



breathe

OUR IDENTITY IS FOUND IN GOD'S LOVE
DURING TIMES OF ANXIETY AND CHANGE

BY **ELAINE A. HEATH**

Bethesda United Methodist Church in Haw Creek, N.C., is a small, semi-rural church in the midst of staggering change. That change is happening at Bethesda does not distinguish it from churches both large and small, rural and urban, across the nation. What is noteworthy at Bethesda is the direction of this change and the response from leaders, congregants, and the community.

A few years ago, a visitor to Bethesda UMC would have seen a nondescript patch of grass and a parking lot with a sign discouraging anyone other than church members from parking there. Founded in 1844, the church was on the verge of being closed. What options did a small church in a small community have to reverse what appeared to be the inevitable trend toward decline and then disappearance?

A GOSPEL-SHAPED CHURCH

In my work I have exhorted the church to move away from staid traditionalism into dynamic, spiritually deep yet nimble expressions of the church. I believe we must now take up the gospel-shaped movement of Jesus that finds solidarity with “the least of these” and is accessible to and largely led by laypeople. It is imperative that the institutional church that is collapsing beneath bureaucratic top heaviness, clergy-centric practice, and ecclesiastical loss of soul live forward into the original vision of Jesus. Indeed, the gospel-shaped church is the only kind that will birth Jesus-followers in the years ahead. What I see emerging in myriad ways and places is precisely that—a gospel-shaped movement.

Today at Bethesda UMC, a new playground filled with laughing preschoolers occupies the patch of grass. The sign on the parking lot invites parents to park there while waiting to pick up their children from the elementary school next door. The pastor of Bethesda, the Rev. Karen Doucette, makes sure that a bowl of fresh fruit is on the picnic tables for parents and children to enjoy.

Portions of this article have been adapted from *God Unbound*, by Elaine A. Heath (Upper Room Books), which explores God’s wisdom from the book of Galatians for the anxious church.

The changes at Bethesda go far beyond a welcoming parking lot and playground. Transformation began when the dozen or so members decided to change rather than close. With the help of their district superintendent, congregational leaders began meeting with leaders from the **Missional Wisdom Foundation** and the Western North Carolina Conference of the UMC to discuss possibilities. Over the course of three years, a mutually agreeable plan was put into action to repurpose the building and parsonage in ways that would create a neighborhood hub and contribute to the flourishing of the village of Haw Creek. The congregation hoped that, by giving itself away to Haw Creek in the manner of Philippians 2:6–10, they would be able to renew the missional vocation of the church. Private donations and grants provided funds for the project.

CHANGE AND ANXIETY

Such change, however, inevitably causes anxiety. Everyone can feel it. There is a growing sense of descent into chaos, and because people cannot see “exactly where all of this is going,” the tendency is to regress to behaviors that are familiar but counterproductive. These behaviors are meant to stop the anxiety rather than address the underlying issue. Usually the behaviors

The story of the birth and ongoing development of the Missional Wisdom Foundation is described in *Missional.Monastic.Mainline: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historic Mainline Traditions* by Elaine A. Heath and Larry Duggins (Cascade). See www.missional-wisdom.com to learn about their work to revitalize churches and faith communities.

include attempts to scapegoat agents of change. (This is why prophets are without honor in their home town, as Jesus says in Luke 4:24!) Rare is the leader who is centered enough and integrated enough to withstand this anxiety, refuse to participate in scapegoating, attend to people within the system who are not going to change, protect necessary space for change to happen, nurture the pioneers who are leading the way forward, and do all of this in ways that are loving and wise. The chaos of change is not the enemy.

Most of us when experiencing anxiety want to simply make it go away. Our earliest experiences of anxiety are connected to needing our caregivers to hold us, feed us, or in some other way tend to a basic human need. These survival connections with anxiety are multiplied exponentially when we have experienced trauma, abandonment, or other painful events. It is not uncommon for our “unfinished business” from long ago to surface

when anxiety enters the systems in which we live, work, and worship. In spiritual direction or therapy we may discover that a good deal of our **anxiety during systems change** is more about our family of origin than about the situation at hand. The exponential character of anxiety can make us feel as if anxiety is the urgent problem that must be fixed. So we hurriedly make choices out of fear and discomfort, not to address the real situation, but to make anxiety stop. Since change seems to be causing the anxiety, the knee-jerk response is to stop change so the anxiety will end.

For Bethesda UMC, some of the most stressful and anxiety-provoking changes involved the plans to remodel the church building. The sanctuary was emptied and remodeled into a community room; it is now ready to serve as worship space on weekends but is also available for neighborhood gatherings. The pews were removed and remade into Shaker-style tables

For more about systems change and anxiety, see *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* by Edwin Friedman (Seabury Press).





To explore how the disciplines of spiritual direction can help us address anxiety and change, read *Jesus Our Spiritual Director: A Pilgrimage through the Gospels* by Wendy J. Miller (Upper Room Books).

for the new co-working space in the church basement. The kitchen is being renovated into a commercial kitchen, which will become part of the co-working area as well as be accessible for church dinners.

It was important for leaders to honor the history of the church and to be patient and loving as congregants grieved over the loss of pews and other structural changes. To help with this difficult part of change, a Sunday school classroom was repurposed as a heritage center with historic photographs and documents from the founding of the church up until the present. The heritage center has helped the congregation honor its own history while helping to write the new chapter in their church's story.

ANXIETY AND IDENTITY

Anxiety is not really the problem. Therapists encourage anxious clients to “sit with their anxiety” so as to make decisions out of freedom rather than fear. A big part of the therapeutic task is to help clients recognize what triggers their anxiety, and why. Our conviction that we are deeply loved and that God will not abandon us provides a path for us to move through anxiety. We need to know at an emotional level that **God is with us in the anxiety-producing change**. The capacity to respond instead of react to anxiety-provoking change has much to do with our general sense of security and our ability to “own” the change through participation.

So much of our anxiety during change comes back to our sense of identity, need for security, and need to belong. Whether consciously or

unconsciously, most of us wonder where we will fit into the new picture. Will we still be “us” corporately if we sit in chairs instead of pews, if we have chickens in the back yard of the parsonage, if our school adopts a new curriculum, if we take seriously the call to become more diverse? Questions about identity and belonging are central to anxiety in the system.

From a stance of belovedness we can recognize when these legitimate human needs feel threatened by change, and we can trace out the root cause of old anxiety that has surfaced. We can choose life-giving responses that are based on trust in God and openness to God's work in the world. We can become compassionate toward others who are stuck, and we can become courageous to make necessary change.

At Bethesda, leadership from the congregation, district, conference, and the Missional Wisdom Foundation committed to a transparent and patient process that would enable as many people as possible to participate in the process of change. For each step of the process the small congregation was involved in discussion, development, and interpreting the project to neighbors. Challenges arose, including the seemingly endless red tape of obtaining building permits. Church members and leaders had to be willing to meet often with neighbors and the city council in order to move forward and remember why this project was important. Failures happened, and the congregation learned to ask, “What can we learn from this experience that will help us as we move forward?”

During the renovation of the sanctuary, the church met in the

parsonage for worship services. They grew to love the intimacy and warmth of the house church, and new people began to attend Bethesda. The new initiatives to use the resources of the church to meet needs in the community coalesced into **Haw Creek Commons**, a community development organization supported by the Missional Wisdom Foundation.

TRANSFORMING ANXIETY INTO GROWTH

Bethesda UMC continues to change, but now instead of declining they are growing in their missional ecclesiology, recognizing that as they give themselves away they not only bring Jesus but also encounter Jesus in their neighbors. Haw Creek Commons continues to evolve, developed from the strengths of the neighborhood. To use a favorite Wesleyan term, the prevenient grace of God is at work within and beyond the boundaries of Haw Creek Commons. The congregation has multiplied substantially. Neighbors are finding at Haw Creek Commons and Bethesda UMC a spiritual home as well as a community of friends who like to work, play, sew, garden, cook, build, and have fun together. Bethesda UMC is thriving as it lives its missional identity as beloved by God in a new day.

I know it's hard to play and be creative when we feel fearful. Anxiety takes the spring out of our step. It can trigger a vast array of responses: hunker down, raise fists, run and hide. But we don't have to be afraid. That is the wonderful news. God's love casts out fear. God is with us! God orchestrates change. Change happens all the time so that every generation,

“IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT HAW CREEK COMMONS IS A FIELD EDUCATION PLACEMENT NEXT SUMMER. THE LESSONS I LEARNED THERE, THE EXPERIENCES I HAD, AND THE PEOPLE I MET HAVE TRULY CHANGED MY LIFE AND THE LIFE OF MY FAMILIES IN A BENEFICIAL WAY. MY UNDERSTANDING OF MINISTRY AND OUTREACH IS FOREVER CHANGED FOR THE BETTER, AND I CANNOT STRESS ENOUGH THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS PLACE AS AN EDUCATIONAL HUB FOR SEMINARY STUDENTS GOING THROUGH FIELD EDUCATION.”

—Patrick Neitzey M.Div.'18

every community, every person can experience God in their world, their context, their time.

All around us are signs of change, from the tiny cedar tree growing from a pine stump to the notification on my computer that a systems update is ready. Without change life is not possible. Breath itself is a constant exchange of air, without which we would die. During times of congregational and institutional change, the temptation is to resist change out of anxiety that we will lose our identity. Instead, what we need to do is breathe—opening ourselves intentionally to wonder, curiosity, playfulness, creativity, and hope. As we do so we discover that God is with us, leading us to a new day. ■

Read about the many ways that Haw Creek Commons is providing space for education, entrepreneurship, the arts, spiritual retreat, gardening, and more for the Haw Creek area: www.hawcreekcommons.com.