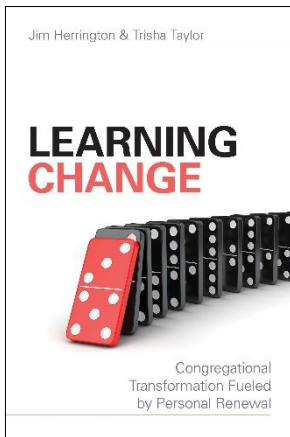


## An interview with Jim Herrington and Trisha Taylor, Authors of *Learning Change*



**Change is seldom easy for an individual, much less an entire group of people such as a church congregation. In *Learning Change: Congregational Transformation Fueled by Personal Renewal* (Kregel Ministry/May 27, 2017), authors Jim Herrington and Trisha Taylor share the stories of church leaders who were able to transform their congregations by first making changes in their own lives.**

**Q: How did you find and collect the stories of churches who were able to institute lasting change in their congregations for this book?**

We were invited by leaders from Western Theological Seminary, Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church to develop a collaborative process focused on personal and congregational transformation. Based on our previous work in a variety of settings and using content from our previous books, *Leading Congregation Change* and *The Leaders Journey*, we designed what has become

Ridder Church Renewal (named after Bud and Lenora Ridder, donors who funded the pilot project). We did a 30-month pilot project with 16 congregations. All of the writers who contributed to the book were in that pilot project. As they applied what they were learning and because we worked together more than five years, we were able to see the unfolding stories of transformation in their individual lives and in the lives of their congregations.

As a result of the process we have been through with more than 100 congregations now, the stories pour in. People love to share the ways they are seeing meaningful change in their personal lives and forward movement in their congregations. The book includes just a few of the stories connected to this group of contributors. The stories in real life are a lot messier than they sound in this book, even though we tried to tell them as honestly as possible. We would encourage the reader to remember that learning is gradual and there's lots of messiness along the way.

**Q: In what ways did the churches participating in the study most need to change? Did they all share a common goal?**

They all needed deep change in the mental models guiding the decisions they made about how to impact their communities effectively with the Gospel. This included confronting and changing mental models about things that are dear to us as Christians: discipleship, mission and the role of the church. They all also needed support and encouragement as they worked to change those mental models. The common goal was renewed hope they and their congregations could thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Q: Tell us about your observations and research that led to the pilot programs you started in Houston to reconnect pastors and congregations to their calling.**



In 1990, Jim was serving as the executive director of Union Baptist Association. They conducted a 40-year longitudinal study of the success and impact of their 400 congregations. They combined that with a series of 25 listening sessions with pastors of different-size churches from different parts of the city and from different language and culture groups. The research showed two overwhelming realities. The first was 80% of their congregations were plateaued or declining despite being in a massive mission field. The second was pastors were largely demoralized. As one pastor said, "I'm working harder than I've ever worked for less results than I've ever gotten. My health is failing. My family is struggling. All my denominational leaders can tell me to do is work harder at what I've been doing." We became convinced we needed to find systemic, innovative solutions to the challenges facing pastors and congregations.

During that same period, Trisha was working one-on-one with pastors and ministers and their families in counseling and in a local pilot leadership development process for pastors called LeadersEdge. Her experience lined up with what several national studies were showing; many pastors were emotionally, relationally and spiritually weak and unhealthy, and they were ineffective leaders because their seminary programs had not trained or equipped them to lead. Many had trouble spiritually forming a congregation because they didn't understand the process of spiritual formation. These pastors felt the



pain of their ineffectiveness but were turning to programs to grow their churches rather than engaging a deep process of personal transformation. As pastors engaged in counseling, peer groups and LeadersEdge, they enthusiastically reported their experience of deep change. However, in most cases, the changes the pastors were experiencing didn't translate to congregational change. We then began wondering how to set up a process for transformation and learning that would lead to change in pastors, lay leaders and congregants.

**Q: Who is the intended audience for *Learning Change*, and how should the book be used?**

The intended audience is pastors and congregational leaders who are faced with the challenge of congregational revitalization. Many pastors — particularly those who have recently finished seminary and are in their first call — have a good background in theology and church history but lack the relational skills to pastor a congregation. While they can't learn these skills from reading our book, the book will alert them to some of the skills and values that are necessary and will invite them into a community of learners.

We're particularly enthusiastic about the potential of this book to provide an introduction and reference guide for lay leaders to engage some of the best information out there about congregational leadership, spiritual formation and missional living and to hear the stories of others who are also putting these things into practice in their congregations.

This book will be most effective when it is used in community — small groups of people who are committed to learning together. We've already heard about church staffs, denominational teams, study groups and gatherings of friends beginning to work through this book together. We would say this to the reader: If you read to gain information, this book will be helpful; it has lots of good information and can serve as a resource for that. If you read to increase your own self-awareness and think through your own leadership, it will be even more helpful. If you do the exercises, think through the questions, practice being different, learn to use the tools in real life, share your learning with others and receive their feedback, it will be life-changing.

**Q: Explain the learning process involved with making a change. How is the transformational learning model different from other methods or models of learning?**

Traditional learning involved mastering information. If I'm trying to improve my marriage or learn to be a good deacon, I go to this class, read this book or listen to this podcast. I get information. The transformational learning model involves three movements: gathering information, putting it into practice and then reflecting on the results. This is an ongoing process that increases one's mastery throughout time. For us, learning has not occurred when you master the information. It has only occurred when you master the practice. In other words, it's not enough to know different until you can actually do different. Because we believe in the power of the learning community, we believe this happens most effectively when we are engaging these three movements together with other people and sharing our learning.

**Q: What are the keys required for real change?**

First, the pain of not changing must be greater than the pain of changing. There must be an intrinsic motivation for learning because almost all learning involves loss: giving up some things to gain other things. Unless there is intrinsic motivation, you will rarely stay the course. Second, you need hope about a possible future that inspires you. Third, you need a good coach who can encourage you and hold you accountable to do the hard work.

**Q: Why is dreaming such an integral part of change?**

There is both a push and a pull to change. The push is the lack of results, the breakdowns, the awareness that what you are doing is not getting you the results you want. The pull is a vision of what is possible for you as a fully alive human being and what is possible for us in our families and communities. Without the pull, the push can't be sustained throughout time.

The dream is the "hope about a possible future" mentioned above. We need to have a picture of what God can do that is increasingly clear and compelling. It's crucial that this dream opens up new possibilities to us; without a clear and compelling dream, we will settle for doing more of the same, just a little bit differently. This is much of what the Bible offers us — stories, poems and word-pictures about God's dream for us and for our world, what it will look like when the *shalom* of God is realized in our lives.

**Q: In the second section of *Learning Change*, you write about the four core values that drive our process of learning and effect change. What are those values, and why are they imperative?**

The values are authenticity, integrity, courage and love.

We believe the core values are essential for two reasons. One, we hold a deep conviction (taught by Jesus and the prophets) that when it comes to transformation, the **how** is even more important than the **what**. Two, deep change has to come from deep places; surface-level behavior change isn't what we're after. These values help us start from a different place and guide us as we learn to live a different way.

**Q: How does a church leader take what he/she learns about change and the changes he/she makes personally and move the congregation to changing as a whole?**

First, we don't believe a leader can do this. It takes a leadership team committed to the journey of deep change throughout time. In our book we talk about 10 practices (four values, five skills sets and one end game) congregations can master to journey into the future effectively. A team of leaders who are at the center of the life of a congregation can begin by taking their own journey of mastery. Leaders need to learn together to embody the skills that empower effective change. Second, they need to help their congregation engage a posture of ongoing learning. They need to create systems and structures, experiences and processes that help more and more people in the congregation: (1) know what the practices are, and (2) have safe, shame-free learning environments where an increasing number of people are gaining greater mastery of the practices.

Leaders are most effective when they are learning to live differently and then sharing their learning with others. This is different from telling people how they should change. As leaders are taking on this learning in their own lives — and joining with others who are doing the same — they will also learn important skills to lead change (for example, the chapter on Generating and Sustaining Creative Tension) and to see the system as a whole and intervene effectively. They will be able to manage their own anxiety in the natural pushback of the system.

**Q: Part three of the book delves into mental models and shifting the way we think about ministry and the church. What are some of the old ways of thinking that need to be reexamined in order to move forward as more missional congregations?**

The fundamental shift is one that disrupts the separation of the secular from the sacred. Until congregational leaders recognize the mission of the church is in the world — the workplace, the schools, the neighborhood — they will continue to languish. This will include disrupting the assumption the professional minister is doing ministry and everyone else is working in the "real" world. This must shift to the ministry team empowering, coaching and celebrating those people in the congregation who are on mission in the world.

A second shift is challenging the assumption that knowledge of the Bible translates into effective leadership. While knowledge of the Bible is essential, knowing how to collaborate, listen and create are also essential skills.

Another important shift is from the goal of preserving and extending the church system as it currently exists, in exchange for joining God in God's redemptive, restorative work in the world. This means letting go of some of my own preferences and moving out of my own comfort zone.

**Q: In what ways is the church losing its impact here in America? What does and doesn't need to happen for the church to regain its ground?**

There are a number of major studies documenting the deep and growing decline of the church, both in terms of constituencies and influence. The world is changing at the pace of a jet in flight, and the church is changing at the pace of a horse and buggy. What doesn't need to happen is for congregations to double down and work harder at 20<sup>th</sup>-century strategies and ways of thinking. What does need to happen is nothing short of the transformation of congregations across the country. We hold this congregational transformation is not possible apart from a journey of personal transformation. Personal transformation is found in the lost art of spiritual formation. That lost art is recaptured in our work in the Faithwalking ministry.

Also, we are actually not interested in helping the church regain its ground or recover something it had in the past. We believe God is doing a new work in a new era, and we want to equip churches to join that work. History tells us the church might have to decrease in order to increase, that it may have to give up

influence or power to engage the culture differently. The culture is changing more rapidly than we even fully understand. We can't go back.

**Q: What kind of leadership is required to move a congregation of many views and opinions through a process of change as one body?**

There are several parts to this answer:

- We see the power of loving, patient, persistent, long-term (10-15 years) leadership. There are no quick fixes to the deep challenges and changes that this new era demands.
- We believe it's a kind of leadership that grows increasingly comfortable with sustaining creative tension as missional experiments are conducted off the map.
- It is leadership focused on managing ourselves in an anxious system, not on changing others.
- It is able to tolerate the discomfort and even pain of leading change in a system that naturally resists change, as all systems do.
- It is leadership that can let go of control and move toward dialogue, collaboration and partnership, especially across boundaries.
- It's leadership that is willing to let go of the posture of the expert and take on the posture of a learner.

**Q: What are some of the additional tools offered in the last section of the book for more effective leadership?**

The tools we offer in the last section of the book are designed to help leaders understand their own part in the corporate change process and manage themselves. We start with helping leaders understand their autopilot — how they show up the way they do — so they can choose differently, starting with healing the wounds involved in creating that autopilot. We then move to helping leaders develop their skills with dialogue, learning to listen deeply and to talk in ways that facilitate change. Finally, we offer life-giving accountability as an essential part of the change process — a lifelong process of coaching and being coached.

**Q: Is there a destination churches should hope to arrive at after reading *Learning Change*?**

There is not so much a destination as there is growing capacity to stay deeply and meaningfully engaged in an ongoing journey of joining God on God's mission in a rapidly changing world. As that journey unfolds, congregations will have to reinvent themselves over and over. There is a lot of hope to be found when you have confidence you have the tools to change (reinvent yourself) as your context changes.