**Sabbatical Project**

**Part 2**

**Congregational Innovation – In Practice**

**For General Assembly Workshop**

[The workshop begins with Design Thinking explained by Rev. Brock Leach – click [here](https://drive.google.com/file/d/17kGJSi4KXe5cNYVMWylumns8iRa-76fe/view?usp=sharing) to see the PowerPoint.]

* Slide: Change, in practice.
	+ What can all this look like in practice?
	+ During a sabbatical this spring I wanted to research congregational vitality.
	+ As a minister, everywhere around me I keep hearing about the decline of the mainstream church, how churches are struggling and shrinking and dying.
	+ But some churches are thriving. And I wanted to hear more not about all the ways things go wrong, but what they were doing right.
	+ So I focused my research on the keys to their vitality, what made them thrive, what I discovered in the process, was that capacity to innovate (and adapt to changing times) was closely related to congregational health.
	+ So I offer you insights from the field, so to speak, on some of what these congregations shared with me about keys to their success. Keys that lined right up with aspects of design thinking and co-creating change.
* Congregations: Those congregations, which you will hear more about in a moment, were:
	+ First Parish in Sherborn UU Area Church, in Massachusetts
	+ The First Church in Sterling, Massachusetts
	+ First Parish Church in Taunton, Massachusetts
	+ All Souls New London, Connecticut
	+ I also spoke to the former minister of the church in TR, the Rev. Jim Robinson, about his time serving the congregation there.
* Slide: Characteristics of vitality:
	+ Before I go into more detail about what those keys to vitality were, I want to start with what I mean by vitality. What is it? What is it about these churches that demonstrates their health and strength?
		- For one thing, growth. These congregations were suggested to me in part because they grew, some 20% some 40%, some more than that, in the last 5-10 plus years. Their pledging went up too. In part because of intentional work around giving for some, but increased giving also implies a deepening commitment to the congregation. And while I want to note that it can be counterproductive to take action primarily to grow in size or budget, growth is often a sign that we're doing some things right.
		- And when I visited – there was laughter. People were happy to be there. I experienced warmth and enthusiasm in my conversations with ministers and lay leaders. People liked each other.
		- And whenI asked, what does vitality mean to you? I heard: positive energy. A feeling of welcome and commitment. Transformation of people within the church and beyond it. I also saw action. At First Parish in Sherborn there happened to be an artistic installation of school desks on the lawn the day I visited, a somber reminder of the anniversary of the Parkland shooting and call to action. All Souls in New London had recently purchased the building next door to host a refugee family. First Parish in Taunton had converted part of their building for their Matthew 25 mission, serving the town's homeless population. The First Church in Sterling had just sent a contingent to the Dominican Republic in support of a medical center there. The churches were looking outward and taking action.
		- Vitality.
		- As I was talking maybe you were thinking about the vitality that exists in your own congregations. The different ways you already show up, the joy and connection you experience, the actions you're taking for the community or the world. I know I was thinking about that with respect to the congregation I serve – all the good that’s already there.
		- So my goal with this research – how can we encourage and grow all that good that already exists in all our congregations? What are keys to that kind of vitality? What were keys to vitality in these churches that were particularly thriving? What set them up for their success and health and what lessons can we take away?
		- It turns out that, although none of these churches were explicitly using design thinking methodology, the principles of design thinking showed up, again and again, in their approaches and in their actions.
* Keys to Vitality:
	+ There are 4 keys I want to lift up: Radical Trust, A bias toward action, A culture of experimentation, and radical empathy with those we are looking to serve.
* Slide: Radical Trust
	+ The title of this workshop includes the words “radical trust.”
	+ When I asked these congregations what set them up for their success, every one of them talked about trust. Between minister and lay leaders, between congregants and the board. Among members of the congregation. Trust in each other’s good intentions, and also trust in whatever processes they mutually decided on.
		- For example: Lay leaders from All Souls New London shared with me that at one time, before they called their current minister, there was... lack of trust. A UU world article about the congregation quotes Nick Evento, past president, who said: “At annual meetings, we used to quibble over $50, $100 expenditures. Nobody trusted enough of the leaders so we could do bold things.”
		- Clare Evento, long time member, shared with me that the 2 year interim time, before their current minister arrived, was instrumental in changing that dynamic. A big part of the change had to do with listening to each other, they told me. They had workshops on listening, they dropped some of their adversarial programming like the worship talkback, they learned to listen with heart, and their culture began to change.
		- The minister at First Parish, Sherborn, Rev. Nathan Detering, also credits building trust, over time, with the health and flexibility in his church today.
		- There too, an interim time had an important impact on a shift in the congregation's sense of itself. As Nathan tells it, in those two years the congregation learned that “the truth can be told and we won't die.” Like, that people would need to increase their pledging if the church was to survive and thrive. Like, that there had been times when people weren't so nice to each other, and they could do better. Like, sometimes you need to disappoint some long time members who aren't used to being disappointed and it's okay. They learned how to stay in relationship even when hard things needed to be said. And, in the process, he said, they rediscovered their pride. They were encouraged to dream. They expanded their vision toward mission and to what was possible
		- That was over 16 years ago, but it set them up for growing trust and collaboration ever since. When I asked Nathan what he has done to foster that he said, I don't compete with anyone over power and authority. Instead he lets the growing depth of his relationships lead the way over time. And, as others I talked with indicated, he is trustworthy himself. He is solid and encouraging. He models appreciation for others and helps create a culture of kindness as well as accountability.
		- These days, when someone steps over a line, he or others will “call them in” (as opposed to calling them out), as in, “Hey, what you just said, that was not okay. You owe me an apology... and then I'll answer the question you just asked me.” Calling in – and pointing a way back to right relationship – helps set healthy boundaries.
		- So – they are cultivating a culture of appreciation, generosity, and telling the truth in love. They are creating health. And, what I heard from them, is that this health is the foundation for an open, joyful, mutual trust.
* Slide: Bias toward action (cultivating a sense of urgency)
	+ - One of the aspects of design thinking that stood out to me immediately was – rapid iteration. Come up with an idea, try it, learn, come up with a new idea, try that, learn from that, repeat. Don't wait around until you have the perfect solution all worked out.
		- While on the one hand I like the idea of moving quickly, on the other hand, how does that work in congregations? Maybe you've heard the joke about how to move the piano from one side of the sanctuary to the other? One inch a day.
		- And yet, it's interesting to me that in every case here, these churches had what design thinking originators Tom and David Kelley call a “bias toward action” - they're not going slowly.
		- Take for example, Rev. Robin Bartlett, minister at First Church in Sterling Mass. Robin told me that she made a lot of changes right away -- worship structure, new strategic plan, new monthly dinner church event, to name a few. It wasn't that she hadn't heard the warnings not to make a lot of changes in your first year. She had. But, she said, I don't think those hold true anymore. The church is about to die. Churches are dying everywhere. A church just died across the street from us. So, what's with this idea that we have all this time to wait?!
		- For her it was personal too. Every UU minister, as part of our formation, does a stint of what is essentially a hospital chaplaincy internship. You witness some of the hardest situations ministry has to offer – people facing illness, struggle, death. Robin told me that for her, it led to an early mid-life crisis. At 35, she had the realization – all these people are dying, I will too. I don't have time to wait.
		- She brought all this to her church. From the moment she arrived she brought a sense of urgency: churches in the area are closing their doors left & right – this church is an anomaly, she told her people. And, as she half-jokingly shared with me, she likes to remind them all, all the time, that they are all going to die.
		- But yet, she said, that recognition that we are all going to die can make us come alive. You should always live like you know you're going to die. It can make you vibrant, active, and bold, now. And they are.
		- Another example. In Taunton, there is, similarly, a bias toward action. There, though, it wasn't that the church might die, it was dying. There was no question about it. There were 10 people left. Ten people in a giant building with big maintenance costs and a rapidly shrinking endowment. They were desperate. And they knew it. And it made them willing. They had what I've heard called the “gift of desperation” - business as usual would lead to their end in a few short years and they become willing to do whatever it took to prevent that from happening. Even - radical change.
		- They called Rev. Christana Wille McKnight, who'd had recent success helping small churches grow.
		- As part of her agreement to join them, Christana made it clear what she wanted to change, right from the start. Like using projected words instead of hymnals, like more variety in music, like use of themes in worship. She requested a children's corner in every room, all paperwork connected to the running of the church, access to every room in the building and full collaboration with the board…
		- Those 10 people said yes to her offer, and in the 7 years since then the church has grown to 10 times its original size, to now, nearly 100 people. That kind of turnaround doesn't happen very often. But that initial willingness, that openness and flexibility, set them up for a radically different future than the trajectory their past would have predicted.
	+ And, that fresh start laid the foundation for a different kind of congregational culture. A culture of experimentation.
* Slide: Culture of Experimentation:
	+ - Which brings me to my next slide, another key characteristic of design thinking that was lifted up by just about everyone I talked with: a willingness to experiment. An openness to trying and failing in the service of moving forward in new ways.
		- Taunton:
			* So, back to Taunton. Using their mission, to “Inspire, Connect, and Serve” as a guide for all decisions, they jump on opportunities as they present themselves, leading to all kinds of innovations. Not just the Matthew 25 homeless mission I mentioned befor, but also a welcoming “Commons” area at the back of their sanctuary with gorgeous hardwood floors made out of.... the last few sets of pews of that sanctuary. A transformation many less experimental congregations would have immediately rejected. There's the “Forest of light” – people pay to sponsor Xmas trees on the church green -- creating an inviting holiday display that raises funds as well as visibility. They’re collaborating with a local high school on a history project that will use First Parish congregational archives, they're on the verge of starting a thrift shop, they are regularly involved with local community action and social justice events...
			* All reasons why First Parish Taunton is known as “the small congregation with the giant building and a huge impact in the community.” It is their willingness to try things, experiment, move forward and just see what happens.
		- New London
			* Thankfully it is not necessary, to restart a church from scratch or almost scratch in order to build a culture of experimentation.
			* Take All Souls New London. They've been a pretty stable congregation since their founding in 1910. But they have also changed. A lot. I talked before about the transformation this congregation went through around levels of trust. Along the same lines, they have gone through a transformation in their relationship with risk. Probably the same basic practice set them up for both – learning to listen to each other. Taking the time to listen to each other. And then, having heard each other, taking some small risks, and some big risks, and watching that risk-taking pay off.
			* “Churches seldom die from taking risks.” This is Michael Dural quote that Rev. Carloyn Patierno, their minister, says to her congregation all the time. There is an openness there to trying, failing, learning and trying again that has become part of the culture at All Souls, and it's paid off.
			* On the occasion of being voted a breakthrough congregation, Sue Phillips, then-New England Regional Lead said of the congregation:
			* “You take risks. Smart risks. But still, risks that could have crashed and burned. You left your old building. Do you have any idea how rare it is for a congregation in New England to leave its old, beautiful, but too-small building? It’s almost unprecedented. You did it.
			* “And you bought a used car dealership for God’s sake. (For God’s sake!) I mean really? You had the audacity to spend a million and a half dollars and re-tool a space that couldn’t even sustain a worldly dream? Amazing. […] You have risked living on the edge – the leading edge – stepping right up there to that sharp drop-off and saying: It’s beautiful up here. Let’s hold hands and go for it.”
			* That car dealership building is beautiful and functional, I can attest, I was there in April. Since that leap they've taken many others including painting a gorgeous, sky-themed mural on their front-facing sanctuary wall – anyone who’s ever tried to pick colors with a committee knows what a risk that must have been – they invited a homeless hospitality center into their original building, use video every Sunday in worship, bought the house next door for a refugee family, became a sanctuary congregation, have been staffing for growth… Taking risks, small and large, has become part of who they are.
* Slide: Radical Empathy/Listening:
	+ - * Perhaps one of the most powerful, and most radical pieces of the design thinking model, at least from my perspective, is the empathy piece. Empathy is always powerful, but empathy from a design thinking perspective is particularly powerful because it involves not only the heart, as in, I care about these other people, but also active listening, and action. It's the kind of empathy that changes things.
			* An excellent example of this kind of radical empathy comes from the work of Rev. Jim Robinson. He started at First Parish in Brewster, Mass in 1982 and by the time he left 22 years later, the congregation had grown from 130 to somewhere between 700 and 1000 adults, children and youth.
			* But again, it's not the size, it's the mission. It's the why. And the how.
			* When he arrived there were 10 children in the RE program. He'd been brought there, in part, to help grow the church, the church school in particular. So he asked members to think of young families they knew in the community who were not already connected with a congregation. He asked them to give these families a flier about First Parish and see if they would be open to a followup call.
			* Rev Jim reached out to these families, one by one, finding out from them what they would want in a religious community. What is your dream, he would ask? What is your hope? What kind of congregation, with what kind of support for families, would you be excited to join?
			* Then, he talked with congregation members and asked if they would be willing to create what these families were looking for. Would they be willing to staff that kind of church school, for a year, until the new families were acclimated and could begin taking over leadership themselves?
			* The congregation said yes, the new families came, and within a year there were 50 children in the church school. By year two there were 100.
			* But. He didn't stop there. They didn't stop there. This was the 80’s and at that time it was much rarer to find churches genuinely welcoming to people who identify as LGBTQ. Jim reached out to the gay community on the cape and asked them: what do you need, what do you want, what is your dream for a religious community? Again, he worked with his congregation on realizing the vision of the people he talked with, and members of the LGB community came.
			* They didn't stop there either. In the 80's refugees from El Salvador were fleeing to the cape. Robinson and his social justice team worked with the congregation to find a way to support them. It was part of a larger effort to collaborate with, but also invite in, people in the wider community doing justice work, who were looking for a compatriots and a spiritual home.
			* And so it continued. Listening to people in the community, to their need, to their want, finding a way to help create it.
			* When I asked Jim how he managed help so many people find a place in his church he said to me: it's like rolling a stone downhill. When you connect with people's passions, it happens almost by itself.
			* Listening, learning, and widening our welcome. The power of radical empathy.

[Closing words to wrap it all up and draw connections again between Design Thinking and examples]