



Tag, We're It:

Observations and Outcomes of Working as Community

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Community is essential to getting things done. In times of challenge. In times of hope. In despair. In joy. In radical shift. Community – the “we” that so many yearn for. Community – where we find the answer to “how can we

accomplish and sustain what we care about?”

Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins knows this. She is General Minister of the Disciples of Christ. She delivered the sermon at President Obama’s inauguration prayer service. She named his immense responsibility, including, an imposing reference to leader of the free world. “Tag, You’re It!” She spoke playfully. Yet, she spoke with a knowing of some of the complexity and peril that such a position holds. She implored President Obama to live fully from his core values and to lead from the wisdom born from his community roots. (www.nationalcathedral.org/presidents/service.html).

The International Disciples Women’s Ministries (IDWM) also knows that community is essential to getting things done. They morphed Rev. Watkins’ words to “Tag, We’re It!” as they encouraged one another to boldly do their part in creating change and community. They dreamed and planned together over five days at their 2009 Cabinet Meeting. They were 110 women committed to working as community and missioned as a movement for wholeness. They traveled deeply in relationship and made strategic choices for the future of women’s ministries at local, regional and national levels.

These are immense times, aren’t they. Inviting times. But immense, whether leader of a nation or participants in a movement. Times of extreme challenge. Times of sweeping change. For many, times of unrest and of unprecedented need. In core societal sectors – like health care, like education, like government, like faith communities – people everywhere realize more

of the same isn't working. Fragmented, heroic, well-intended but removed-from-community leadership is not enough. Faster with more of the same isn't enough. And neither is more of the same, spoken more loudly.

We are learning that what matters most -- what has the most lasting impact -- is the work we do with groups to help them build community and then live and work from a platform of community in their efforts to create change and make a difference.

In these immense times, many are turning to find each other. To work in deeper partnership. To work imaginatively with what are friends at The Berkana Institute name as "*the wealth and wisdom already present in the community.*" They know, as we know, that without community, what matters doesn't get done.

Teresa and I are group process artists. We are facilitators, event designers, hosts of conversation. We are learning that what matters most -- what has the most lasting impact -- is the work we do with groups to help them build community and then live and work from a platform of community in their efforts to create change and make a difference.

Earlier this year we were very impacted by co-hosting two beautiful groups over a ten day stretch. First, with colleagues Lauri Prest, Bob Stilger, Toke Moeller, and Michael Jones, a two-day Leadership Symposium for 40 participants at Providence Care, a health care organization in Kingston, Ontario. And then second, with Patti Case, Judy Row, Adonna Bowman, and Shirley Cannon, the five-day Cabinet Meeting with the Disciples of Christ, a million strong faith community home-based in Indianapolis, Indiana.



Both required of participants a spirit of boldness and imagination to respond to pressing need. With both, there was a feeling of crossing a threshold, of launching a new era of how things get done. Both sought visions of the future. Both invited community to deliberate interaction and conversation. And with both, before starting, we heard the concern from our clients that we have learned is rooted in desire to do the best work possible -- will this really work? Will we get done what we need too? Will it be concrete enough? Will community work? Can we trust that community will work?

Will community work? What a question right at the heart of it! We are happy to affirm that community worked. These communities got to work. We saw concern and angst over uncertainty of the new shift to conviction and courage. We saw participants' uneasiness over absence of a preplanned agenda shift to surprise at how many powerful and visionary topics were created and addressed by participants. IDWM Executive Director Adonna Bowman spoke it beautifully after the cabinet meeting when she realized that the afternoon agendas created by the community included 36 powerful topics. "If the executive committee had tried to impose those 36 topics, we'd be lucky to have half the people care about even half of the topics. Yet here, everybody cared about all of them. It was remarkable."

What becomes possible as we develop the skill and capacity to work as community? Why is this platform of community essential for transformational work?

Below are a few principles that we noticed in these recent experiences with Providence Care and IDWM. With thanks to our colleagues and participants, we offer them to encourage next levels of practice in working as community. Please add to them. Or notice your own. Join us in being curious about community as a core platform for transformational change. Curious about how to build this capacity in traditional organizations and systems, as well as organizations with a long history of "community".

Principle 1: Community Becomes Visible as Organizations Host Their Own Health



Care – Providence Care, as mission, is committed to hosting the next version of healthy care of their health care system in Ontario. If work is to go well – serving patients, providing services in the community – Providence must also tend to its own well-being as a system. Lauri Prest at Providence knows very well the demands of a healthcare system "under stress" and how it impacts the physical and emotional health of the people around her – from administrators, to nurses and physicians, to patients.

So, how does a system tend to itself? It happens when leaders within organizations, like Lauri, invite participation. Invite story-telling with each other. Connect as a group at deeper levels. It

happens with deliberate engagement forums where the community – employees, leadership, board, municipal and provincial leaders, patients – can ask questions of itself.

Overarching questions with deliberateness, like, how is our work progressing? What are we learning that serves the common good? Or strategic questions like how could we look together at the long view of health and healthcare? How could we hold together key conversations about transformational change in healthcare while at the same time looking at short term changes necessary to tend well to quality patient care?

Or relational and personal questions like what could we do to improve the quality of our relationships in support of this work? Can we hold the conversations we have all truly been wanting to have or have been afraid to have? How do we stand together as a learning community working for the health of Providence Care and the regional system? What in the new makes us tremble?

Our friend Margaret Wheatley has spoken this principle often – "if you want a system to be healthy, connect it to more of itself." It is actually a very simple principled strategy for serving mission. Our conversations make us well. So, when we need innovation – the community to do such becomes visible through connecting to itself. When we need creativity – connect the community to itself. When we need commitment, covenant, and follow-through – connect the community to itself. Connection – health system.



Principle 2: Community Encourages Us to Live Boldly From Our Core Values

– Both IDWM and Providence Care are faith-based communities. Disciples of Christ, of which International Disciples Women's Ministries is a part, was founded in the 1800s committed to demonstrating true community, service and inclusiveness. At the cabinet meeting we experienced a deep richness and beauty in worship and practice. Dancing in joy. Singing songs of

beauty and togetherness. Many people remarked at the gathering how they were returning to their true sense of mission – which was not about church building but about working for positive change in their communities.

Providence Care, similarly, was founded over one hundred years ago when four Sisters of Providence arrived by train in Kingston, Ontario. They arrived into an unknown, yet with heart and faith to work as community. They founded Providence Manor, originally a home for destitute elderly persons and orphans, and that later became Providence Care. Sister Sheila, a providence sister, in her closing remarks at the leadership symposium called the gathering a “re-founding and a “re-visioning.” The dream and the spirit that was at the core identity of the organization was evident AND the team who was to help lead the effort this time around was present.

When we can reconnect with the core identity or core values of a community amazing things start to erupt in a room! Both of these groups with their faith-based orientation would likely call it, “an act of faith.” It can feel like a leap of faith to take the time to re-enliven core values. Many have forgotten the value of turning to each other to do this. Or the simplicity of pausing and being still long enough to listen deeply as a strategy for action. Many have forgotten the experience of surprise. Of clarity that comes from many diverse views within a community coming together to discover who we REALLY are and what we are capable of. For many, the thought of convening together as community is at best, an indulgence. An act of cordiality before returning to “real work” and “real process.” We’ve forgotten that for decisions void of community, the prominent action becomes selling and cajoling. There is a strong invitation for all of us now to go for the kind of action that grows from remembering our core values of who we are and what we know is possible.

Principle 3: Community Transforms Individuals and the Group at the Same Time

– Several years ago, I Tenneson, went to an event that I didn’t think I had time for. It was a launch event for a global leadership initiative Teresa and I were creating with our friends at The Berkana Institute, called *From the Four Directions*. It was in the UK. It was in December. I was father of two young children enjoying holiday time together. I wondered if I really needed to be there in person. With some hesitation, I went. I’m glad I did. There I met people that became many of my closest friends today. I was transformed. We were transformed in our being together. Bonds of “I’m-at-your-back” friendship



and collaboration were formed. In that, there was an immense joy. That transformation birthed not only next steps for that initiative, but also for much of the work we currently do.

Teresa and I notice repeatedly that when people gather to listen well, to share stories, to ask questions, to be curious – simultaneously individuals and the group are transformed. Not just moved or influenced. But transformed. There is energy of shared creation felt among the group. There are stronger, more loving relationships. There is lasting work that gets done. It doesn't have to be in person. But it is uniquely sweet when so as there is clarity that is held by more of the group.

One memorable moment in this regard at the IDWM cabinet meeting came in the closing of our last action planning session. With tears in her eyes, one of the participants shared that she had always dreamed of opening a school in Haiti. She spoke very personally of this long held desire. With more tears, she shared her gratitude in discovering another participant who had already opened such a school. Yes, they found each other. Yes, the community transformed the individual and the group at the same time.

Another significant shift in the community at IDWM was around intercultural and intergenerational dialogue. Because of the experience of community, elders felt not only encouraged, but enthusiastic to connect in new ways. Several signed on to Facebook and learned about social networking. Friendships and understanding formed across cultural divides. A Hispanic woman, spoke how this was the first time she felt truly welcome and included at a cabinet meeting.

It becomes quite beautiful to see the dance of individual and collective transformation.

Individuals begin to communicate at levels beyond the normal head space. Many insights and ahas show up at the personal level as people “travel” with their questions and make visible what they care about. And when groups organize based on “taking responsibility for what they love” it is as if the group becomes more of a whole together. A body. A team, but more. An entity, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually tuned and transformed. We hear feedback at many levels to indicate this. It is often reported as the “buzz” that is in the room. We have seen it often at the end of an open space format when three hours earlier there was much anxiety about not being able to participate in everything. Yet, at the end, the attitude has shifted to not

needing to hear all details because the group trusts its colleagues. They trust the community and only need to know who to connect with if they want to be involved.

Principle 4: Community Helps Us To Remember Wholeness – Our good friend and colleague Rev. Patti Case of the Office of General Ministry and President, Disciples of Christ, is an amazing teacher for us about this. She is a fierce and gentle defender of wholeness. She told us one day, “I’m just crazy enough to believe that we can be living in wholeness.”

We have learned that the science of the 17th century, so deeply embedded in contemporary ideology and social norms, taught us to separate wholes into parts. It was the right thing to do. As organizational practice, this has left many no longer able to imagine working in deep community. It has left us fractured personally and collectively. Wholeness is often rejected as soft idealism. Yet, the science of our time, including the quantum sciences and chaos theory, recall us to the reality of interconnectedness. Recall us to knowing all change happens in relationship. It always has.

Community helps us to remember wholeness. And home. And beauty. We notice that human beings instinctively want to be together. We know some of the reasons that this is so. The quality of our knowing of each other in community transcends the short time that we actually spend together. As we see mirrored in others our hopes and our despairs, that mirroring, that knowing, is a sense of home. That sense provides the ground, the agreement, from which our deeper work can sprout and grow.

Our colleague in Kingston, Michael Jones, taught us this. “Wherever science goes, a poet was there 100 years ago.” Michael includes some beautiful poetry that speaks to this on the cover of his CD, *Almost Home*. His words are another beautiful expression of wholeness in the form of home.

“The earth never tires. Silent and incomprehensible at first, soon every moment becomes a miracle, every blade of grass, every birdcall, every whisper of wind, every high hilltop, every quiet bay a reminder that we are almost home. In every moment the world gives itself to our imagination. The mind may wander, but the heart knows where

we belong. Come let us travel the open road together. Let us hear the song that may awaken the heart to a beauty greater than words can tell.”

Principle 5: People are Hungry to Work as Community – We often hear in ourselves and others a doubt that follows the excitement of a new spark of yes that comes in working as community. It is a deflating feeling of “yah but” or “now we need to come back to the real world” or “that will never work around here.” Underneath these is a fear that community doesn’t work. It’s nice, but it doesn’t work.

Despite the doubt, people remain hungry. In fact, witnessing the doubt together ironically helps release it. People seem more hungry now than ever. We need spaces of belonging, spaces of learning, spaces of inquiry, and ways to organize for action. Social technologies for dialogue and engagement have become much more mainstream in the last 5, 10, and 20 years. We see a widespread yearning everywhere we travel. It is a kind of relief, a kind of “we’re not crazy after all” as teams experience working together as community.

It is important to notice that this hunger, although deeply rooted in the human desire for belonging, is much more. People sense that community is the way to build ownership and foster innovation and action. As boards work with staff. As colleagues taste shared inquiry. As community members develop community plans, even in demanding, seemingly intractable challenges like those found in health care today. They want to be awake. Whole. Well. They are pleading for what one participant in Kingston spoke as a “culture of hope.”

People are hungry and ready to work more wisely together.

Working as community is itself something to practice. We know that practice is essential for these immense times. Community is essential to getting things done. We are inspired by our colleagues contributing to working as community. We are inspired by leaders like Lauri Prest at Providence, and Patti Case and Adonna Bowman at IDWM that courageously invite and inspire others to boldly live into the gifts of community.

We close with a few more words from Meg Wheatley written in her book, *Turning to One Another*, and invoke the spirit of working as community experienced with the beautiful people of IDWM. Tag, we're it!

*There is no power greater than a
community discovering what it cares about.*

*Ask "What's possible? Not "What's wrong?"
Keep asking.*

*Notice what you care about.
Assume that many others share your
dreams.*

*Be brave enough to start a conversation
that matters.
Talk to people you know.
Talk to people you don't know.
Talk to people you never talk to.*

*Be intrigued by the differences you hear.
Expect to be surprised.*

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

*Invite in everybody who cares to work on
what's possible.*

*Acknowledge that everyone is an expert
about something.*

*Know that creative solutions come from
new connections.*

*Remember, you don't fear people whose
story you know.*

*Real listening always brings people closer
together.*

*Trust that meaningful conversations can
change your world.*

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.