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"Local Wisdom for a Time of Change"
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"The world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air."

Treebeard, a figure who combines rooted and ancient wisdom, offers this cultural-historical diagnosis in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Return of The King*. Peter Jackson later places Treebeard's words in Galadriel's mouth, introducing *The Lord of The Rings* within an unavoidable arc of change. In each case, Treebeard and Galadriel name the lived experience of people and communities of faith in North America.

The world of *has* change. This reality is *seen* in the shifting structures of institutionalize religion. Indeed, recent Pew data indicates that religion in the United States is changing at a rapid pace.

More significantly, however, this reality is *felt*. Like saline seeping through one's veins, the sensation may initially feel unperceivable, but it gradually grows stronger and begins to spread. For some, this feeling prompts despair, inviting grief for the things that have been (or will be) lost. For others, this feeling kindles hope, sparking creativity and a vision for the new things that will come into being.

During this period of decisive cultural-religious change, my research utilizes a novel qualitative method to examine the social structure and practical wisdom that directs adaptive change within communities of faith. Conventional approaches to the study of religious change either focus on a single type of religious organization (e.g., congregations, mosques, theological schools, non-profits, Christian colleges) or identify places and practices that enable people of faith to gather beyond organized bodies. My research, however, seeks to identify sites where these two approaches converge.

Accordingly, I identified centers in the Pacific Northwest where established religious organizations and live religious practices are mingling to support new forms of religious organization: The Parish Collective (PC) (Seattle, WA) and The Office of Church Engagement (OCE) (Spokane, WA). My research undertakes an extended case study of these two collaborative centers, which I characterize as 'hubs', that are practicing and cultivating a type of organizational leadership in order to enable networks of Christians—and the various organizations that support Christian communities—to pursue more effective and collective work.

Further, the Pacific Northwest's distinct religious climate, which includes established religious organizations and a history of religious entrepreneurship, provides a context to consider the expanding range of religious vocations and the organizational adaptations that may enrich religious communities and leadership within and beyond the region. According to recent research, the region has the capacity to serve as "a regional laboratory of demography indicating where North America north of the Mexican border is headed when it comes to religion."

The research supported by the Lived Religion in a Digital Age project proposed to map the networks that direct the adaptive work in and through these hubs. My preliminary findings are summarized below:

- While the proposed project identified these adaptive hubs as kindred responses to the challenges of 'post-Christendom', this research presents a more complex picture. Specifically, it identifies seven interrelated challenges that confront individuals across these hubs: relational engagement; leadership development; boundary zone work; post-Christendom; financial stability; loneliness and isolation; and connection to place. Although this catalogue reflects aspects of broader national and cultural trends that are typically identified as challenges for religious organizations (e.g., mainline Protestant decline, technological change, declining interest in religious vocations), the identification of these challenges offers a finer assessment of the presenting challenges that occasion adaptive change.
- These hubs share a similar network structure, but they are also different *kinds* of networks. For example, their formation reflects organizers' extended tenure in the region (in some cases, more than a decade) and a history of friendship. Nevertheless, they differ in two ways. The OCE network fosters partnerships between organizations—which may include and enhance individual connections—and has a higher financial barrier to entry. The PC network has historically emphasized the need for partnerships between individuals—which may include organizations—and has a lower financial barrier to entry. Further, the OCE network is geographically concentrated in the Pacific Northwest; the PC network emerged from the Pacific Northwest, but it has catalyzed other geographically concentrated networks beyond the region.
- Digital technologies serve to create content platforms and onramps that complement the adaptive work that organizes these hubs. Nonetheless, interpersonal connection remains an essential condition for the forms of collaboration and adaptability that marks these hubs.
- Each network exists within and in proximity to an ecology of other organizations. This 'ecclesial ecology,' which includes congregations, Christian colleges, theological schools, nonprofits, funders, theological schools, and grassroots faith expressions, possesses a dynamic quality that is constantly evolving in response *both* to internal pressures and the changing composition of this ecology
- Leadership within and across these hubs is marked by practices of listening, presence, connecting, and collaboration.

Amid this period of unmistakable change for religion in North America, the future remains unknown. For communities of faith and those who serve them, this period require practical wisdom to navigating this transition, enabling some practices and patterns to die with dignity and supporting the conditions for new life to emerge. If new patterns, practices, and social structures are to emerge, however, the place to look may be in the connections that organize a common life. As Niall Ferguson observes in *The Square and the Tower*:

> Networks are important not just as transmission mechanisms for new ideas, but as the sources of the new ideas themselves. Not all networks are likely to foster change; on the contrary, some dense and clustered networks have the tendency to resist it. But the point

of contact between diverse networks may be the place to look for novelty. The question is what the nature of the point of contact is (42).

Indeed, insofar scholars of religion and people of faith share a common interest in the new things that may emerge amid this period of change, the connection that organize a common life provide a good place to start. This research identifies two cases to consider, but similar collaborative centers may already exist or may be emerging, both within and beyond the Pacific Northwest.

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