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**Choosing Change:
How to Motivate Churches to Face the Future
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On-line Chapter

A Theology of Motivation

*“If God is a person, then God acts; and if God acts, God has motives.”¹
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The Bible is a primer on the subject of motivation. It overflows with stories of people grappling with challenges, plights, needs, purposes, and holy causes. Motives, pushing and pulling at people, influenced their intentions, choices, and actions. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we read that Adam and Eve gave in to temptation and ate the forbidden fruit in the selfish hope of being like God. Then, in a bid to save his hide and avoid God’s punishment, Adam pointed at Eve and blamed her for his lack of obedience. Eve, wanting the same thing, pointed at the serpent and blamed it. The serpent, having no arms, was unable to point to anyone. God turned them out of the Garden in God’s first (but hardly the last) act of tough love to teach the creatures the importance of faithful living. These actions were all driven by motives.

So it goes as story after story unfolds. Cain slew Abel out of envy. Noah built the Ark out of a desire to obey God ... and perhaps a degree of self-interest. People built the tower of Babel to create a reputation for themselves. God put a stop to the tower’s construction and confused their language to hobble human pretensions. Abraham laid Isaac on the altar, because faithfulness to God was a more important motive to him than the well-being of his son. God extended a blessing to Abraham to make Abraham’s “offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven,” because God hoped Abraham’s descendants would become a sign of faithfulness for the world. The Bible shares age-old stories of the relationship between God and people. But along the way, the Bible is also a nuanced study in how motives prompt action, for good and for ill.

To have motives is human nature . . . and God's nature. But all potential motives for human behavior are not judged the same in the Judeo-Christian faiths. Some motives are considered more faithful to God, and some are considered to have greater integrity to our calling as people of faith. So when we read how Jacob manipulated Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup, we look with disdain upon Jacob's greed—his motive. When Abraham argued with God about rescuing the righteous of Sodom, we admire the courage and determination arising from Abraham's compassion—his motive. Story after story teaches us, directly or indirectly, the difference between motives that honor God and those that do not.

For Jesus faithful discipleship was often about having the right motives that lead to doing the right thing. For example, it is because we are a forgiven people that we are to be a forgiving people, even if it means forgiving someone seventy times seven times. We are encouraged not to fast to gain public praise and sympathy, but rather, to fast in secret to honor the only one who will know: God. Jesus wished people to adopt an orientation for behavior articulated long before by Jeremiah: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (31:33). Jesus taught that people with the right motives do not need rules. "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good" (Luke 6:45). Understanding faith this way, we can appreciate that nurturing faith is more than simply imparting knowledge about God. Rather, faith formation, to a large degree, has always been about encouraging people to adopt and be motivated by a collection of motives that will in turn influence choices, strengthen intentions, and lead to faithful living.

Jesus was a keen observer of people's motives, and he honored those with faithful motives and criticized those with less than faithful motives. Jesus was moved by the contrition behind the Zacchaeus's desire to pay restitution to whomever he had defrauded. Jesus was angered by the Pharisees, whom he called whitewashed tombs, because the faithful outward actions of these religious leaders were influenced by the wrong inward motives. Just before Jesus' death, the disciples criticized a woman for wasting a huge sum of money on ointment to anoint Jesus feet. The critique was a fair and faithful one since the money could have been given to the poor. But Jesus saw things differently. He recognized her motive to honor him: the Son of God facing death. Jesus said that she would be remembered always for her actions. And we do remember this nameless woman to this day, as much for her motives as for her actions.

Because Jesus was a keen observer of people's motives, he taught and preached to appeal to people's motives. To the woman at the well, for example, Jesus offered living water that springs up to eternal life. In response the woman asked, "Sir, give me this water." She was moved by her need (a push motive) and the perceived benefit of this gift (a pull motive). Jesus sought to influence people's push and pull motives all the time. Consider the parable on God's judgment that ends Matthew 25. We can desire the promise to "inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" while we equally want to avoid being considered accursed by Jesus and condemned to the punishment of separation from him. Pushed and pulled by these two potential consequences of judgment, the hearer can be influenced to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. It seems that Jesus was not

above appealing to the most universal human motive: self-interest. But as we've seen, Jesus was a keen observer of people's motives, and there is nothing more motivating than self-interest.

So if the Bible is a primer on the subject of motivation, it should not surprise us that we can derive from its pages a theology of motivation that is rooted in three central concepts of our faith: stewardship, hope and trust.

Stewardship is about accepting responsibility for something that has been entrusted into one's care and then taking the initiative to ensure its preservation and growth. Parents, for example, are stewards of their children. When we become a steward, we become attentive to the present and future well-being of what has been entrusted to us. If we believe that this well-being is challenged in some way, we feel concern. Concern is a feeling we experience when motives line up pushing us to change how things are now. Stewardship gives rise to push motives.

Hope is the consequence of our belief that the future can be better than the present. When parents invest in a savings plan for the future education of their infant children, they do so because they have hopes for their children. Hopes find their clearest expression in goals that we want to attain. Goals motivate us, because attaining goals satisfy the motives for pursuing the goal. Hope elicits feelings of desire (I want this) and anticipation (this will happen). Desire and anticipation are feelings we experience when motives line up beckoning us towards what we hope for. The motives behind our hopes *pull* us to change.

Trust is the consequence of our belief that the help we need to attain our goals is there, ready and able to help us. When parents open an investment account for their daughter when she is one year old, they do so believing that the contribution plan and the returns over the years will achieve what is promised. We call this trust, which we experience as confidence. The sense of confidence arises from our assessment that what we are placing our trust in is indeed trustworthy. This confidence, in turn, strengthens our sense of hope. The feeling of confidence arising from trust helps us to act on our motives.

Stewardship, hope, and trust, each in its unique way, strengthens motivation. Their relationship can be illustrated by the following formula:

Stewardship in the present + (Hopes for the future x Trust) = Intention (readiness to act)

Every congregation has its own unique disposition in how stewardship, hope and trust are generally balanced in its life. Some congregations are inclined to take the stewardship of their present and future lives very seriously; others are not. Some congregations are inclined towards great hope for their future, while others despair. Some congregations are inclined to have great trust in God and in themselves to attain what they hope for, while other congregations seemingly trust in neither. I have served both kinds of congregation.

Recall again the story in chapter one of the congregations that merged and thrived. These three small, struggling congregations must have had

- a deep sense of responsibility for the future well-being of their congregation
- a great hope that the future would indeed be better than the present
- a good deal of confidence that their abilities, resources, leadership, and their God would help them attain what they hope for.

A disposition is a prevailing orientation that generally will prompt predictable behavior. When people have a sense of congregational stewardship, hope, and trust regarding a specific issue, then they can feel motivated to attain a specific goal. But when a congregation has a strong sense of stewardship, hope, and trust embedded in its culture generally as its disposition, it can feel motivated to tackle just about anything.

Stewardship, hope, and trust are all familiar words to us as Christians, so we need to look more specifically at how we understand these concepts and the roles they play in the motivation of congregations.

Stewardship

The story is told of a minister who delivered a searing sermon on tithing. The pastor then called for the offering. As the gathered congregation sang the Doxology, the minister surveyed the contents of the plates brought forward for dedication. When the singing ended, he bellowed, “You didn’t hear a single word I said! Pass those plates around again!” And they did. The word “stewardship” is commonly used in many congregations as the code word for “everyone needs to give more money,” and experiences like this have led many to grow uneasy with the word. This is unfortunate, because the word has a far richer meaning that can be more helpful to the church than its current typical use.

Fortunately the church is re-learning an understanding of stewardship from—of all places—the world of business through major writers who are also people of faith. In the 1960s while an executive with AT&T, Robert Greenleaf developed his ideas on servant leadership. Prompted in part by his Quaker heritage, he believed that leaders should operate from the principle that they hold in trust the current and future well-being of their organizations. He thought managers should understand themselves as the servants of the people they managed. In true Quaker fashion Greenleaf asserted that the stewardship of an organization was the responsibility of everyone in the organization. When people see themselves as stewards, he wrote, people shift from self-interest to collective interests.²

The Mormon Stephen Covey in his book *Principle-Centered Leadership* made the important point that leaders are to be stewards of the organization’s purpose. As such organizational stewardship is about “being an agent for worthy principles, purposes and causes.”³ Stewards like this work to ensure their organization walks the talk.

Respected business leader and writer Max DePree wrote of stewardship as leaving a legacy, as he did with the company Herman Miller and as a trustee on the Board of Fuller Seminary. He wrote:

Leadership is a concept of owing certain things to the institution. It is a way of thinking about institutional heirs, a way of thinking about stewardship as contrasted with ownership. The art of leadership requires us to think about the leader-as-steward in terms of relationship: of assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, of civility and values. Leaders should leave behind them assets and a legacy.⁴

While not writing from a faith perspective himself, business writer Peter Block recognized that the concept of stewardship arises out of several religions. As such stewardship for him is inherently spiritual. It means “to honor what has been given to us, to use power with a sense of grace, and to pursue purposes that transcend short-term self-interest.”⁵ For Block stewardship is about the greater good, in the long term. Imagine how differently things might have turned out in 2008 if these stewardship ideas had been held at the investment banks Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns, and at the insurance giant AIG.

A Christian reader of such ideas will find resonance with them. Jesus viewed his own ministry as one of stewardship, being entrusted with declaring and building up the Kingdom of God. “The Father loves the Son and placed all things in his hands” (John 3:35). At the end of his ministry Jesus entrusted the future of his followers into the care of the first leaders of the church. To Peter he said, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). He entrusted them with a mission for the new church: to encourage more people to become his followers (Matthew 28:19). We even hear Jesus’ guidance that the leadership style should have a stewardship orientation:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their leaders lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

In the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Jesus is the man who has gone away on a long journey, one day to return. Before leaving he “entrusted his property” to his servants, whom he hoped would prove trustworthy in helping his property grow in every way imaginable. His property is the body of Christ, which we see most visibly as congregations. So as stewards, congregations are entrusted with:

- their congregation’s life, which is also entrusted to them by the preceding generation, for the sake of living out and proclaiming the Kingdom of God
- the Gospel, which conveys to congregations their purposes, mission, values, and principles, which guides congregations to walk-the-talk of their proclamation

- the spiritual gifts of congregants, given for the fulfillment of ministry and mission in the world
- the aspiration of leaving a legacy of a healthy, vital, and hopefully stronger congregation that will one day be entrusted in turn into the stewardship of the generation that follows them.

Congregations that embrace this kind of stewardship of their own life will be motivated to pursue goals for the sake of a stronger future and perhaps also for the sake of hearing the praise of one who has gone on the journey and will return: “Well done, good and trustworthy servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

The great Biblical primer on the stewardship of an organization is found in Genesis 41 in the life’s work of Joseph. He was given by God an ability to interpret Pharaoh’s dream. A seven-year long famine was going to befall the land starting in seven years’ time. Joseph’s insight and wisdom impressed Pharaoh who then entrusted the long term well-being of Egypt into Joseph’s care as a steward. As the story unfolds we discover many characteristics of organizational stewardship which are easily transferrable to leaders today who act as stewards.

First, a trust is given to one by another. In a democracy a nation’s well-being is entrusted to its elected representatives by the people. In business a company’s profitability is entrusted to top management by the shareholders. In church the well-being of a congregation is entrusted to the special stewardship of its leaders. Just as Joseph did not own Egypt, church leaders do not own the congregation but act as servants of the ones on whose behalf they hold this trust, that being: God, the congregation, and the congregation that will follow the current generation. Steward leaders choose to assume the responsibility given to them for the sake of the ones they serve and their future. Strengthening an organization’s well-being takes time, so steward leaders must keep the long view in mind. Joseph accepted his stewardship role for the sake of the population of Egypt and its well-being throughout 14 years. As the Egyptians were to enjoy seven years of bounty, a short view of the future would have resulted in current ease and future distress. In the same way the stewardship timeline in congregations needs to be long term, because all current practices and decisions inevitably have long-term implications. Conversely, a long view on planning will help orient the near term for the sake of the more distant future.

In addition to bearing responsibility for the well-being of the people themselves, steward leaders are entrusted with two other things. The first is the causes of the people. Joseph was entrusted with the cause of ensuring nation’s survival through a distant, prolonged famine. In the same way church leaders are entrusted with the causes Christ has given all congregations: to form disciples, to help people know the fullness of God, to bear one another’s burdens, and so on. To fulfill these causes, steward leaders are also entrusted with the organization’s resources. For Joseph, the resource was a nation’s food supply. His calling was to manage this asset for the sake of the nation’s future well-being by literally growing this asset. Church leaders are to manage and strengthen congregational assets, which is about much more than financial management. The assets church leaders strengthen are the faithfulness of the people of the congregation and the

congregation's willingness and ability to fulfill Christ's callings. Being good stewards of congregational assets is also about raising up new generations of disciples, who will become the next generation of church—and its leaders—when the trust held by the current congregation is given into the stewardship of those who follow. After all: if there is no next generation there will be no one to entrust with the causes of Christ.

For leaders to effect their stewardship, they must enroll the people they serve in the purposes and goals of their organization. Joseph had to bring an entire nation onboard with his plan: every year for seven years everybody had to turn over to him 20 percent of their harvest. That would be on top of the normal taxes! This would not be easy to do, especially if people were told they had to do it because Pharaoh one night had a weird dream about seven skinny cows. Human nature is such that people are easily motivated by short-term self-interest that can pre-empt what is called intergenerational justice. Intergenerational justice, in essence, asserts that the Golden Rule must apply not only to those with us now but also to the generation that will follow us. Those Egyptians would probably have preferred to enjoy their current bounty and hoped that Pharaoh's dream was just a product of night-time indigestion. But for Joseph to be successful he had to bring everyone together in believing that "our interests for tomorrow" were just as important as "my interests for today." Joseph did this, and in so doing (in Max De Pree's understanding) left a positive legacy for those he served. Indeed, Joseph's legacy was so significant that more than 3,000 years later, there is a Broadway musical about him.

A congregation's stewardship of its future is no different from Egypt's stewardship of her future. Stewardship is not one aspect of congregational life but can be an orientation—a disposition—for living all of congregational life. Congregants who become stewards of congregational life are motivated to accept responsibility for all that is entrusted to us by the Master, who has gone on a journey. Consequently the starting place for stewardship is always current reality; that is, stewardship begins with what is in our trust now. A stewardship perspective then helps us be attentive to the well-being of our congregation—in the present and for the future—so we can maintain and even strengthen congregational well-being. This perspective helps congregants to notice emerging needs, weaknesses or vulnerability which stewards will want to address out of their care for what has been entrusted to them. Needs, weaknesses, and vulnerability are assessed by stewards to determine whether something needs to be done to rectify the situation. When the evaluation is "yes, we need to act to improve things," what is really happening is the creation of push motives. Push motives, which are experienced as concern, arise from stewardship.

This sense of stewardship elicits goals that will reflect our concerns and care. But there is always a degree of uncertainty about whether any goal can be attained, and the greater the uncertainty, the less motivation there will be. What, then, provides our motivation to strive for a goal?

Hope

Hope arises in us when we believe the future can be better than the present. The word occurs sixty-five times in the New Testament, but of these only three times in the Gospels. This is not very often. But regardless of how frequently Jesus used this word, his message and actions certainly inspired great hope among his followers. Hope is such a central idea to Christianity that it is said our rebirth in faith is to a new “living hope” (1 Peter 1:3). But Christians are not the only hope-filled people. It is human nature to hope. The theologian Lewis Smedes put it this way.

Hope is the spiritual power for living successfully as creatures endowed with the Godlike ability to imagine the future but stuck with the humanlike inability to control it. I cannot vouch for the report that he said it, but if he did say it, Martin Luther was seeing reality with his usual clean-sweep vision: “Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.”⁶

The theological understanding of hope has undergone some significant revision in recent decades in ways that recognize hope’s motivating power. Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *Theology of Hope*, wrote that hope inspires new perspectives, choices, and actions in the present. As such hopes “set everything in motion and keep it in a state of change.”⁷ This is because God is the power in front of history providing “propulsive force” and “new impulses” to help the people of God bring to greater expression God’s will for creation. For Moltmann, God is both the source and the inspiration of our hope, and both together motivate the work of the church.

The theologian James Smith has provided us with a very helpful phenomenology of hope. He says that five things need to be present for hope to exist:

1. Hopes are carried by people, so there must be one or ones who hope.
2. There must be an object hoped for. To hope is always to hope for something.
3. There must be an act of hope. Hope inspires people to do things.
4. There must be a ground for hope. Hope is more than wishful thinking. The one who hopes has reasons for hoping. The ground of hope contributes to the confidence one has in hoping. This will be explored shortly in a consideration of the importance of trust.
5. There must be some expectation of fulfillment. Hopes are hopes because there are no guarantees. But if people see no possibility of fulfillment then there will be no hope.⁸

This practical explanation of hope is helpful for leaders as a checklist to guide their work. Congregational hopes are often quite vague. Leaders strengthen hope by articulating goals to be the focus of congregational hope. This makes the “object hoped for” clearer, simpler to understand, and easier to pursue. Trusted leaders need to provide some degree of assurance that goals can be fulfilled. Otherwise, the opposite of hope—

apathy and despair—may prevail. Having an object, ground, and expectation for hope, a congregation can become a people of hope, which in turn helps a congregation to act on its hope.

Hope motivates because we desire what our hope envisions (the “object hoped for”). We feel desire because we have reasons to strive towards what we hope for. Those reasons are our motives, which draw us forward. The more pull motives there are drawing us towards the object of our hope, the more desire we will feel to attain what we envision. When strong desire is combined with the anticipation that attaining our goal is possible, our hope is given the energy to act.

Moltmann and Smith, among other theologians today, are suggesting that hope should be transformational. Any transformation—whether it is from caterpillar to butterfly, the movements of human history, or congregational change—can be analyzed, understood, and shared in the form of a story. Humans use narrative thinking naturally to bring coherence to their sense of identity and personal history. We not only do this to help ourselves understand our past but also to prepare for potential futures. After all, the future is inherently uncertain, yet in the midst of countless possible futures, there are only some we would desire. People often develop as a narrative their vision for the desired future as well as their sense of the best path to attain that future. Theologian Daniel Johnson describes how “storying” our future in this way functions to foster and strengthen hope.

It is only by means of narrative that hope is experienced in the first place. The assertion is well founded, for the experience of hope has a narrative structure built right into it. When people hope, they lay a story arc over a certain span of history, one that identifies the limitations of the present, offers a vision of how those limitations may be overcome in the future, and furnishes grounds for expecting that future will be realized. The story may not be fully articulated in the experience itself, of course, but the narrative structure is there just the same.⁹

Humans want their best future. The future is unknowable, and the subsequent uncertainty can make it so very hard to hope. So we imagine a scenario of the future we desire, describing it—and the way to get there—like a story. If that story of the future is desirable, if it seems realistic and realizable enough, then the story fosters hope. That hope, in turn, strengthens motivation to pursue the imagined future. Leaders, then, need to be story tellers, helping people imagine how a “plot twist” (i.e., a proposed change) in a congregation’s story can lead to a stronger, desirable future. If people are naturally oriented to find hope in the stories they imagine regarding their future, then leaders have to help people to do just that. This is so crucial to the role of leadership that Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner asserts “the ultimate impact of the leader depends most significantly on the particular story that he or she relates or embodies, and the receptions to that story on the part of audiences (or collaborators or followers).”¹⁰

The story of the exodus journey of the Israelites is an example of the narrative structure of hope and a master class on the importance of hope when facing the possibility of change. Moses told the people enslaved in Egypt that God wanted to return

them to the land promised to their ancestor Abraham. Moses gave the Israelites, in Smith's terms, an object of hope, but the people reacted in hopelessness. "They would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery" (Exodus 6:9). The Israelites' lacked hope because two of the elements identified in Smith's phenomenology of hope were missing: they had no ground for hope (they did not trust God to be able to help them) and they had no expectation that this hope could be realized (since the Egyptians would never let them go). But the beliefs of the Israelites began to change as the ten plagues unfolded, for the plagues were as much a sign to the Israelites as to the Egyptians that the God of Abraham would help the Israelites escape slavery. By the time of the tenth plague, the Israelites belief in God's support and power was sufficient that they complied with Moses instructions for Passover, for by then they trusted Moses. They now had a ground for hope. With Pharaoh's words, "Rise up and be gone!" the Israelites had at least some expectation that their hope could be realized. The Israelites became a people of hope and acted in hope by commencing the exodus. God, through the leader Moses, helped people to develop hope where at first there was none.

When it comes to the narrative structure of hope, Johnson tells us that people lay a story arc over their hoped-for future. Imagine what the Israelites must have been thinking as they packed for the journey. First they would be imagining this Promised Land. To the Israelites it would be a place remembered and described in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. The story of God's covenant with Abraham would remind the Israelites that this land was their inheritance. Never having been there themselves, the Israelites would describe the land in imaginative ways: that the land was good and broad, flowing with milk and honey. Plus one other thing: it would be a land free from Egyptian bondage. These elements of the story they would tell of the Promised Land would reflect the Israelites' motives for travelling there, creating a desire to go there. Then there was Moses' account of his meeting with God at the burning bush when God committed to help the Israelites to attain this inheritance. God's commitment—and the evidence for God's commitment seen in the plagues—would give confidence to the Israelites' trust in God and thus give further confidence to their hope.

The narrative arc of the Israelites' hope would also prompt them to imagine the story of their journey to the Promised Land. Imagining how the journey could unfold helps people to recognize the conditions, needs, and priorities to accommodate in their plans. It also helps people assess whether a goal is attainable or not, which will either strengthen or weaken hope. So we can imagine the following thoughts going through the minds of the Israelites as they imagined the story of their journey. "I can take only what I am able to carry, so what am I going to pack? We are going to have to find food on the way, because we can't carry all we need. We'll have to have some guidance, somehow, to point the way. After all: we've never been there before! Will my elderly mother make it? We will be in the wilderness, so what kind of shelter will we need? And I'm a little concerned about the size of the Red Sea." Imagining the story of how a journey, change, or transformation will unfold helps us understand better not only the goal but also our motives for pursuing the goal. It also helps us plan out the path to the goal. Hope is created and strengthened when

- the story of change excites us to the point that we desire its attainment, and
- the story of the journey to that destination appears to us to be effective and realistic.

Hope also sustains us as we imagine the possible difficulties we may face along the way. This helps us to “hope for the best” in the face of future uncertainty.

The actual journey of change rarely unfolds as we’ve imagined it. So it was with the Israelites. For example, I doubt that anyone—including Moses—anticipated the parting of the Red Sea. Sometimes the plot twists of the journey strengthen hope—as this would have—but not always. In fact, the Israelites often found it hard to sustain hope on the journey. The challenges of finding food and water in the wilderness caused the Israelites to despair time and again. Hope can also diminish when people believe that they have failed their God and themselves, as the Israelites felt in the wake of the Golden Calf debacle. People too easily come to believe that their nature, circumstances or their efforts will not be sufficient, and so hope can wane. Consequently leaders must be in the business of reawakening and strengthening people’s hope. If Moses failed in this responsibility, the Israelites would have returned to slavery a defeated people—defeated not by an enemy army, but by their own loss of hope.

I have noted that every congregation has its own unique disposition in how stewardship, hope and trust are balanced in its life. This means a congregation can do more than have hope regarding a few discrete possibilities regarding its future. Hope can be strengthened as a significant part of a congregation’s disposition. As Jürgen Moltmann beautifully put it, “The whole body of Christians is engaged in the apostolate of hope for the world and finds therein its essence—namely that which makes it the church of God.”¹¹ Hope, in other words, is to be part of the nature of a congregation, helping it along the path of becoming increasingly what God hopes for us and makes possible for us “in the possibilities and powers of the Holy Spirit.”¹² In this way a congregation can feel motivation not just to tackle those few discrete possibilities regarding its future, but motivation to be all that Christ calls each fellowship of faith to become.

Of course, we know there are no guarantees that we will attain what we hope for. Hope always involves risk, and we risk more than simply seeing our goals not achieved. Leaders can feel humiliation when congregants do not adopt proposed goals. We risk the personal feelings of disappointment and shame when what is hoped for does not come to be. Surprises, roadblocks, and unanticipated consequences can so dog the implementation of plans that the hope, once strong, becomes hard to cling to. We can find ourselves needing to “hope against hope” as Paul described (Romans 4:18). We can even end up angry with the God we trusted in the risky venture, to the point of questioning our faith. Hope is necessary for change, but it can be so elusive. For these reasons congregational leaders must be agents of hope. An important role of leadership is to remind, point to, interpret, and affirm hope whenever the moment of that possibility arises. As Andrew Greeley wrote, “Every object, event and person in life is potentially an occasion for hope renewal and hence potentially sacred.”¹³ It is hard to imagine few things more important for leaders than to be midwives of sacred moments such as this. Peter in his first letter challenged his readers to be ready to give account for the hope that was within them

(3:15). We hope because we have reason to hope. But if this is true, what are those reasons? What is our ground for hope?

Trust

According to Smith's phenomenology of hope, the ground for hope is trust. Trust is a reliance on a person or a thing that creates a sense of support and security in uncertain situations. Uncertainty can diminish hope, which in turn diminishes motivation. So to strengthen hope, people turn to something—mostly beyond themselves—to help them do what they feel unsure they can do on their own. When people believe these things will help them they are putting their trust in them, since the act of help will only come in the future. Trust, in turn, reduces the feelings of risk and uncertainty, creating a greater confidence for one's hope, which in turn fosters more motivation to act despite the uncertainties. This is how trust sustains and strengthens hope.

Let's look at a scenario which can help us better appreciate the relationship of hope and trust. Suppose during a momentary lapse in mental judgment I tell my elderly step-mother that I will knit her a sweater for her birthday in six weeks' time. A handmade sweater would certainly be far more meaningful than a gift certificate from her favorite store. But I have a problem: I am a very poor knitter. After coming back to my senses, I realize there is little hope of my actually attaining my goal by the deadline. This makes me anxious—creating stress—because I am now focused on my limitations rather than the goal and my motives for striving for the goal. Consequently I find it hard to feel enthusiasm for the project. But then, suppose, my wife offers to help me by teaching me how to knit more proficiently, by providing positive and corrective feedback for my work, and by offering to share in the knitting project itself. Suddenly, I find myself with far more hope. My hope has a new ground: my trust in my wife to help. I can have this confident trust because my wife exhibits the three qualities that inspire trustworthiness: benevolence (she has my interests at heart), ability (she *can* do what she has promised to do), and integrity (she *will* do what she promises to do).¹⁴ At the moment she offers this help, the help is yet to be realized. All I have is my trust in her that she will do what she promised. Yet these three qualities foster trust, which in turn strengthens hope, because my sense of uncertainty has been diminished.

Congregational change always implies some degree of risk, which can be as straightforward as the risk of failing to attain the hoped-for benefits of the goal. But another risk of change can be the loss of something meaningful, and grief is a feeling we all like to avoid. There is also the risk that change can lead to congregants leaving. Leaders, in proposing change, take the risk that the trust congregants have in them will decline, and that conflict might increase. Fear of potential negative outcomes can make proposed congregational change seem too risky.

In the face of these very real risks a congregation must have as broad and strong a ground of hope as possible. Trust in God can help congregations face with confidence the uncertainties and risks inherent in change, since trust can help congregants affirm with

the apostle Paul, “If God is for us then who can stand against us?” (Romans 8:31). But the ground of hope can be made stronger by adding other elements as well, such as trust in

- the leadership (who congregants must trust to have wisdom about the goal the leaders propose)
- the congregation as a whole (who congregants must trust to support their striving for the goal)
- the goal itself (that its attainment will effect what is hoped for)
- the plan (that implementing it will enable them to attain the goal),
- resources (that they will be sufficient to fulfill the plan),
- and the wider context of the congregation (that it will not prevent their attaining the goal).

A congregation embarking on change relies on all these elements. The more of them a congregation can trust to fulfill what is anticipated about them, the more the congregation will believe “we can do this!” which, in turn, will strengthen hope.

The human need to have a broad ground for hope is illustrated poignantly in the story of the report of the Israelite spies after their forty-day reconnoiter in the Promised Land of Canaan (Numbers 13). The spies were called “leading men” (v. 3), which implies they had the trust of the people. Their initial report was a simple summary of the facts from their investigation (vv. 27–29): it is a good land, but the people there are strong and their towns well-fortified. Caleb was the first to speak after the basic report was given. He tried to build the confidence of the people through his assessment of the Israelites’ ability to conquer the land’s inhabitants: “Let us go up at once and occupy it, *for we are well able* to overcome it” (v. 30). Caleb was encouraging the Israelites to trust their military abilities. Another ground for hope is also implied in Caleb’s battle cry: trust me as one of your leaders. Ten of the spies next argued the other position. “*We are not able* to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we” (v. 31). The ten had a lower trust in their abilities. So far nothing has been said by either side of the debate regarding the confidence that can come from trusting in the God who provided so much help already.

With sides now taken, the debate escalated as these leaders tried to win the hearts of the people. The ten spies made their next claim: “the land devours its inhabitants” (v. 32). They were claiming that the agricultural land was poor—a claim that would diminish the hopes people had in the Promised Land. They described the enemy not just as strong, but as the giant, semi-divine Nephilim. These ten “leading men” were making the risks appear greater and greater, and saying that the people couldn’t trust in anything to help them win. The ten were also implying, “Trust us as your leaders!”

But Caleb, now joined by Joshua, would not give in. The goal, they said, was still a good one. These two now called Canaan “an *exceedingly* good land” (14:7), making the goal sound even more worthy. They tried to strengthen the Israelites’ trust in themselves as warriors: “Do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us” (v. 9). They were also encouraging the people to trust in their human resources. The

census reported in Numbers 1 determined that the Israelites had 603,550 men able to go to war. Caleb and Joshua also played the ultimate trump card to counter the report that the Nephilim lived in Canaan. “If *the Lord* is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us” (v. 8). Caleb and Joshua tried to build the broadest ground of hope they could to reduce the uncertainty and risk of warfare. They did so to give confidence to the people’s hope of victory, and consequently to strengthen the Israelites commitment to fight.

Trust is an attitude that is created through people’s evaluation of what they are being asked to trust. The Israelites assessed the two very different perspectives presented to them, and they lost hope. “The congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night” (14:1). Even though the Israelites had a very desirable goal that had been their destination ever since they left Egypt, they chose to give that goal up because they believed there was insufficient ground for their hope. Motivation does not depend on the reality of the situation; rather, it depends on what people believe about their situation. So the Israelites second-guessed the whole journey, saying they would have been better off just staying in Egypt as slaves. They questioned God’s wisdom in leading them here (v. 3). They also began to create new rationalizations for their decision not to enter Canaan: “Our wives and our little ones will become booty” (v. 3) if the war was lost. They even threatened to stone Caleb and Joshua to end the nay-saying of these two leaders (v. 10). Defeated by the loss of their hope rather than by an enemy, the Israelites chose to take their broken spirit back to cruel slavery—which was where they started in Exodus 6.9 when Moses arrived with his mission. They said, “Let us choose a captain who will lead us back to Egypt” (v. 4). That wasn’t to happen, of course, because the last straw was broken for the God who had endured one time too many their lack of trust.

This story is a cautionary tale on the ground of hope and it points us towards four critical learnings:

- the ground of hope needs to be as wide as possible, especially in the face of a goal that appears risky and uncertain
- the key for hope is whether people believe the ground for hope is trustworthy
- leaders have a critical role in building and maintaining trust
- trust, which is so slow to build, can be lost quickly.

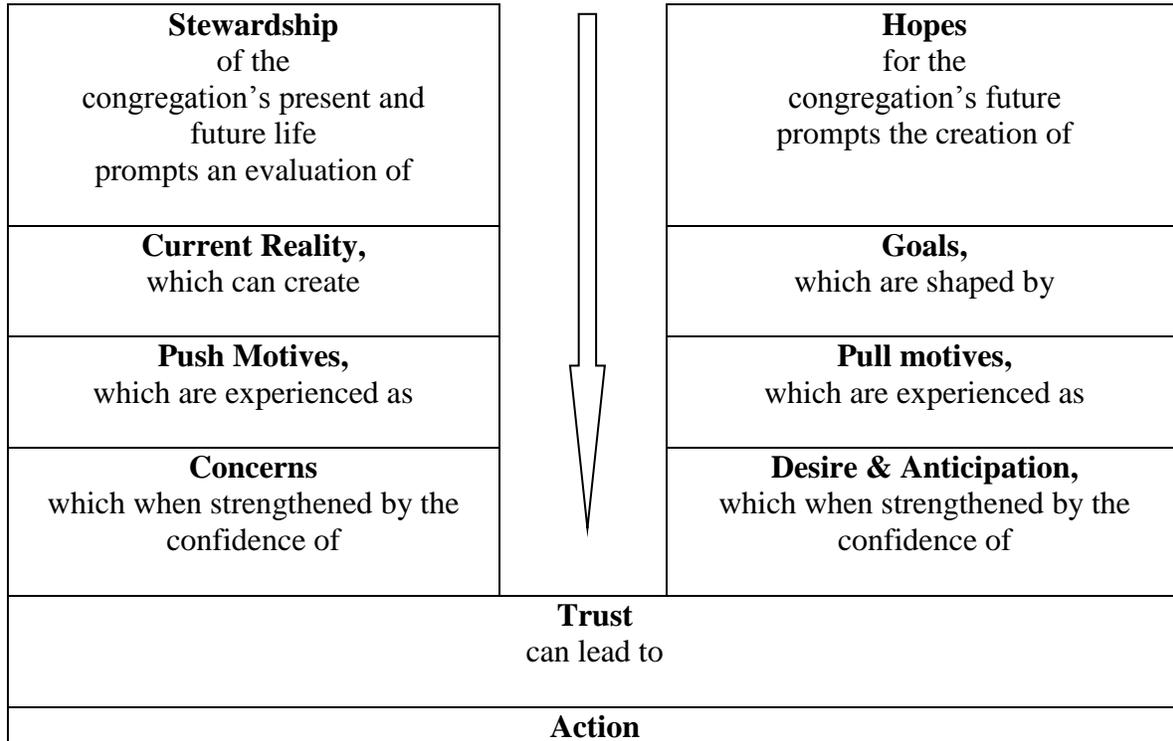
The more a congregation is inclined generally to trust God, itself, its ability to attain its goals, its leadership and its resources, the more disposed a congregation will be to act in order to attain its hopes. Wise leaders strengthen a congregation’s willingness to embark on change by strengthening trust.

Summary

Congregations have a disposition for motivated behavior. Every congregation—to some degree—acts as a steward of its life, hopes in its future, and trusts the ground of its hopes. What sets congregations apart from each other motivationally is the strength with

which these three inclinations are held within a congregation. Generally, the more a congregation is oriented by its stewardship, hope, and trust, the more likely a congregation will act when it feels motivated to do so. Wise leaders will work every day to strengthen the motivational disposition of their congregation, for this work will pay dividends each time a new initiative is proposed to the congregation.

We have begun to build a framework for understanding motivation:



This scheme is not complete, however. Chapters 2 and 3 of *Choosing Change* builds on this theological foundation with what is understood about motivation from the world of psychology. A psychological understanding of motivation helps us develop this framework further as a functional tool for leaders.

¹ Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 213.

² Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 6 – 48.

³ Stephen Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 53.

⁴ Max DePree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Dell, 1989), 12-13.

⁵ Peter Block, *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-interest* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1993), 22.

⁶ Lewis Smedes, *Standing on the Promises* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1998), 32.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), page 5.

⁸ James K.A. Smith, “Determined Hope: A Phenomenology of Christian Expectation,” in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

⁹ Daniel Johnson, “Contrary Hopes: Evangelical Christianity and the Decline of Narrative,” in *The Future of Hope*, 31.

¹⁰ Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: an Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 13.

¹¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 328.

¹² Moltmann, *The Church and the Power of the Holy Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 25.

¹³ Andrew Greeley, *Religion as Poetry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 28.

¹⁴ Roger C. Mayer, James H. Davis, and F. David Schoorman, “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,” in *The Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (July 1995): 709–34.

This chapter is an additional work for the book:

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