EDGE ORGANIZATIONS, ENTREPRENEURIAL PEOPLE AND GOD'S DREAMS

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REFLECTIONS AND TAKE-AWAY LEARNINGS
GATHERING OF EDGE ORGANIZATIONS

1. Leading Change: While the literature consistently talks about the role of leader in terms of leading change, the more accurate description may be "leading continuity and change." There is that within the traditions and practice of the church that is essential and must be carried forward even if changed in character. The leader is responsible for keeping future changes and adaptations connected to the essentials of the present and past.

A business model might express this as "value added." When dealing only with the concept of change the outcome, or output, must be different. However, when dealing with the idea of leading both continuity and change, the outcome still holds the essential truth or deliverable but now includes an added value – something that makes it of greater value or importance. This is a basic principle outlined by Jim Collins in which he speaks of preserving the core while stimulating progress.

2. Edge organizations, initiatives, efforts, and activities: TMF is following its own discernment of the uniqueness of its role as "of but not in" the United Methodist Church. This living on the edge of the church provides a freedom which can be leveraged for the health of the church and for God's dreams which go beyond the institutional needs of the church to address the purpose of the church. In its own planning of strategic directions TMF is seeking to understand and live out its edge role. However, TMF's experience as an organization led to thinking of edge leadership in terms of "organizations". While there are such organizations connected to the United Methodist denomination it may be more helpful to think more inclusively about edge organizations, and individual initiatives, efforts, and activities. Individuals may be in positions of leadership in organizations that are well within the church but can still, entrepreneurially, initiate edge efforts and activities. The individual does not need to be in an edge organization in order to initiate edge behavior and efforts.

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3. Loneliness and self-doubt: A clear theme in the conversation of participants was the loneliness of working at the edge. Participants spoke of feeling like they are in a place at a time when it is simply "right" to act, despite the risks. One participant talked of doing what she does because "perhaps" it was for a time such as this" that she was placed in her position of leadership. This reference from the book of Esther offered the sense that, like Esther who alone was called to take a risk on behalf of her people, the work of the edge leader is often done alone – or can't be done by others who don't hold the institutional position of leader. In fact, positional leadership is an important factor in edge change. Being elected, called, or employed to a position which offers a platform for significant change can put a leader in a place and an opportunity that is not shared by others. As one participant stated, "if not me, who?"

The loneliness is heightened by the time it will take to realize the benefits of the change for which leaders are working. One participant noted, "We will not live to see the results." Because the results, the changed outcome, is distant and cannot be seen in the present moment it may not be easily supported by people who are more aware or sensitive to the immediate cost of the change. Being a leader who holds the long term view is a lonely position when dealing with people who are looking at the short term cost. Perhaps one of the most significant prices paid by leaders in edge organizations is the quiet, personal, self-doubt. "What if I'm wrong?" (Jim Collins makes the point that entrepreneurial leaders do not need to be able to manage risk as much as ambiguity.) Systemic change is difficult and it comes at the price of people no longer being able to assume old norms. Changing the norms of a group - who gets rewarded, what performance will be expected, what outcomes will be measured– comes at some great cost to the people in the system who played faithfully according to old rules only then to have the rules changed. Edge leaders are aware of the cost that their decisions and directions exact from others. Because the result of the change is long term, not seen in the immediate moment, leaders live with a quiet self-doubt that leads to wondering if the cost being borne by others is needed or an unnecessary mistake. Because edge organizations and edge leaders live, by definition on the edge where there is less contact with others, the self-doubt is not easily expressed or dealt with because there are few ,or no, others who share the same doubt.

4. Arrogance and support: Within organizational literature there is recognition that good leaders need a level of ego strength and there has been some writing in recent years acknowledging that strong leaders may exhibit healthy forms of narcissism. Narcissism and ego strength, or even simple clarity of leadership, can be experienced by others as arrogance. At the same time people claiming a non-negotiable position and insisting that others change to accommodate their position may, in fact, be an act of arrogance. In a leader's effort to be a change agent there is a tension between living on the edge where one needs and invites support from others and taking an "edgy" position for which one seeks only agreement or compliance from others. This tension was played out in the TMF edge event in a series of responses that followed the keynote presentation. The questions and statements presented to John Wimmer by three participants were offered in the following order: From an institutional leader: "How does one respond to the arrogance and lack of cooperation experienced from some who claim to be edge leaders?" From an institutional leader: "Where do edge leaders get their needed support and protection to take the risks of being on the edge?" From a consultant: "Don't give us too much support and protection. We are arrogant because we do think we see something more and if given too much support our position will be tamed."

Certainly arrogance may need further definition to distinguish it from clarity, commitment, and willingness to risk. Nonetheless, the tension, as exhibited in the dialogue within the group, points to some of costs of edge leadership. Working at the edge may be perceived by others as arrogance.

5. Metrics: Any intended change needs metrics to both describe the change that is intended and to measure movement toward that change. Metrics are more difficult in non-profit and relationship based organizations. They are, nonetheless, critical. Without metrics the organization will focus on effort, not outcome (on the amount of donations and volunteer hours given, not on the quantifiable difference made in people's lives). "You get what you measure." If you measure nothing you get no change. If you measure only effort you may get more effort but still make no difference. The question of metrics is one of the significant challenges now facing the church.

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6. Scalability: There is an odd interplay between the size of an idea or goal and the starting point to address that goal. The goal may be huge but the starting place to address that goal may need to be modest and manageable. However, the strategy to address the goal must be scalable, able to be replicated and grow. The example of Habitat for Humanity displays this interplay: It is founded on a simple idea that "everyone ought to have a decent place to live." (simple ideas are often large and may be paradigm shifts, or lead to paradigm shifts: rather than serve the institution of the church we should be serving the purpose of the church; let's get the church out of medical care and into health, let's provide homes instead of housing….) Simple ideas lead to very large goals: we will build homes that people can own instead of having to depend on others for housing. The simple start: "We built one house. After that we built another house." Scalability: We learned how to replicate and grow the effort based on using 4 hour shifts of inexperienced volunteers supervised by people with construction experience.

Large ideas do not need to start with large actions or solutions. Large ideas need a place to begin that is scalable and from which they can grow as a product of experience and learning.

7. Defining entrepreneurialism: The understanding of an "entrepreneur" has changed over time. Up to about 1980 entrepreneurship was looked at as "a weird black art" practiced by crazy, creative people. Beginning in the 1980s the thinking shifted to entrepreneurialism as a "systemic, replicable process." Entrepreneurialism is a choice, not a temperament or personality. It is a learnable process. We are now on the cusp of a new stage of entrepreneurialism that takes us from trying to build a great organization to building a "great movement." (Jim Collins: Inc. magazine)

8. Language: While talking about entrepreneurialism is helpful the language constrains us to think organizationally, leveraging assets or gain. The church needs to find its own language for an entrepreneurialism that addresses the movement aspect of the church and that seeks to go beyond serving the church in order to serve God's dream. In the same way in which the switch of language of clergy appointments from "appointment to the local church" to "appointment to the mission field" has produced a reexamination of appointment practices and new experiments, so a change of language surrounding entrepreneurialism is needed to reframe the role of the entrepreneur and create experiments of entrepreneurialism that are closely tied to the church.

9. Keystones and Platforms: (The Keystone Advantage, Iansiti and Levien) How can conversations that serve as keystones to hold ideas and initiatives together or platforms that give others a base from which others do their own work be replicated? The "edge organization, entrepreneurial people and God's dream" conversation in Austin stirred strong resonance among the participants. On the one level this leads to the question of what TMF needs to do to continue building keystones and platforms. On the other level it also raises the issues of what keystones and platforms the individual participants of the event need to build within their own systems and constituencies. A clear need for follow up surfaced in this event.