

Thirty years ago, Fairview Denominational Church was largely what one would expect from an established, Euro- American church in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area. Worship services were restrained and formal, with hymns and an organ. The congregation was sizeable, with mostly middle- to upper-middle-class members attired in their best clothes. Theologically, the church tended toward the conservative side of the spectrum. And, like most all churches, Fairview Denominational Church was not immune to the decline brought about by the shifting religious landscape in the United States.

Today, Fairview Denominational Church has transformed into The Growing Church, and it is largely unlike what one would expect, given its history and origins. Worship services are loud and unrestrained, with a house band and a variety of songs. The congregation is smaller, with some ethnic diversity and members from a wide socioeconomic spectrum; no one dresses in anything more formal than jeans on Sunday mornings. Theologically, the church is thoroughly evangelical and LGBT-affirming. It also has a strong environmental focus that is reflected in its new, rural location. And, unlike many churches, The Growing Church is thriving.

The Rev. Dr. Robin Matthews, age 56, has been senior pastor of what is now The Growing Church for twenty-six years. She arrived at Fairview Denominational Church as a seminary intern more than thirty years ago.

The first seed that would become The Growing Church was planted as a strategic response to a growing dissatisfaction among congregants. The board structure of the church was no longer serving the needs of ministry and was hindering the discipleship of members. So in her first year as senior pastor, she proposed a new structure that would be more efficient and effective: a single board divided into elders, with responsibility for overall guidance and leadership, and deacons, with responsibility for the church's physical property and assets.

The second seed was a theological shift. While serving as senior pastor, Matthews started a Sunday evening worship service for the LGBT community, at a separate site. This began as an independent ministry from the church. After several years of ministry and study, the two "congregations" were merged and became one. Some people were not happy with this decision and left. At the same time, the church gained new members who were attracted by the welcome extended to the LGBT community. When Fairview later held a congregational vote on becoming a recognized "welcoming and affirming" congregation, the motion was unanimously approved.

The next significant seed was related to the practice of worship. In the course of becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation, FDC experienced the exodus of many longtime, stalwart members and an influx of new members, many of whom were younger than the émigrés and less steeped in traditional church culture. The hymns, organ music, formal attire, and restrained worship for which Fairview was known did not appeal to the newer members, nor did they appeal to many of the younger members who had spent their lives at the church. Eventually hymns were eliminated,

contemporary worship songs were added, and the musicians in the congregation formed a band. As a result, worship services became more informal, less traditional, and noticeably louder. This shift, according to Matthews, was even more difficult than the journey to becoming a welcoming and affirming congregation, in part because those who were adamantly opposed to the new worship style did not immediately leave the church as former disaffected members had. Rather, they remained at FDC, making their dissatisfaction known and polarizing the congregation over more than just the music. Eventually, some of these members left FDC, while others came around to the louder, less formal, contemporary worship style.

Through attrition, schism, and change-induced exodus, the membership of Fairview Denominational Church in the late-1990s and early-2000s was a mere fraction of the 350 people who were on the membership list when Matthews first arrived at the church in the mid-1980s. Yet in spite of its tumultuous history, FDC was remarkably healthy.

However, in spite of its vitality, the attrition of membership led the financial hardship, as the 'new' congregation struggled to maintain a large facility. The congregation eventually sold their existing site, moved into a new site appropriate for their ministry, and now worships as a vibrant community of faith newly named "The Growing Church."

Adapted from THE GROWING CHURCH: A CASE STUDY IN LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE
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Questions to Consider

- What themes from the presentation did you notice?
- What places in this Case Study made you think "That sounds familiar"?
- What assets did this congregation have that allowed them to change?
- What were the places of loss that they had to face?
- If you were a leader in this congregation at the beginning of their story, would you still be a leader at the end? Why or why not?
- What is scary about their story?
- What gives you hope about their story?
- If you were in this new congregation what would you want to be "measuring"? How might you go about that?