



Rebuilding the Altar

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Rebuilding Worship for a Church in Ruins

Graham Standish and Tammy Wiens

Beginning in June 2014, we formed a clergy team for a unique presbytery experiment in congregational renewal. Embedded in this experiment was the larger question: When a church has been decimated to almost nothing, is renewal and rebirth possible, or is it too late? Could we revitalize a congregation—specifically, Trinity Presbyterian Church in Butler, Pennsylvania—that had gone through a crisis and had lost almost 90 percent of its membership? Our hope for Trinity Church was to reclaim the original purpose of the congregation—to recapture the *why*. The challenge is that congregations aren't used to focusing on the *why* of church. As pastors and spiritual leaders, we are much more comfortable with focusing on *what* we do, and on *how* we do it. Rarely do we ask churches what their purpose is—what their *why* is.

We began our experiment full of hope for what God could, and would, do through this congregation. A fresh season of worship and renewal carried us through the summer months. The enhanced energy continued into the fall and escalated through Advent, as it catapulted us into Christmas. We joyfully celebrated Epiphany. And then . . .

We'd put so much prayer, preparation, and planning into Advent-Christmas-Epiphany that the January gloom snuck up on us seemingly out of nowhere. There was a momentary lapse in memory and we had to ask again, "Why are we doing this?" The weather got colder, the nights seemed longer, and the chill numbed our imagination as Ordinary Time ticked by. The gray days threatened to drain our imagination for our ongoing renewal effort. It is really hard to keep asking *why*. It is always easier to

slip into focusing on *what* and *how*. Then the soft wind of the Spirit blew into our hearts and landed us in the book of Ezra:

They sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid (Ezra 3:11).

On this foundation, we began to ask new questions, and build again.

Rebuilding the Altar

The intriguing thing about the faithful remnant of Israel who journeyed back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile was their complete lack of imagination for anything new. This energetic, adventurous pack of pilgrims was returning to a city that had been in ruins for almost seventy years. You can imagine the people standing among the ruins of the old temple, collectively asking, "Where do we start?" Some engineer might step forward and suggest that after years of exile they'd need to rebuild the city's infrastructure or construct new homes for their respective families. But Ezra had a different vision. He knew that the first priority was to rebuild an altar. The first priority was to restore a place for right worship and to renew the rituals in keeping with God's faithful covenant. Ezra was focused on Israel's purpose—on their *why*.

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Reading Ezra's story today can feel counterintuitive. Many Ezra-like people leading renewal movements in the twenty-first century are set on imagining diverse and innovative ways to worship. They recruit artists and decorators to create hip new worship spaces and outside-the-box liturgies. That's not to say that there is anything wrong with innovation, but it does require that we first pause and ask, "Why are we doing what we're doing?"

Ezra and his band of Levites wanted to make everything *exactly* the same as it had been before the Babylonians dethroned their king and ravaged their temple. They wanted an altar constructed with the very same dimensions and made of exactly the same materials as Solomon had used to build the first altar four hundred years earlier. What was so important to Israel about replicating the former altar? Why didn't they seek to be more experimental in worship? These are very modern questions emerging from a contemporary mindset that sings the praises of everything new. When rebuilding a church decimated by crisis, the temptation is to build something splashy that can be marketed, advertised, and branded. The problem is that newness for its own sake is overly focused on *what* to do, and may only entice people to come to church for the sake of novelty, rather than inspiring people to come to church seeking God. That's the difference between trying to figure out *what* and understanding *why* we do what we do.

Simon Sinek, in his book *Start with Why*, talks about this tendency.¹ He tells us that the greatest companies and organizations become successful because they never lose sight of *why* they are doing *what* they are doing. Meanwhile, mediocre and moderately successful companies focus their energies on what they should do, and how they should do it. In other words, the present-day mindset is in a hurry to do something, anything, to accomplish *what* feels to them to be most likely to attract customers. They also figure out *how* to accomplish the *what* they are after, but they don't always know *why* they are doing it. Why does the *why* matter? It matters because those who focus only on *what* never move deeper than the superficial fad that attracts the initial customers. Those who focus on *why* seek depth, meaning, and purpose that draws people in for the long haul. Ezra knew *why*.

Starting with *what* and *how* is a problem in most of today's mainline churches. We know *what* we

are doing because we simply do what has always worked in the past. We also know *how* to do it because we just do it how we've always done it. But we don't always know *why* we're still doing what we did and how we did it. *Why* do we insist on playing the organ? Is it part of who we are, or just what we've always done? *Why* should we switch to contemporary music? Is it because that's what the "other" churches do?

There's a time for innovation and a time for restoration, a time for starting something fresh and a time for rebuilding something worth preserving. Our clergy team and the members of Trinity Presbyterian Church needed to hear the message of Ezra 3 because God was calling us to rebuild the altar first. A new temple could come later, and it might have some of that splashy newness. God may eventually call us to do something never before imagined, but our first call is to restore what had been lost. We were not called to start something brand new. We were called to rebuild on the foundations of what had already been.

Diana Butler-Bass talks about this effort to rebuild on existing foundations in her book *The Practicing Congregation*, calling it "retraditioning."² Retraditioning means revitalizing the existing traditions of worship. We re-root the congregation in the spiritual purpose of the tradition, while also asking how the tradition can be modified to speak to a multigenerational, modern congregation. Retraditioning is rooted in *why* because it asks why the tradition started. It then asks *how* we can ground ourselves in that tradition so that we can do *what* we do in a renewed way. According to Butler-Bass's research, this can be a successful strategy for congregational revitalization.

The Story of Trinity Presbyterian Church

Five years ago, Trinity Presbyterian Church was a robust congregation of close to two hundred members. The building and property were well maintained and vigorously utilized for children's programs. The music and adult education programs were solid. Then something went terribly wrong. The church had done *what* so many other churches do when looking for new pastoral leadership. They wanted a young pastor who could bring in young families, but they were so focused on attracting younger families that they overlooked significant relational and administrative deficiencies in calling a new pastor. The dysfunction that ensued quickly

led members to flee. Three years later, seventeen members remained. They held very little hope, and even less in the way of financial resources.

The presbytery looked for ways to raise the church from its wreckage. They eventually approached the senior pastor of a healthy church in the presbytery, which had a history of long-term growth. They asked the Reverend Dr. Graham Standish, the pastor of Calvin Presbyterian Church in Zelenople, if he and his church might be willing to create a satellite church using the Trinity sanctuary. The hope was to expand what Calvin Church was already doing in Zelenople and extend its ministry to the neighboring community. The presbytery looked at models of church growth in evangelical churches and wondered if a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation could do *what* these new churches were doing. It made sense for the presbytery to approach Standish because of his experience in leading church growth.

A task force exploring the possibility of a two-campus pastorate was created, bringing together leaders from both congregations (Trinity and Calvin). The team met for five months, but none of their ideas for ministry seemed to mesh. The members prayed together and enjoyed each other's company, but something seemed to block every plan for moving forward. Over the Christmas season, a season of new birth, Standish sensed the Spirit leading the team away from the idea of building a "Calvin North" campus. Growth for growth's sake was not part of Calvin Church's purpose. Calvin Church was indeed growing in its membership, but not because of a specific focus on numbers. Calvin Church was drawing new members by its focus on nurturing vibrant spiritual growth. They believed that if the church focused on spiritual growth, the numerical growth would take care of itself. Growing spiritually was Calvin Church's *why*. Growing numerically was what has happened as a result.

Pastoring a two-campus pastorate seemed like a departure from Calvin Church's commitment to nurturing spiritual vitality, and yet, Standish did not sense a need to immediately pull out of the task force. Both he and the Reverend Connie Frierson, Calvin Church's associate pastor, believed that there was a role for them to play in God's plan for Trinity. Standish and Frierson posed a fresh question to the task force: Instead of growing Calvin Church using Trinity's building, how could the people and mission of Calvin serve as a catalyst for energizing a renewal

ministry within the Trinity community? Reaching out to Trinity in this way was better aligned with Calvin's *why*. Growing a satellite campus would only glorify Calvin Church and its pastors. Helping a struggling church revitalize through spiritual growth would glorify God by reconnecting the Trinity leaders and members with their own original purpose.

When Standish shared his discernment with the team in their next meeting, he heard a collective sigh of relief. Instantly the committee became energized, creative, and open to tackling the situation without feeling locked into the "solution" they had been handed. The people of Trinity felt especially grateful that their congregation would not be subsumed into a larger congregation, but they would have the support needed to rebuild in a way that remained true to who they were. The team began to focus on a spiritual direction that did not focus on how big the church could be, but on how healthy the church could be. God had a *why* for Trinity, and the task force was beginning to get a glimpse of what that might look like.

The ensuing five months were spent outlining how Calvin Church could help Trinity Church become revitalized according to their own *why*. Planning ensued in order to work out how the pastors of Calvin Church could lead Trinity's worship while continuing their ministry at Calvin Church. Calvin Church also sought help from Beaver Butler Presbytery. The presbytery had been building a church renewal fund for several years, collecting money it had received as part of the exit negotiations by churches seeking to leave the denomination to join another Reformed body. Trinity and Calvin churches proposed to the presbytery that Trinity receive a \$60,000 grant from the presbytery to upgrade its worship space, to which the presbytery generously agreed. This proposal included installing a new projection and sound system, as well as new lighting. The grant also made it possible for Trinity to hire a part-time pastor to help with the renewal effort. After receiving the grant, a providential meeting between Standish and another spiritual director, the Reverend Dr. Tammy Wiens, led to the hiring of Wiens to join the pastoral team alongside Standish and Frierson. Everything was falling into place, and soon Trinity, like the remnant of Israel, could begin "rebuilding the altar."

The first priority in rebuilding was a meeting with the worship team to review the history of the church so as to figuratively reclaim the altar that had

been built at its founding. Trinity Church had started as a presbytery outreach in 1949 to minister to young families in the area. It began as a Sunday school for children in the area. Often the Sunday school was held either in the manse of a nearby church or in a large tent erected on the eventual grounds of the church. Out of that grew an interest in creating a church centered upon a worship service designed around families with young children. The building of a new sanctuary quickly ensued, and in 1952 the 115 members of this church worshiped together.

For the remnant of Trinity Presbyterian gathered in 2014, the first priority was to revitalize worship. God was calling Standish, Frierson, Wiens, and the people gathered at Trinity Presbyterian Church to set worship as the foundation of their congregation's identity. Using the history of the church as their guide, the new Trinity Church worship team designed a worship service that would be intentionally family- and kid-friendly. For Trinity, rebuilding the altar would mean rebuilding on the principles by which Trinity Church had been founded. It would be a church where children and families would feel at home, where all would be inspired, and where the sense of God's presence would feel immediate and vibrant.

Hopeful Reflections

What did Ezra know about renewing a worshiping community in ruins? He knew *what* to do and *how* to rebuild the temple, but more importantly he

knew *why* they were rebuilding it. Too often in the mainline church we no longer know *why* we are doing *what* we do. We try to come up with answers. We may come up with a very convincing theological statement that seems to point to a foundational why, but often our mission is merely justifying our what.

Like Ezra, Calvin Church understood its *why*—and that *why* did not include building a north campus. Its *why* was to nurture a tangible, personal encounter with, and experience of, Christ. Rooting its ministries in that *why* led to its growth. Now they are walking alongside Trinity as that congregation is trying to recapture its own *why*.

Ezra understood that in order for the Jewish faith to survive, and eventually thrive, it would have to rebuild its center, which is worship. Trinity Church is imitating Ezra's model by returning to its original purpose—reaching out to families with a sense of love that is welcoming and compassionate, but more importantly, focused on helping people of all ages discover God acting in their lives. The renewal experience of Trinity Church is a story of hope and encouragement for congregations and leaders who, like Ezra, are called to rebuild.

Notes

1. Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2009).
2. Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), p. 80.