

## A reflection as we approach Lent and our Annual Vestry Meeting

***“What’s next in this “new normal”?” Paul Silcox***

Let me begin with this story. One Sunday morning a priest was giving a homily and as he went on, he became more animated. As he made a sweeping gesture - he knocked all the pages of his sermon off the pulpit. He immediately went down to the floor and scrambled to pick them up. Once back in the pulpit, He looked out and asked, "Now, where was I?" A voice from the back of the congregation responded, "*Right near the end!*"

When we look into the face of this pandemic, ***we are not “right near the end of it”***, even with a vaccine.

During this pandemic some people have said that we are at the end of what we used to call normal...we are entering a “new normal”. If that is true and it looks like it is, then we all need to begin discovering our “new normal”.

Before we were confronted with COVID-19, some congregations were on a journey together using the Joining God: A remaking church initiative created by The Missional Network. This new initiative had challenged us to work on discerning, “where God was calling us to be in our communities?”.

Well, when this pandemic started, The Missional Network went to work in creating another initiative called, “*Leading Out of Crisis*”. The purpose of this initiative was to people talking about where God was leading them in the present moment and into the future.

The Missional Network says:

“What if this is ***not a time for fixing or getting new programs into place***, but of attending to, listening, or discerning what the spirit is saying to us? When the lockdown came we realized that so many of our normal practices and activities were stopped.

Many of us dove into planning and organizing ways of responding. We had to work out, quickly, how to put services on-line, how to be with those who cared for us in social distancing, how to manage the sudden drop in finances—a whole list of “how-to’s” that needed to be done. It was all quite hard work that, strangely, made us even more stretched than before.

But now, just as we are settling into some kind of, “new normal” this other question is starting to be asked. **What comes next?**

If there isn’t going to be a return to things as they were before, if our roles are going to change, if something is happening to our people through this period-how do we as clergy prepare for the next chapter and ho do we lead our people into it and through it in ways that discern and integrate our life what the spirit is saying to us?”

So how do we listen to what the spirit is saying to us in this special time?

I believe it requires us to have a plan. But how do you make this plan? In order to have a plan you need to understand the lay of the land, how people are living.

It reminds me of the priest who was called to a church in the slums of India. The first thing she did was go out and talk with the people in her parish. Then she went out into the community that surrounded the church, listening to people’s stories. It was only after hearing the people’s

versions of the way they were living that she could then hear the way the spirit was leading her to begin looking at a new plan for their church

With the help of other leaders in her church they developed a plan. The church didn't grow in leaps and bounds but it maintained its status in the community in a whole new way. It became a healing church that helped people to grow and prosper.

We are now living in a time where we are being called to discern where God's spirit is leading us. It is not about everyone doing a program that will get us through this. Instead it is about taking the initiative to listen to God's spirit which works through the people both in the church and in the community. This is what the "*Leading Out of Crisis Initiative*" is about. It is an organized way to help people talk and share their stories about how their lives have been shaped by this pandemic.

It begins with the idea that people are beginning to ponder about what the church will look like moving forward.

But it also encourages people to have conversations about what they are experiencing right now in their lives.

This resource begins with three postures.

1. Don't get caught up in to-do lists.

We need to watch that we don't focus on keeping ourselves busy with the day to day maintaining the church status quo.

2. Focus on the work of your people.

The work of the church is not just on maintaining the church as it was—church services, following through the church seasons and so on.

The work right now is how to lead people to discern what has been happening and what it means for us to be God's people in our community.

3. Reflect together on your experiences.

No one person, whether clergy or laity has the answer forward.

This is a time to invite our leadership to reflect on their experiences over the past months and discern what these experiences might mean for being the church in a world we can't expect.

In this resource they give ideas to help create a group or groups of people to begin this journey of reflecting, storytelling and discerning the spirit.

There are four sessions which all have four elements to them.

1. Our stories

2. Our stories beyond our own

3. Our stories and church life

4. Discovering a new normal

The four elements for each section are:

A) Each session begins with the, "Dwelling Of The Word", time to listen to God through scripture and one another.

B) Sharing stories around a question: What are you noticing that is different in your neighbourhood due to COVID-19?

C) What are you hearing about what is happening in your neighbourhoods? Three questions are given to the group for discussion.

D) For next time: You are asked to do some personal reflection around three questions that are given. The answers to these questions are discussed in the next session which will lead into the topic of the following session.

Sara Jane Roxburgh Walker at The Missional Network in Vancouver told me that there are other congregations in the Anglican Communion using this resource which is helping them move forward in new ways.

This resource link is: [www.themissionalnetwork.com/lead](http://www.themissionalnetwork.com/lead).