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Equipping Leaders. Aligning Resources. Engaging Mission.

Embracing Liminal Space

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Nobody likes being stuck in an in-between space. Stuck seasons in the life of a congregation provoke feelings of helplessness, ambiguity, and anxiety. For example, a congregation in a season of pastoral transition experiences a fallow period of time upon the arrival of the new pastor, a time when people are waiting and learning to trust their new leader. Unfortunately, the fallow season arrives just as leaders feel the greatest compulsion to accomplish great new things, to prove that the congregation and the new leader are okay together. Or, a congregation finishes a major building project and people suddenly lose their focus and energy. In the meantime, the new building sits underutilized, mocking everyone with its pregnant possibility. Or, a synagogue has been doggedly pursuing growth for a number of years, bouncing up against the same attendance ceiling over and over. Leaders can't seem to craft a strategy for breaking through and they feel exhausted by the futility of it all.

What is at the heart of this perpetual “stuckness”, this sense that we can't move ahead, even though we are longing to break free, even though we are working incredibly hard towards a new beginning? Let me offer a hypothesis. We are confusing liminal space with problem solving space. Liminal space is the space in between things. Between periods of industry, productivity, and growth lay fallow spaces; spaces where untapped potential is lying wait. In liminal seasons there is a body of work to be done, but it is not problem-solving work. We often avoid the work of liminal space because it feels passive, and at times non-productive. So, we substitute hard work and busyness. Unfortunately, when we focus on the wrong work in a liminal season we contribute to our own exhaustion and inability to move forward.

What is liminal space?

[Richard Rohr](#) describes liminal space in this way.

...a unique position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to entrust and wait, you will run...anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.

[William Bridges](#) identifies this season as the neutral zone, the space in between an ending and a new beginning. According to Bridges, people in the neutral zone are often confused, uncertain and impatient. Feelings of anxiety, skepticism or low morale are likely to surface. Attendance wanes and giving lags. The neutral zone is generally a time of confusion, quietness, vulnerability and feeling exposed.

Liminal seasons are not great for bringing forth major new initiatives and launching bold actions. Our compulsions to be productive, growth oriented and busy, keep us from embracing liminality. We churn instead of rest. When we do this we truncate the true potential of the season for healing, rediscovering vocation, shaping values, framing memory, tending soul and strengthening the core.

What work should we be doing?

Liminal seasons cannot be powered through. They must be attended to, and the leader must approach the season with a stance of unknowing and wonder. We work our way through liminal space with a discerning mindset, not a decision making mindset. This can be scary for leaders because it requires yielding and a different kind of doing.

These are great seasons to focus on prayer and discernment. We can re-examine our assumptions about where vision resides in the life of the congregation. We can explore ways to replace tired old forms of decision making with fresh approaches in group discernment.

During liminal seasons we can do important leadership narrative work. We can invite and listen to stories about our greatest prouds and sorries. We can mine the story lines that we recite for accuracy, for evidence of our real core values, and for the potential to birth new beginnings.

Liminality is a great place to strengthen what is; both process and program. We can assess our leadership systems and evaluate their capacity to handle the next chapter. We can re-evaluate our body of programming to see where we are really focusing our resources, and whether that focus reflects our core values and stated priorities.

We can tend to the grief of the organization. Liminal seasons exist because something has been left behind and the people are not yet ready for a new beginning. We can help people understand what has really ended, what is lost and what is waiting to be born anew. We can excavate and heal the wounds of the institution that bind us in shame, fear or pride.

During liminal seasons it is important to revisit and shape the important vocational questions of the congregation: Who are we? Who are we here to serve? What is God calling us to do or become? What are our most important priorities and how might our priorities be shifting in this season?

When will we be ready for the next thing?

You need to steep in liminality for as long as it takes. You can invite a new beginning, but you cannot force its arrival. [Bridges tells us](#) that people will be ready for the new beginning when the next chapter appears to have: a purpose, a picture, a plan, and part for each to play. But, don't let the four P's drive you into a false frenzy of activity before the congregation is ready. Choosing when to move forward is a discernment, not a decision, and the prayerful leader will intuit when the people are ready.