

Leading in Fragile Times

Introduction

In times of intense shared stress and change, certain behaviours and patterns may emerge that ordinarily stay suppressed. The ways we respond to these changed patterns and unfamiliar behaviours, in ourselves, and in the communities in which we live and in which we serve, matter.

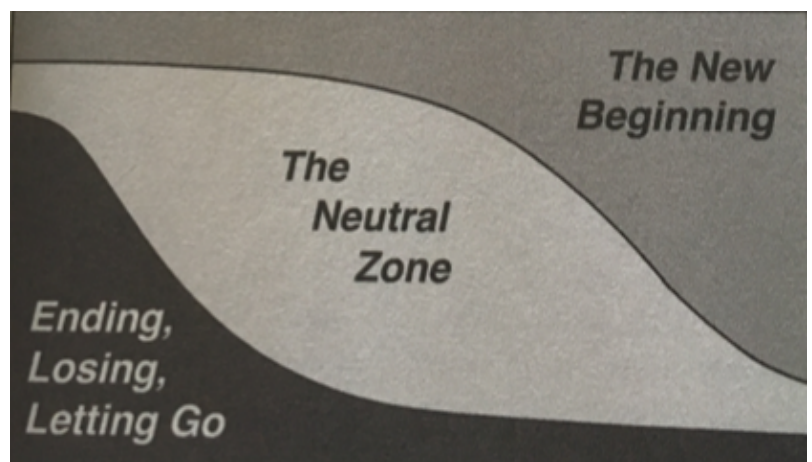
**'When old words die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart;
and where the old tracks are lost,
new country is revealed with its wonders.'**

Rabindranath Tagore

Living, and leading through times of change and transition is a part of the calling of the Gospel, and the work of the church. The Easter story, leading us from lament and grief, through a time of emptiness and waiting to an experience of hope for the future is central to the Christian faith. This is a pattern also present in times of change and transition and in times of conflict and reconciliation. It may also be a pattern that can support and sustain us in this time of global pandemic.

William Bridges and Susan Bridges in their book 'Managing Transition: making the most out of change' draw a distinction between change and transition.

They suggest that a **change** is situational, and is "an outer orientation, such as a specific move, change in situation, or clear decision that is made." In the context of the pandemic, there are new changes each day – from the spread of the virus, to responses decreed by our government and by those in authority. We have little control of these high-level changes.



A **transition** on the other hand is psychological process, "an inner orientation such as the process of redefinition that you may experience, in order to incorporate, or embed the change in your life." Many of us, our families, neighbourhoods, churches, work contexts and communities are experiencing multiple transitions on a regular basis.

Bridges and Bridges outline three distinct stages in a transition: ending, neutral zone, and new beginning. These three stages are paralleled in the Easter story (Lament, Waiting, Hope). For now, and in these tender times, we offer headings for how to navigate the Neutral Zone, or the 'waiting time.'



It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear...It's like being between trapezes."

Marilynne Ferguson

Easter Saturday: leading in the waiting time

(adapted from Managing Transition: making the most out of change by William and Susan Bridges)

Concerns in the Waiting Time can include

- anxiety rises and motivation falls
- productivity can suffer - there can be a rise in illness and absence
- old weaknesses and fissures can re-emerge
- people can become overloaded
- people can become polarized – tensions can rise
- external threats can loom large
- time can expand, and seem interminable

Opportunities in the Waiting Time

Normalize this time

Our brains and our bodies can take a while to catch up with a 'new normal'. What do we need to do to reassure each other that it's OK to feel disorientated, upset, concerned?

Redefine 'neutral'

Bridges talks about this as a 'neutral' zone - how can we redefine the neutral zone? Does a metaphor help? Are we 'forging a new path', 'drawing a new map' together? Maybe this is more of a chaotic, space, or waiting time, than a 'neutral' zone?

Create temporary systems

Consider setting up a 'transition team' or a 'transition monitoring team.' Have we created the necessary temporary policies, procedures, roles, lines of reporting to help us through this phase? What short-range goals have we set? Does our team need new, clear roles to help focus?

Strengthen intragroup connections

What ways can we find to keep people feeling valued, that they still belong? What special support or training programmes might we need to consider in this phase? What online opportunities are there in this phase that may strengthen our connection? Are we asking people 'how are you?' and 'what do you need?', rather than making assumptions about the needs of others?

Encourage all to 'step back' and 'reflect'

How are we giving ourselves space to reflect on this phase, and to step back and take stock of how processes are being managed within our orbit of influence? Are we encouraging others also to step back, to take stock?

Encourage new learning, innovation, experimentation

To what extent are folks prepared to experiment and take risks in this space? How are we encouraging this time of experimentation? Are we sure we're not punishing a sense of 'failure'?

Embrace losses and setbacks as entry points to new solutions

How are we working gently and compassionately to turn 'losses' into new opportunities, to try things out in a new way?

Resist the temptation to push prematurely for certainty and closure

Are we checking to see that we are not pushing for certainty and closure when it could be more conducive to creativity to remain a little longer with uncertainty and questions?