



Leading Missional Change Case Study

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The Train Wreck

Overview

St. John's Lutheran Church was a 134 year old congregation in Salina, Kansas, an agricultural community of approximately 50,000 people. Since 1959, St. John's had also belonged to Salina Lutheran School (SLS), a preschool – junior high Christian day school supported by six Lutheran congregations. As St. John's had grown in membership, its enrollment in SLS had also increased. This growth brought a sobering reality, however: student tuition was paid by the congregation, thus St. John's share of the SLS operating costs was increasing disproportionately to the rest of its budget, limiting resources in much needed ministries. After much discussion, St. John's leaders recommended withdrawing from the SLS and beginning their own school. This proposal caused much dissension in the congregation, among the local Lutheran churches, and in the community.

The Voters' Meeting

The sanctuary was packed. "There have to be almost 400 people here," Peter whispered to Jim. "Both balconies are full." The two were pastors at St. John's—Jim Adams the senior pastor of 20 years and Peter Harnith, the associate of five. Never before had this many people showed up for a voters' meeting. But then again never before had a decision of such import been brought before the group. Even Evelyn, who had been a member for over 80 years, could not remember this kind of attendance. Not even the expansion proposal in the late '50s had garnered such energy.

The motion was straight-forward: *That St. John's withdraw from Salina Lutheran School at the end of the '99-'00 school year and form its own Lutheran day school.* The new school would be a "subsidized tuition" model. Parents would pay partial tuition with the congregation covering the remainder of the cost.

This was a major shift from the current reality. Since 1959, the congregation covered the entire tuition cost for its members. If the Smiths were members of St. John's and had a child in SLS, the Smiths paid no tuition—the cost came out of St. John's operating budget in the form of an assessment. The Smiths were "expected" to financially support St. John's ministry but IRS regulations made the accountability conversations tricky. If a specific amount of offering was solicited, then a case could be made that the parent was receiving 'services in kind' and the charitable donation status of the offering would be in jeopardy. Thus orientation meetings were held and the cost of tuition was shared, along with expectations for worship and participation. But ultimately St. John's leadership was unwilling to disallow St. John's children whose family did not give a generous enough offering. This policy resulted in a SLS assessment for St.

While based on true circumstances, this case was prepared for class discussion and learning. Some names and situations have been altered.

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John's that outpaced the offering growth of the congregation, creating financial strains in virtually all departments of the ministry.

There's Always Been A School

St. John's Lutheran Church began in 1864 with a 28 x 30 wood frame church on West Ash Street in the heart of Salina. The founding group numbered but eight families, all of German descent and recently migrated from Perry County, south of St. Louis, Missouri. The original pastor, Rev. Wilhelm Franke, served both St. John's and a small congregation of 40 people in Emporia, Kansas, approximately 100 miles southeast. While his presence was infrequent, his love for education impacted the young congregation—in 1880 St. John's moved the wood frame church building a few blocks away to Baker and W. Iron streets to be used as a Christian day school. Twenty four years later in 1904 that love grew again: a new brick structure was built for the school at a cost of \$7,000.

St. John's love for Christian education and Christian day school grew over the years. At the peak enrollment, almost 200 children attended the school. As the Lutheran population grew in Salina with seven additional Lutheran congregations springing up before 1950, St. John's was invited to discuss forming a school association. A sister congregation—St. Timothy's—also managed a day school with over 100 students. A number of the other Lutheran congregations desired to provide Christian education for their children as well. Thus in 1959 Salina Lutheran School was formed.

SLS was a joint effort of six Lutheran congregations: St. John's, St. Timothy's, Concordia, Mt. Calvary, Our Redeemer and Trinity. It was housed in St. John's and St. Timothy's facilities. Each congregation was assessed the tuition costs for its member families, with assessments totally funding all operating costs. Over the years individuals and families bequeathed dollars to SLS, but those dollars went for needs beyond operations. The arrangement took great coordination, especially when facility expansions and capital campaigns were warranted. And relationships drove the well-being of the school. If the congregations ever left conflict unresolved or began to take a "we/they" posture, that attitude was sure to transfer into the governing of the school.

The SLS governing structure embodied simplicity: a school board governed the school, delegating the day-to-day operations to a superintendent. Each congregation received one spot on the board, and each board member had one vote. Thus each congregation had an equal voice, and in virtually all matters except indebtedness, the school board had ultimate authority.

Blue, White, and Farmers

The population of Salina consisted of three basic demographics: blue collar, white collar, and farmers, with blue collar occupying the majority. The AFL-CIO owned a loud voice in the city. The major industry was agricultural or food oriented. John Deere and Cargill were some of the largest employers, with regular rumors of layoffs and potential relocations. Overall Salina had decreased by 10,000 people over the past two decades. In large part it followed the national trend of younger adults moving to larger cities.

St. John's congregation, while not mirroring the decline of Salina, had remained at about 650 in worship for the decade before Peter's arrival. All three demographics existed in St. John's with the white collar members occupying a slightly larger percentage than in the general population. The congregation had been well-led over the decades, and a great spirit of unity existed. St. John's was the healthiest of the Lutheran congregations by far.

St. John's governance structure consisted of a voters' assembly/church council model. The Voters' Assembly met four times per year, deciding issues the council believed warranted Voters' approval. While the Assembly had ultimate authority to call workers, acquire indebtedness and approve annual operating budgets and plans, enough gray existed in responsibilities that the council often delegated approval of issues to the Voters. The council seats were occupied by a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer (who also managed the accounting aspects of the ministry), along with a representative each from children & youth, adult education, facilities, and outreach. Two representatives from the board of elders sat on the council and ensured the spiritual issues were addressed. The council met monthly and had final say in most operational decisions.

While this council-driven model worked well for many years, as St. John's grew confusion and conflict concerning day-to-day operations and roles began to grow among St. John's leaders and staff. St. John's staff consisted of a senior pastor, Jim, who was also responsible for pastoral care and handled the majority of the preaching; an associate pastor, Peter, who oversaw adult education, outreach, and communication; a director of children's ministries, Amy Starr; a director of youth ministries, Dana Fowler; a director of Stephen's Ministries (a lay counseling ministry), Brenda Simmons; a number of music ministers; and three secretaries. The confusion arose over responsibilities and authority: when did staff have authority to simply act? What needed approval from the council? From the Voters? This issue became more critical as the pace of the ministry increased.

Thus in late 1997 Peter recommended to Jim that the congregation move to a policy-based model. This necessitated dissolving the existing council structure and instead creating a new board of elders—six men—who set policy and oversaw the pastors, also serving as their counselors. Day-to-day operations were delegated to the paid staff, which enabled significant more decision-making authority than before. While initially this move concerned Jim, he and much of the existing leadership (including long-time member Herman Schmidt) ultimately supported the change, ensuring passage by the Voters' Assembly. The acceptance came in part from retaining the existing committees in advisory capacities. Very few people changed seats and most kept their influence, a critical move in this congregation with such deep family ties.

Sure & Steady and The Golden Boy

Jim was born and raised in Kansas, only three hours from Salina. Called to St. John's in 1978 from seminary, St. John's was all Jim knew. His longevity and deep compassion for all people, especially those outside of the church, endeared him to St. John's. He had led them through a tough pastoral transition twelve years earlier and just recently through an extensive renovation and expansion of the facility. With his fifteen years of tenure, strong relational skills, and steady leadership, Jim's bank account overflowed in regards to the congregation. He garnered great excitement and respect, and his support of an issue virtually guaranteed Voters' approval.

Jim's sure and steady relational strength, however, also proved his biggest stumbling block, especially when leading. He found it difficult to confront and speak truth, particularly in areas of poor performance or misfit of gifts. Previously some of those confrontational tasks were shared by the former associate, Alex, a peer of Jim. Their relationship was almost a co-pastorate, and when Alex left for a denominational position, Jim lost not only a close friend, but also a true colleague, someone who shared the emotional burden of ministry.

With Alex's departure, however, leadership determined to grow the congregation through younger families. Thus they sought a younger pastor. They also desired a pastor whose gifts would complement Jim's. Peter—only two years out of seminary—was located, interviewed, and offered the position. He and his wife, Melissa, accepted. They were excited to be a part of a larger church that truly wanted to grow. The friendliness and health of the staff team attracted them as well.

Peter's call documents detailed his new position as Pastor of Outreach & Adult Education, with a side responsibility for overseeing the church office staff. The main outreach effort St. John's wanted was to begin a contemporary worship service. While vibrant and energetic, their current worship style consisted solely of a very liturgical and organ-driven service. Pastor Jim and the leadership sensed a new style of worship was needed to reach a younger demographic. This became Peter's job #1 which he tackled with gusto.

Where Jim was a relational leader, Peter was an influencer. He quickly developed game plans and formed teams. He led field trips to other churches, showed videos of other worship styles, and spoke to leaders in the field. A massive outreach campaign was conducted, announcing the new service. And not surprisingly, it was a stunning success. Over the next five years St. John's grew from 650 to over 900 in worship, almost solely through the new contemporary worship service. For a congregation whose attendance had not grown in a decade, Peter was The Golden Boy.

Peter embraced the label and tackled things head on. He overhauled the church office forcing out the main secretary, who had been on staff for over thirty years. He addressed a performance issue in youth ministry, eventually replacing that individual as well. He rejuvenated the small group ministry, doubling it to 40 groups. Peter could seemingly do no wrong, for he left results in his wake.

He also left a wake of arrogance. His young, egotistical, and superior attitude spewed out unintentionally in routine conversations. Type A to the max, he pushed hard, aimed for excellence, and allowed no grass to grow under his feet. While he loved people, that love was often hidden behind his desire for results. His office was immaculate with a place for everything. After a number of times of the janitorial staff not replacing his knick knacks appropriately, he instituted a matching label system. Some called him compulsive; he simply saw order. He wore suits and suspenders, with almost a Kirk Douglas and Wall Street feel, which meshed well with the white-collar mindset but left a disconnect with the blue-collar and farming crowd. People often felt close to him yet also distant, leaving confusion in their minds.

Compounding this, his youth and inexperience routinely blinded him to the value of others' perception of the problem. They also kept him from appreciating how others perceived him and his leadership. So as the financial situation developed around the SLS assessments, Peter saw the solution to be simple: St. John's should leave the SLS and begin its own school. What he did not see was the congregational conflict, and personal conflict, this proposal would generate.

The Local Lutheran Scene

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) consists of four levels of concentric organization: congregation, circuit, district, and national. Each congregation is located in a geographical circuit which is located in a district (usually geographical) which joins with other districts to form the national body of synod.

Congregations are autonomous—they own their own facilities and call their own pastors and workers. But as members of synod, they agree to abide by certain theological teachings. This “autonomous membership” depends highly on relationship, especially when the application of teachings differs from one congregation to the next. In circuits where relationships are strong, the diversity is embraced and used for the benefit of all.

For decades little diversity existed between the Salina Lutheran congregations. Yes, the congregations differed in size and demographic. But by and large their worship took a similar format and feel. As the U.S. culture began to change more rapidly through the 1970’s, that change slowly invaded Salina’s Lutheran churches, especially in their worship experiences and in their understanding of the local congregation’s mission. Two-thirds of the congregations worshiped in a more liturgical, historical format, with an organ being the primary musical instrument. Those same congregations viewed the church’s mission more of maturing the Christians already in their congregation rather than creating disciples out of the lost people in the community.

When one thinks of a mainline congregation, especially a congregation 134 years old, “progressive” and “evangelistic” are not two words that usually come to mind. St. John’s, however, demonstrated a passion for lost people time and again. This evangelistic fervor caught fire under Pastor Jim and led him to identify the need for a contemporary worship service.

When St. John’s began its contemporary worship service, it also unintentionally began to distance itself from its sister congregations. Not only did it now worship differently—with the pastors no longer wearing albs and stoles in the new service—it also began to grow at a rate unheard of in that shrinking community. St. John’s historical evangelicalism and love for lost people took on a new reality: the oldest and largest Lutheran congregation in town now also became the fastest growing and most progressive.

This visible change in St. John’s ministry impacted the relationships between the local Lutheran pastors. Their monthly circuit meetings became less congenial. St. John’s methods were questioned, as well as their theology. One of the congregation’s pastors would not commune with St. John’s pastors due to worship differences. Papers were written against St. John’s new style. A meeting was called to address the error of St. John’s ways. Jim, who had been friends with the pastors for over a decade, was hurt. Peter, in typical driver-style, rarely participated in the meetings and wrote-off their opinion. One evening after Bible class Peter was given a tape by a St. John’s member. “Pastor, you should listen to this.” As Peter sat in his truck with the tape in the cassette deck, he listened to a local pastor haranguing him by name in a Sunday morning Bible study. “I was stunned there was that much bitterness towards me,” he later recounted.

Striking Out On Their Own

The tension in the relationships between pastors began to color the relationships of those on the SLS school board with resentment originating from both sides of the aisle. St. John’s was growing while the other congregations were not, with a small part of this growth coming from the transfer of individuals from one of the sister Lutheran churches into St. John’s. The lack of growth in some of the smaller congregations led to difficult financial situations which resulted in a few of the congregations not paying their assessment. A number of school staff issues were going unresolved. On top of this the school facility—now consolidated into St. Timothy’s old facility—needed major improvements. How would those dollars be assessed? Would St. John’s, with almost 40% of the children in the school, be required to fund 40% of the facility?

The bottom line for St. John's was it had but one vote on the board while having to fund almost half of the school. Its share of the school budget continued to increase while its ability to improve the school and address staffing concerns remained stymied. While many of these problems had existed for years, Peter felt certain the time was now to make a change. And the change he recommended was for St. John's to create its own school.

The decision to withdraw was not taken lightly. Nor was it arrived at overnight. The discussion began slowly between Jim and Peter and migrated into the Board of Elders. Peter researched what it would take for St. John's to manage its own school. He contacted a congregation that had gone through a similar situation—and succeeded. He spoke with representatives at the denomination's national level, seeking to understand what type of transition time would be needed and if one year would be adequate. In all, he and Jim and the Board of Elders wrestled with this decision for over three months, maintaining a strict sense of confidentiality during this time. Peter believed that to include the congregation in the struggling would be counterproductive and probably ruin the chances of St. John's actually going forward with the withdrawal.

While Peter believed withdrawal the only option, the rest of the Board of Elders and Jim wisely required much more convincing. Herman Schmidt brought the historical perspective to bear and early on spoke against the proposal. He recommended that reconciliation and peacemaking be explored. Bob Wilson, an executive director at John Deere, encouraged conversation and understanding. A number of younger elders, who were also friends of Peter's, readily saw Peter's solution as the best way. They, too, had been frustrated with the direction of the SLS and perceived the current governance system untenable. They represented the up and coming influencers and would prove very effective in communicating with the parents in the months ahead. Ultimately the board supported the proposal, especially coming on the heels of Peter's past successes.

A parent letter was drafted explaining the recommendation, along with the research and reasoning. A series of informational meetings were scheduled, with the understanding that one-on-one conversations would be the most effective at explaining the "why?" All of the elders concurred. Jim and Peter began preparing materials for the meetings.

The Meeting From Hell

Soon after sending the parent letter, Peter received a phone call from a reporter for the Salina Journal, the local paper. Would he be able to give an interview about why St. John's wanted to leave the SLS? On one hand impressed that he was the one phoned, Peter was also worried about what he should say. He called his friend, the local news anchor. "If you don't put good info out there," Mike said, "people will start making it up. I recommend you do the interview." Peter called the reporter and spent thirty minutes answering questions. The following day both he and St. John's were on the front page of the Journal.

The next week in the grocery store another friend, David, the store manager, approached him. "How are you holding up?" "Ok," Peter replied. "Why?" "Well, word is that if St. John's says no to this you'll be on the first train out of town. Just worrying about you." "I appreciate it," Peter said. "But I'm feeling good about the vote. And I don't plan on going anywhere." The conversation demonstrated a widespread perception that Peter was the driver behind the proposal. While Jim publicly supported the move, many believed him to be a puppet for Peter's desires.

The first informational meeting for St. John's members took place on a Tuesday night at St. John's. The majority of the new Elder Board was present. Unfortunately Jim's son had a basketball tournament so Jim did not arrive until after Peter had presented the case. When Peter entered the crowded room, he saw many supportive faces that fully backed the proposal. But many angry voices also showed up. Anxious beforehand—he had never presented something this significant in this capacity before—his anxiety proved well-founded: he lost control of the meeting early on to a group of upset moms and the meeting never recovered. A number of parents demanded to know why he wanted to ruin their school. What if they could not pay the tuition? What about the other churches, would the SLS be able to survive without St. John's? While he was somewhat prepared with answers, he was ill-prepared for the emotion behind the questions. His usual smooth and polished style disintegrated into a stumbling, stammering display of uncertainty. In the hallway afterward, Herman told Jim, in Peter's presence, "We are not going to do another meeting like that without you leading the way. That was horrible." It was a telling statement and left a chink in Peter's veneer.

Soon after the meeting, a well-respected doctor in the community, Lincoln Frank, sent a letter to all St. John's and SLS families speaking against the recommendation and specifically against Jim, Peter, and the Elder Board. Compounding this was that Lincoln was an influential person in St. John's and also Peter's personal doctor. While the parent meeting took Peter by surprise, the letter rocked him deeply. Unlike the cassette tape, this attack came from a respected leader and friend.

A number of Peter's friends offered to send a counter letter. As passionate as Dr. Frank was for keeping the SLS they were passionate for dissolving it. Plus they had information they could share with the parents and voters which if coming from Peter and Jim would not be well received. Even though Jim and Peter knew there were a great number of parents supportive of their recommendation, they chose to not engage in a letter-writing campaign. They desired to avoid personal attacks if at all possible and countering Dr. Frank's letter with a letter would only escalate long-term disunity.

In addition to Frank's letter, numerous individuals and couples desired one-on-one conversations with Jim or Peter. Jim and Peter always said yes to such a request, with quite a number of the conversations resulting in understanding and support. One conversation greatly bothered Peter, though. It was with Brad and Cynthia Anderson, godparents to Peter and Melissa's son. Brad taught in the SLS. Both Brad and Cynthia expressed great concern over a St. John's school. The sister congregations would be hurt, unable to maintain as good of a school as SLS without St. John's participation. Ultimately, St. John's might succeed but its school's quality would suffer because of the lack of synergy with the other congregations.

It didn't totally surprise Peter that Brad could not see the solution to the problem as Peter did—they approached the world from different perspectives. But the lack of support, even the questioning of motives, rattled Peter. Plus, Brad's wife Cynthia and Peter's wife Melissa were best friends. While Melissa strongly supported the proposal, Peter knew this would cause her great pain.

A group of St. John's parents desired to slow down the recommendation, processing it more with the congregation, even creating a team or two to study the options. They counseled that this level of change could not take place over night. Perhaps over a year or two, but the congregation simply had not had enough time to process the new future.

Another vocal, somewhat younger group counseled the opposite, however. They wanted a new level of accountability in the school and believed more directional control was necessary. They also desired the other areas of St. John's ministry to grow and understood how the SLS was handcuffing St. John's other efforts. Like Peter, they could not envision any type of reconciliation happening between the congregations. They saw no need to slow down.

In the Elder meetings leading up to Voters, the board wrestled with postponing the vote and engaging in more conversation between parents and sister congregations. Many of the elders felt good about the congregation's overall response to the recommendation. While antagonistic at times, it appeared the tide had somewhat turned. While the vote would be close, they believed St. John's would be withdrawing from the SLS in the next year. Herman Schmidt, who ran in the older crowd, was less certain. He was unsure they had presented enough of a reason for taking on the pain the withdrawal would take. Ultimately they all agreed to move ahead with the Voters meeting. The train had left the station, and the sooner the transition happened the sooner St. John's would be able to address some of its financial needs.

And the Vote Is...

"The sanctuary is packed," Peter thought. "Wow." For the past weeks, Peter had wondered what kind of turnout the meeting would bring. He had not seen this attendance coming.

Over the last month Peter had also wrestled internally with great doubt about the direction. "What have I unleashed? If it passes, I'll be consumed with making this transition happen over the next year. If not, I'm a loser. Which one would I rather have?" This especially bothered him because in good conscience if he won this vote he would have to commit at least five years to ensuring the transition. But did he want to remain another five years at St. John's?

At the same time, the sheer majority of the families who had joined since he came were overwhelmingly supportive of the proposal. Thankfully, they were all in attendance.

As he sat up front, he recounted the various meetings and conversations that brought him to this day. While the encouragement of friends helped, the conflict had been amazing. At least he and Jim were going to play golf the next day regardless of the outcome. Peter wondered if they would be wallowing in defeat or celebrating victory.

Scanning the meeting for a friendly face, many families met his eyes with smiles. But it seemed to him that just as many looked away, unwilling to confront their pastor. Frankly, he just wanted to get the vote behind him.

Questions for Clarity

1. How would you have handled the disparity present between congregations in the SLS?

 2. What were St. John's values? Jim's values? Peter's values?
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3. What did St. John's leaders do right? What did they do wrong?

4. Will the congregation approve withdrawing from SLS?

