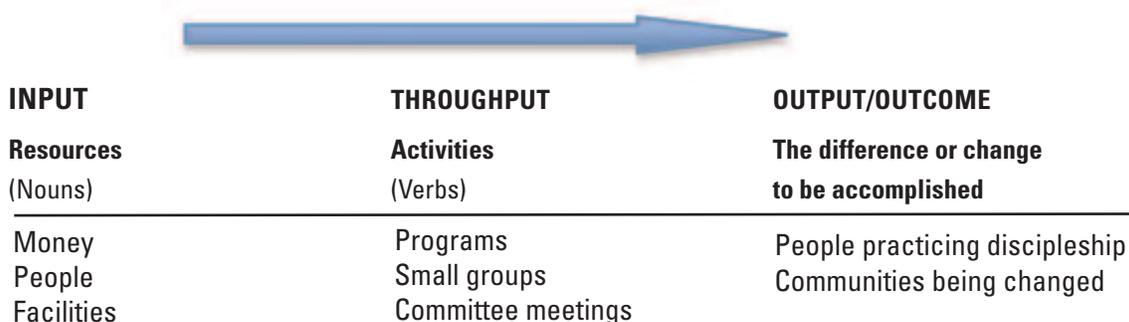
Inherent in the purpose of the church is a commitment to a changed way of being – that an encounter with Christ brings change to a person’s life and that people changed by their encounter with Christ, in fact, become the instrument of God by which change is brought to the world. **A clear outcome, describing the change the people believe is called for by God and given to them to achieve, provides a congregation with purpose and identity that is essential to vitality. Yet, the identification and claiming of clear and measurable outcomes is some of the most difficult work that leaders of a congregation will do because it involves discernment, making choices, continual learning and boldness.** Getting to a clear outcome also requires understanding metrics and the difference between counting and measuring.

## **COUNTING AND MEASURING (AGAIN)**

In the first of this series of monographs, I made the distinction between counting and measuring, suggesting that counting gives attention to numbers that are most directly related to resources and activities. Measuring, I argued, is more related to change and offers tools to assess how far a congregation has moved toward an intended outcome it believes is its call by God to achieve.



The Deming systems model that I used to make this distinction is as follows:



Clearly both counting and measuring are essential to a congregation. Yet counting and measuring are different tools and serve different functions in the life and purpose of the congregation. Let's go deeper in our distinction between the two.

| <b>COUNTING</b>  | <b>MEASURING</b>  |
|--|---|
| <b>Focus is on resources and activities – what currently <i>is</i></b> | <b>Focus is on outcomes – intended differences of <i>what is not yet</i></b>        |
| <b>Answers questions of how many, how often and how much</b>           | <b>Answers the question of how far have we moved toward our intended difference</b> |
| <b>Indicators of strength, health, potential</b>                       | <b>Indicator of movement toward the goal</b>  |
| <b>Related to vitality</b>   | <b>Related to purpose</b>   |
| <b>Axiomatic and belonging to all congregations / conferences</b>      | <b>Unique and specific to the individual congregation / conference</b>              |

### **VITAL CONGREGATIONS – KNOWING WHERE *COUNTING* FITS IN**

As a part of the denominational “Call to Action” initiated by the Council of Bishops a vitality index was established for United Methodist congregations based on the research reported in the Towers and Watson report of June, 2010. Key indicators of vitality (growth, engagement, involvement, giving) were identified that were used as measures by which 32,288 United Methodist congregations were screened. From the screening 15% of the total number of congregations surfaced as being vital. Further measures and comparisons of this 15% of congregations were taken. From a list of more than 100 ministries and strategies, Towers and Watson



found that vital congregations had 16 variables in common. These 16 variables were identified as “drivers” of vitality, which clustered around four central foci of church life and ministry.

The 16 indicators of congregational vitality were then used to establish a benchmark of vitality, a standard that was then determined to be met by only 15% of United Methodist congregations. Much of the denominational focus of the “Call to Action” has been on increasing the number of vital congregations. Indeed, the adaptive challenge for the denomination is now identified as the need to radically redirect our attention and resources to increase the number of vital congregations, as measured against the benchmarks of the Towers and Watson research. In a variety of ways, the counting related to vital congregations has been at the foundation of most of the annual conference dashboards to which individual congregations report their own data in an on-going process.

It is worth reviewing the benchmarks from this research and the work of the Council of Bishops’ “Team Vital” led by Bishop John Schol. Through this work we now have a vitality index which identifies the actual metric or percentage that a congregation needs to achieve in order to meet the established benchmark for vitality:<sup>ii</sup>

## **GROWTH**

- On average, US highly vital congregations increase worship attendance by 4% over five years. The average worship attendance change for all US churches is -7%.
- On average, US highly vital congregations increase the number of professions of faith by 82% over five years. The average change in the number of professions of faith for all US churches is -11%.

## **INVOLVEMENT**

- On average, US highly vital congregations have 106% of their worship attendance involved in a small group or some ongoing study opportunity. This number may seem inaccurate, but it exceeds 100% because the average worship attendance does not include some people who go to small groups like children in Sunday School or youth in youth group. The average for all US churches is 5%.
- On average, US highly vital congregations have 9% of their worship attendance who are young adults involved in study groups that include Bible study, Sunday School, and other groups for learning. The average for all US churches is 5%.
- On average, US highly vital congregations have 56% of their total professing members in average worship attendance. The average for all US churches is 51%.

## **ENGAGED**

- On average, US highly vital congregations have 20% of their worship attendance engaged in a volunteer in mission ministry. The average for the US is 8%.
- On average, US highly vital congregations have 6% of their worship attendance that join by profession of faith or are restored in a given year. This does not include confirmands. The average for US churches is 2%.

## **GIVING**

- US highly vital congregations give 100% of their apportionments for the most current year.
- On average, US highly vital congregations grow mission giving by 12% over five years. The average for all US churches is -15%.
- On average, US highly vital congregations grow non-capital spending by 22% over five years. The average for all US churches is 2% over five years.



Given the argument of these monographs, there are several points to be made about the focus on vital congregations and the dashboard counting of many of our annual conferences that is related to directing our denominational attention and resources to increasing the number of vital congregations.

- 1. The attention to vital congregations is absolutely essential to the mission and ministry of the United Methodist Church.** Increasing the number of vital congregations is not a new institutionalism motivated by a denomination that needs to increase its resource base to sustain the denominational structure and commitments already in place. In fact, the current denominational structure and commitments are very much under scrutiny for what is needed for a mission-based future. Our mission as the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ and to transform the world. Disciples are made in community, primarily in local congregations. **If the United Methodist Church is sincere in its call and commitment to making disciples, we simply need more vital congregations to fulfill our mission.** We need more congregations with a passion for making disciples, with an awareness of the tools and resources needed for making disciples, and with the vitality to do the work.
- 2. The vitality index is an invaluable tool of health for all congregations.** The vitality index is a “benchmark.” A benchmark is defined as “a standard or point of reference against which things may be compared or assessed.” One of the primary tasks of leadership in all organizations is to first draw the honest picture of the current reality of the organization. If a benchmark of vital congregations is the increase in worship attendance by 4% over five years, it is important for leaders of a local congregation to know where they stand in relationship to that benchmark. If their worship attendance has plateaued or declined over the past five years, it raises questions about vitality for the future and the potential for making disciples. **Benchmarks very appropriately draw attention to critical issues of health and performance and give feedback to direct future action.** Like one’s blood pressure, weight, or cholesterol, which are all standard benchmarks of health monitored and used to direct action by one’s physician, there are benchmarks appropriate to organizations, congregations included. Benchmarks are to be used by leaders to be honest about the current reality, to assess potential and need for change, and to direct attention and action toward health and vitality.
- 3. The focus of the work on vital congregations and the vitality index is appropriately related to resources and activities – it is dependent on counting.** Vitality is not an end goal for a congregation: it is a measure of the potential of the congregation for accomplishing the real outcome of ministry, which is making disciples and changing the world. Vitality is a measure of resources and activities – how many people at worship, how many groups, how many involved in mission, how much money? “If one of you wanted to build a tower, wouldn’t you first sit down and calculate the cost to determine whether you have enough money to complete it? Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down to consider whether his ten thousand soldiers could go up against the twenty thousand coming against him?” (Luke 14: 28, 31) **Leaders must know who they are, what resources they have, and what resources they need for the demands of their future.**
- 4. As a tool of counting, the vitality index belongs to all congregations.** A benchmark is a standard against which all related organizations measure themselves. While the standard may not easily fit all, and while there may be community, demographic or historic reasons for a congregation to be at variance from the standard, nonetheless, a benchmark is a standard against which all are to be measured.



5. **The vitality of a congregation is not the same as the purpose of a congregation.** Vitality is related to the resources of the congregation and its potential for mission. Purpose is related to the intended outcome of the work and ministry of a congregation and, as such, must be individually determined and must use individually determined measurements of progress toward the intended difference. Getting clear about this distinction is critical to leaders knowing when to use the tools of counting and when to use the tools of measuring.

## WHAT THEN? VITALITY FOR WHAT?

If vitality is a counting of resources – indicators of strength, health and potentially applicable to all congregations – the obvious next question is, resources for what? To what is the strength, health and potential of a congregation to be bent? For that answer leaders must turn to the work of identifying specific outcomes unique to the individual congregation or annual conference and the use of appropriately developed measures to monitor progress toward that outcome. It is a work of a different order. **While counting can be done at any time because of its focus on resources and activities, measuring depends upon, and can only be employed, if there is a clear and specific outcome to measure against.**

The reality is that any metric that is applied to all congregations or conferences has its limits and is confined to limited use. **Mission is global but strategy is local.** While the mission of making disciples and transforming the world belongs to all United Methodist annual conferences and congregations, the specific strategy by which that is to be done is determined by the local setting and the local needs. “Pastors cannot readily assume that the assumptions they take into the pulpit, the illustrations they find most meaningful, or the sermon forms they most enjoy using will be equally accessible to, or meaningful for, their hearers,” writes Professor of Preaching Leonora Tubbs Tisdale. She presents preaching as an act of constructing “local theology – that is, theology crafted for a very particular people in a particular time and place.”<sup>iii</sup> Whatever the eternal truth of Christ, meaning must be found in the context of the immediate history of a people and the specific questions confronting them as individuals and as community. **Whatever the mission of the denomination, the immediate purpose of an annual conference or a local congregation must be framed by the local context and the gap that an annual conference or local congregation experiences between their stated mission and the current internal and external realities being lived.** Outcomes must reflect local theology and local mission.

The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world – a mission that belongs to all. But in the midst of that shared mission, the Greater New Jersey Conference experienced Hurricane Sandy, the second costliest hurricane in US history, in October 2012. The Western Pennsylvania Conference sits in the center of the Marcellus Shale field, the Dakotas Conference has the Bakken Shale field in its boundaries, the conferences of Texas have four shale fields. With the shared mission for all conferences of making disciples and transforming the world, these annual conferences are all addressing that purpose in the context of the health and political questions of fracking, the fallout of “fraccidents,” work force “man camps” that spring up over night, stretching communities and human needs to their limits, and the imposition of new wealth on old congregations that have already lost their purpose beyond survival. The newly forming Rio Texas Conference, in the southern half of Texas, is a predominantly Anglo institution in a territory in which Hispanics are already more than 50% of the population. **How to make disciples and change the world is a question that belongs to all of these conferences, but the specific**



**strategies for making disciples and changing the world must be unique to the local setting and measured by the local needs.** The better question for each of the conferences is how are they to make disciples and how are they to transform their part of the world given the reality of their setting. The measurable outcomes of each conference must focus on what they specifically need to next put in place in order to get closer to their purpose of making disciples and changing the world.

Consider a small city church, with regional membership, surrounded by at-risk youth in an urban poverty environment. Compare such a church to a suburban congregation with a growing component of young families with dual income earning parents who are stressed by the very thin margins of their lives. Or compare these to a county seat church of white Anglos located in a demographic area quickly growing with people of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, or a rural congregation with a membership of average age in the 70s that is being surrounded by new construction in which the homes for incoming families will be larger than their church building. If these are all United Methodist churches, they all share the same mission and all should be very aware of, and attending to, their vitality index – a requirement for all. But their local theologies, their individual outcomes and their specific strategies to move toward making disciples and changing the world that surrounds them must be unique and specific to the corner of the Kingdom of God to which they have been assigned.

## **“I GO AWAY” – FIGURING IT OUT WHERE WE ARE**

When it comes to the general and universal, the mission, goals, and metrics can be equally given to all. It is both appropriate and important for the Council of Bishops to mount a research initiative to provide uniform guidelines and benchmarks of vitality that can guide congregations to the accomplishment of shared mission. When it comes to the local and unique, however, the mission, goals and metrics need to be determined and decided in the specificity of the context in which they will be lived. **The general can be given to all. The specific we need to figure out for ourselves.**

“But now I go away to the one who sent me.” said Jesus to his disciples. “I have much more to say to you, but you can’t handle it now. However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you in all truth.” (John 16: 5, 12-13)

Discernment means that we will not be told everything. We are a Trinitarian people – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father was disclosed by His Son, the Son was the embodiment for us to see and experience, but the Holy Spirit was given to help us discern the truth of the Father and Son in the daily context of our lives centuries after. Discernment means that we are going to have to figure some things out for ourselves – but not arbitrarily, of course. **Discernment is constant dialogue with the Spirit of God for our identity and purpose and in constant dialogue with our unique context for the clear and specific need that we are called to make different in the lives of people and their shared life in community.** Within that constant dialogue with the Spirit of God and the needs about us, we need to figure out the next appropriate difference that we are to make in the place where we are located.



## PRACTICAL WISDOM – “PHRONESIS”

The subtitle of the book *Practical Wisdom* by Schwartz and Sharpe is “the right way to do the right thing.” When it comes to making decisions about the right way and right thing, they note:

Generally we reach for one of two tools. The first tool is a set of rules and administrative oversight mechanisms that tell people what to do and monitor their performance to make sure they are doing it. The second tool is a set of incentives that encourage good performance by rewarding people for it.<sup>iv</sup>

But rules and incentives are not sufficient, they observe. What is left out is the essential wisdom that comes from the specifics facing the individual – practical wisdom, identified as phronesis by Aristotle. “Without this missing ingredient, neither rules (no matter how detailed and well monitored) nor incentives (no matter how clever) will be enough to solve the problems we face.”<sup>v</sup> Phronesis requires figuring it out for ourselves and making choices.

Plato, Aristotle’s teacher, saw wisdom as theoretical and abstract, a gift given only to a few. For contemporary Christians these few might be the mystics and the great leaders who could, by God’s hand, see what others could not. Indeed, many of us still wish for these great few who can tell us what to do, relieve us of the burden of decisions and who, when proven wrong or insufficient, can be blamed.

Aristotle, in contrast, saw that “our fundamental social practices constantly demanded choices – like when to be loyal to a friend, or how to be fair, or how to confront risk, or when and how to be angry – and that making the right choices demanded wisdom.” These are choices no one can direct for us. **Making choices, practical wisdom, requires the ability to honestly perceive the situation one is in, to have the appropriate feelings or motivations about the situation, to deliberate what could and should be done, and then to act. And such work is to be guided by the telos of the situation, Aristotle’s word for the purpose or aim of the act.**

The telos of teaching is to educate students; the telos of doctoring is to promote health and relieve suffering; the telos of lawyering is to pursue justice. Every profession – from banking to social work – has a telos, and those who excel are those who are able to locate and pursue it.<sup>vi</sup>

The telos of a United Methodist annual conference and a United Methodist congregation is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It takes phronesis, practical wisdom, to figure out how that telos will be given life in the local setting. It takes what the church calls discernment – to honestly perceive the situation one is in, to have the appropriate feelings or motivations about the situation, to deliberate what could and should be done, and then to act – all done with an openness and attentiveness to what the Spirit of God is calling for these people in this place.

## PHRONESIS AS THE PRACTICAL WISDOM OF FAITHFULNESS

How then is an annual conference or a local church to name a clear and specific outcome, an intended difference God intends for a specific people and place? How do we claim a clear and specific outcome against which we are willing to measure our progress?



We are accustomed to the linear logic of strategic planning. First we must figure out where we are now – Point A. Then we decide on where we want to be – Point B. We then draw the difference between the two points and make a plan to get from Point A to Point B. Yes, all well and good.

However, **the real challenge in the current setting is that for an annual conference or a local congregation to name Point B requires discernment, courage and boldness.** Clearly and specifically, identifying Point B means making a choice among an array of possibilities to which we can direct our limited attention and resources. Indeed, having limited attention and resources requires that we make a mission-based choice. However, our established denominational and congregational norms make such clear choices difficult. We want everyone to have a voice. We want full agreement to move ahead. Norms such as these minimize our boldness because they set us in search of decisions that will make the most people happy and the fewest people angry. When listening so closely to the opinions and preferences of all the members and participants, it is very easy to miss the quieter voice of God that calls us to make a difference that goes beyond institutional preservation or personal satisfaction. Without a clear missional Point B, the church is reduced to an institution counting its resources and activities, worrying about money and members, and rewarding tiredness as if the completion of tasks and programs was the purpose of the church.

**A missional Point B is the outcome.** It is the intended difference that the people discern God calls them to make in their place and in this time. It is the difference to be achieved over the next three to five years that will be most important to measure progress against:

- An annual conference that commits to increasing the percentage of clergy under 35 years of age, so that new generations in the mission field can be served.
- A local church that commits to being the first place that the children and their parents from the school across the street will turn to in times of need.
- An annual conference that commits to increasing the number of highly vital congregations (using Team Vital benchmarks) and commits to learning how to measure disciple making.
- A local church that commits to making disciples (measured by the number of new professions of faith) or a willingness to forgive offenses (measured by an increase of civility toward others), an increase in the dependence on scripture to bring understanding to one's experience – or other markers of discipleship.
- An annual conference that commits to five new church starts (traditional new congregations) and three new faith community experiments (non-traditional efforts to reach the unchurched with the relevance of the Wesleyan faith).
- A local church that commits to serving the youth of their community, measured by the percentage of young people who graduate from high school with clear plans to attend college, a technical school, or enter the military.
- An annual conference that commits to ... add your boldest difference that you believe is needed to make your annual conference a fruitful instrument of making disciples and transforming the world.
- A local church that commits to ... add your boldest difference that you believe is needed to make your local church a fruitful instrument of making disciples and transforming the world.



## ORGANIC DISCERNMENT

To live into the new wilderness of a changed mission field now asks us to discern outcomes and commitments in a new, and much less orderly, manner. Where we once moved from Point A to Point B with confidence, discerning a clear and fruitful outcome now requires **an on-going act of intuition and learning.**

I am intrigued by William Duggan's work on strategic intuition. I will stick with my favorite definition of intuition as "practiced wisdom." However, Duggan goes beyond my simpler definition to describe three forms of intuition.<sup>vii</sup>

1. **Ordinary intuition** consists of vague hunches, gut instinct. It is a form of feeling, not thinking. It is shaped by our life experiences, and is commonly trustworthy.
2. The second form of intuition is **expert intuition**. This is a form of rapid thinking that allows us to jump to helpful conclusions because we recognize something familiar. Duggan notes that expert intuition is always fast and only works in familiar situations we have faced before.
3. The third form of intuition is **strategic intuition**, which unlike ordinary intuition, is thinking, not feeling and, unlike expert intuition, helps us bring clarity to unknown situations not encountered before. Duggan describes strategic intuition as a flash of insight that cuts through the fog of our mind with a clear and shining thought. It comes from connecting ideas and experiences that have already been there but find new form and importance as we put them together with purpose. However, the flash of insight is the product, not the process of strategic intuition. Strategic intuition itself is always slow, and it works for new situations, which is when we most need such intuitive insight.

Again, I believe we are being invited into the practice that the early church fathers identified as discernment. We slow down. We pray. We compare our experience to God's purpose using the regular reading and study of the scripture. We muse. We empty ourselves intentionally to make room for what is needed that goes beyond what we already know or what we already prefer. We talk with one another. We read books together. We play with new ideas. We look for new metaphors that help us see familiar things in new light. We dream. We wait. We listen. **These are all parts of the process of strategic intuition and very familiar to our understanding of discernment.** And then we are called. This calling is the flash of insight and deep feeling that comes with God's purpose. Our familiar circumstances connect in new ways with our prayers, our conversations, and our new learning and we "see" what it is that we are called to make different. **The lessons of discernment from the early church fathers tell us that the journey in the wilderness of a new and different mission field is to be determined much more by strategic intuition than by logical decision making by leaders and committees.**

Duggan notes "... (strategic planning) tells you to pick your desired objective and march toward it. ... (strategic intuition) tells you to wait for the decisive point when a combination of past examples can achieve a worthy goal."<sup>viii</sup> Strategic planning tells you to control the flow. Strategic intuition tells you to go with the flow. For a people who believe God is already active in our world, it is more appropriate to go with the flow of God's Spirit. We will not control it.



## **READY – FIRE – AIM: MOVING QUICKLY INTO SLOW DISCERNMENT**

**Discernment of God’s purpose in our lives, in our congregation, in our community is, therefore, a slow and on-going process of being open and being willing to live with questions.** It is not the quick decision making that we so much want from our leaders. On the other hand, we cannot wait. Our time is limited. As a United Methodist denomination we now are on a trajectory in which some 11,500 congregations may close in the next 17 years, based on current trends. As a United Methodist denomination, our average age is 22 years older than the national average for all people in the United States, a clear indication that we are now irrelevant to younger generations. As a United Methodist denomination, our greatest strength and attraction is within the Anglo middle class at a time when our nation is becoming less and less Anglo-centric and the middle class is disappearing into a changed configuration of a new upper class of educated elite and an exploding new lower class.<sup>ix</sup> **These few descriptions of current trends offer indisputable evidence that our denomination is unsustainable as it currently is and that we have only a few years to make significant changes. At the same time, discernment of God’s purpose and learning how to live in a new mission field is a long, slow, and faith-shaping experience.** The lesson we must now learn was stated by an experienced brain surgeon standing next to the resident surgeon in training who said, “Now remember, from the time you open the skull you only have three minutes before the patient experiences stress, **so work slowly.**”

The temptation, faced with a strong need to make deep changes that are both correct and quick, is to want to stand at Point A, get a clear sighting of Point B, and just go to work. It is the familiar path of strategic planning: Ready – Aim – Fire. But it only works in a controlled environment when Point B is both known and correct allowing us to stand at A (Ready), clearly seeing B (Aim), thus moving to quick action (Fire).

**Ours is not a time of Ready – Aim – Fire but rather a time of bold learning that instead asks of us Ready – Fire – Aim. Ready – Fire – Aim asks us to put action and discernment together.**

Consider this new challenge of Ready – Fire – Aim in the example of one person who found an important outcome to be addressed and then had to learn, step by step, how to address it – while doing it. Steve Rothschild launched Yoplait yogurt in the United States and went on to become executive vice president of General Mills. Sometime in the 1980s, working in the Twin Cities area, he became aware of issues of poverty and the barriers facing low-income adults living in generational poverty. Rothschild, after a considerable amount of personal discernment about what was pulling at his spirit and after some necessary homework about the situation he was observing around him, changed his work life and established Twin Cities RISE! (Responsible, Independent, Skilled, Employed) in the Minneapolis and St. Paul metropolitan areas of Minnesota. RISE! is a nonprofit dedicated to reducing poverty through job employment. As Rothschild tells his story, he is clear about how he set his hand to the task and then needed to learn, adjust, adapt, and change along the way: Ready – Fire – Aim.

“I founded RISE! in order to combat poverty in the Twin Cities, but before I could do that, I had to learn about poverty in the US,” he wrote.<sup>x</sup> He learned that most of the poverty programs operated on the assumption that once people got started on a path of economic self-sufficiency, they could simply bootstrap their way to success. However, as he explored poverty in America he learned of the difference between situational poverty (common to immigrants who need to begin life in a new place without employment and with few resources)



and generational poverty (in which people, after two or three generations of poverty, emerge with a damaged sense of self-worth that combines with a feeling of entitlement that makes someone else responsible for their situation and in which hopelessness brings them to the conclusion that action on their part will produce no change.)

The mission, purpose and metrics of RISE! are pretty straightforward, informed by research and well thought out:

**Purpose:** To reduce concentrated poverty (Generational poverty thrives in concentrated, economically depressed, mostly urban neighborhoods.)

**Mission:** To provide employers with skilled workers, primarily men of color. (RISE! accepts people of both sexes and all races but concentrates on impoverished men as the group underserved by most poverty programs designed to get people off welfare and, therefore, focus on custodial parents who are primarily women.)

**Strategy:** RISE! provides extensive training in two primary areas: operations (materials handling, warehousing, manufacturing and machine operations) and office support (customer service, clerical work, financial services and call centers).

**Outcome and Metrics:** RISE!'s metric of success is the number of graduates who get and keep a living-wage job with benefits for at least two years.

So, Rothschild and RISE! got ready – they identified the need and did the necessary homework to be clear about their purpose, mission, strategy, outcome and metrics. They fired – they got their program up and running.

And then they aimed. What is important for our consideration of setting outcomes in the church is that the bulk of the story of RISE!, as told in Rothschild's book, is about what they learned while they were doing their work and how it made them adapt and change their strategy, their program, their expectations, their requirements, their assumptions.

- They learned that the participants in their program needed to know the culture of business that was foreign to their experience, so RISE! chose a management structure for their own program that would reflect the structure of the companies in which their participants would find work.
- They learned that the offices of RISE! needed to be designed to replicate the offices of employers in order to accustom their participants to feel comfortable in their future surroundings.
- They learned to test their participants for drug use, not because many of the participants had a history of alcohol or drug abuse, but because drug testing was part of the culture of most of the employers where RISE! participants would seek employment.
- While the average length of time for a participant to complete the RISE! program was 13 months, it could take some people two years or more. RISE! continued to work with a participant for any amount of time necessary, as long as the participant was accountable for his or her work. But RISE! quickly learned that accountability required a positive system of beliefs, feelings and skills from their participants. To accomplish this part of the work required RISE! to move well beyond job training to teach a particular set of cognitive and emotional skills along with a positive belief system.



**The current situation of our United Methodist denomination and many of its congregations is that we must boldly act because we have a clear mission and a clear understanding of why we can't wait. But, like RISE!, we have much to learn as we do our work.** We must now learn about making disciples and making a difference in this new mission field in which we now find ourselves. We too are in the uncomfortable position of Ready – Fire – Aim. Significantly, Rothschild writes about being “learning driven” and notes that for new initiatives, one of the biggest barriers to experiential learning is over-planning! Too much planning delays startup and interferes with learning how to actually accomplish the difference one sets out to make. He notes that the best laid plans must change frequently, not because the planning was poorly done, but because we can't predict the future and must be prepared to learn from it.

The story of RISE! is inspiring and instructive. However, it is also large, complex, and demands resources and a full network of stakeholders. For many conferences and congregations, the story of RISE! will seem like too much to take on. **But, at its simplest, it is a story about dissatisfaction and discernment (seeing a world as God would have it, not as it is), about action (doing the homework, setting an outcome and getting started) and about shaping the path of mission as one goes (being willing to question results and learn from what does and does not work). Ready – Fire – Aim.**

Reduced to these simpler principles clear outcomes of ministry that make a measurable difference are well within the reach of any congregation or conference. A favorite example from noted consultant Lyle Schaller is about a very small family church that questioned its purpose and connected it to a young child in one of the families of the church who was physically challenged and attended a special school that could accommodate his needs. They connected the fact that they knew how to throw a birthday party and that Bobby, this young boy, had never been invited to a birthday party. So, they decided to make a clear difference and threw a birthday party for Bobby, encouraging him to invite his friends from school who also never got invited to birthday parties. They learned that special needs children can't participate in many things without a parent's presence and ended up with a real celebration of children and parents, all needing support. The party was so good that the church determined to have another birthday party next month, since surely it must be someone's birthday. This time the children who attended Bobby's party were encouraged to invite their friends (and subsequently those friends' parents). Quickly the church learned to build a bridge to its surrounding community. Having taken their first shot with Bobby's birthday party, they learned how to aim higher at making a difference in the lives of their full community. In the process, their own spirits were changed.

Disappointingly, it is fairly common to watch many congregations short-circuit their mission by practicing Ready – Fire – Quit. For example, one midsize urban congregation in Pennsylvania that I worked with determined that they had lost their connection with the community they lived in. All of their members now drove to church and almost no one from the neighborhood participated in the church. They planned a street fair – a very public event of games, music and food by which they intended to get to know their neighbors. (They got ready.) The day came, after much effort and considerable use of resources, and they set up their fair. (They fired.) And no one from the neighborhood came. The disappointment was palpable, and they began to argue with one another about what went wrong. (They quit.) A short time later, I was called to help them manage their argument. As I asked about their fair, I discovered that the primary way in which they “advertised” and invited their neighbors was through announcements from the pulpit. They were angry at their neighbors for not attending a fair that the neighbors didn't even know about. A “rookie mistake,” to be sure. However, had they been willing to learn, instead of fight, they could have easily re-aimed for their next



shot. Instead, they quit because of their unwillingness to learn from their first attempt and their lack of courage to try again to move toward a missional future.

## METRICS OF MEASUREMENT

It is here, at the intersection between an established outcome (providing graduates from RISE! who will get and keep a living-wage job with benefits for at least two years) and the continual learning and adapting that RISE! had to do to be successful in their mission, that the metrics of measurement belong. **“How far have we moved toward our outcome?”** This was the question that the church with the street fair desperately needed to ask. This is the question that measures achievement and progress but which also asks about next steps and what needs to be learned and tried next. It is similar to “performance management” in supervision. Performance management is a tool of supervision in an organization in which the supervisor regularly engages the person being supervised in a learning conversation about how far the person is progressing in their work toward expected outcomes. It is a regular conversation conducted monthly or bi-monthly that does not look at what went wrong but at what has happened so far and what needs to happen next. In our book on staffing and supervision in large congregations, Susan Beaumont and I offered a typical agenda of a performance management meeting:<sup>xi</sup>

### The Agenda

1. A Review of the past month (or two months):
  - What actions have you taken? These should be the details of performance since the last performance management meeting.
  - What discoveries have you made? This should be an account of formal and informal learning done since the last performance management meeting. What are the new insights, and from where did they come?
  - What partnerships have you built? What new relationships have been built, or what old relationships have been strengthened?
2. A forecast for the next time period:
  - What is your main focus now? What are the primary goals that will get your priority attention over the next month or months?
  - What are you planning to learn over the next month or months?
  - What new partnerships (new relationships or strengthening of old relationships) are you hoping to build over the next month or months?

The practice of performance management acknowledges that our efforts will naturally lead to new learning and the identification of next steps. It also acknowledges that we don’t do our work alone, that we must build relationships and coalitions to progress toward our outcome. **In the next monograph we will turn our attention to some of the actual measurement tools related to outcomes that can help the on-going learning and development of our work toward the outcome that God calls us to. But note for the time being that, like performance management, using the metrics of measurement does not evaluate our success (+ / -) but enables us to locate where we are so far in our work and where we need to go next.**



## GETTING TO OUR OUTCOME

Our natural default position is to think of an outcome as an answer – we assume that deciding what difference we are to make will solve our problem or answer our question. It feels as if A should lead to B. Fruitfulness of mission and ministry is much more dynamic than that. First steps lead naturally to second steps, even if **not anticipated. Questions addressed commonly lead to better questions. The value of the metrics of measuring is in constantly asking “how far” have we moved toward making the difference we are called to make. The constant asking of “how far” will teach us, guide us, and embolden us to more and more ministry, more and more fruitfulness, and more and more relevance to a world that wonders whether the church makes any difference at all.** Getting to our outcome is commonly not a straight path of making a decision and then acting. Rather, getting to our outcome is a continual process set by boldness and a belief in God’s difference in our world followed by on-going conversation and discernment marked by action, measurements, and learning. The nature or shape of an on-going outcome conversation may be thought of as follows:

1. Question God’s purpose for your church or conference for the next three to five years.
2. Dream big. Be bold about what you can make different because it moves you closer to fruitfulness in your purpose.
3. Commit to making a difference in the lives of people or your community, and name the difference, describing it as deeply as you can.
4. See how. Ask what other churches or conferences know about achieving your outcome. Search the literature. Use your own experience to learn next steps.
5. Work hard.
6. Measure results. Constantly track “how far” you are getting to your outcome.
7. Repeat again, starting with step #3.

## READY – FIRE – AIM

All nonprofit organizations find it difficult to set clear, measurable outcomes. It is hard to work our way from the ideal for which we exist to the necessary proximate steps we need to take in order to actually accomplish our ideal. It is one thing to know that, as a church, we are to make disciples and transform the world. It is quite a different matter to discern what required first and subsequent steps must be put in place in order to move us closer to that central purpose.

As leaders, it is important to understand that discerning God’s outcome for your congregation or conference “in your particular corner of the Kingdom” in which you have been placed, is a path fraught with distractions and emotions. In the midst of writing these metric monographs, the Texas Methodist Foundation hosted a gathering of about 40 leaders from across the US to explore the issues of metrics and outcomes. As a part of the day’s work, the group developed a “force field analysis,” a mapping of the drivers that help us move toward clear outcomes and of the resisters that block our path to getting clear about God’s dream for us. The list of resisters was very telling. As leaders begin the outcome conversation as outlined above, consider the many issues and reactions that may easily get in the way of clarity. A partial list of the resisters identified by the group includes:



- We resist a self-awareness that may indicate we are not doing what we are called to do.
- We don't know the Gospel stories enough to compel us to action.
- We suffer from the "tyranny of the urgent" – there are so many things we need to care for.
- We live with a theology of scarcity – aware of what we lack, not of what we can do.
- We are tired already, and a call to new work is too much.
- We lack opportunities to collaborate and to unite with others in purpose.
- It requires new learning for us, and we don't know how.
- We, quite frankly, like it the way it is and a clear outcome identifying a needed difference may work against our own satisfaction and preferences.
- I might need to change. If we go down this path, it might require some personal change in my own life.

Using the old strategic planning assumptions of moving from Point A to Point B, the variety of resisters named above will seem like a host of problems, all needing solutions in order to move ahead to a clear decision about God's outcome for our congregation or conference. **However, when approaching our leadership as an act of discernment, it becomes easier to see the list above as a potential agenda for work and learning that will bring us closer to God's call for our lives, our congregation, our conference.** We don't have time to solve all of the problems we face before we begin. As a church, as Christian community, we are currently unsustainable as we are.

**So... Ready – Fire – Aim. Get started. Ask the question of what purpose God has for you that will make a clear difference in the lives of people and in your community. Set an outcome that will make a difference that is both important and needed. Take some steps.** It may take you to Bible study to connect Gospel stories that are meant to compel you to action. It may make you confront your own anxiety of scarcity in which we never seem to feel that we have enough while living in the midst of the richest consumer society on the globe. It may require you to reach out to other congregations or conferences to learn from the experience of those who have already gone ahead. Measure your progress. Learn what you need to do next.

Dealing with these natural resisters are not barriers to fruitfulness. Rather, these are steps of discipleship – of learning how to be disciples and learning how to change the world. These are the conversations leading to clear purpose and measurable differences that we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, were meant to have.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> Jeffrey Bullock, "How We Make Choices: Congregations and the Psychology of Risk" *Christian Century* (June 12, 2013; Vol.130, No.12), 12-13.

<sup>ii</sup> Report of the Team Vital to the Council of Bishops, May, 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) xii.

<sup>iv</sup> Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010) 4.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid. 7.

vii William Duggan, *Strategic Intuition: The Creative Spark in Human Achievement* (New York: Columbia Business School Publishing, 2007) 2.

viii Ibid. 106.

ix Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960 -2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).

x Steve Rothchild, *The Non Nonprofit: For-Profit Thinking for Nonprofit Success* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 23.

xi Gil Rendle and Susan Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron: Staffing and Supervision in Large Congregations* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2007) 101-102.

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