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GOD'S PAINTBRUSH: THE STORY OF TRINITY BAPTIST'S CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

Trinity Baptist Church was founded in 1949. The beginning was difficult; the first pastor called to the church had a short tenure due to moral issues. But the next pastor, Buckner Fanning, stayed at the church forty-two years. Under the guidance of this gifted preacher and dynamic leader, Trinity's membership grew to over ten thousand, becoming a progressive and forward thinking church. Trinity was the first church in America to have a counseling center; they also had a roller skating rink and a bowling alley at one point. The church was on the cover of Time Magazine in the 1960s. In 2001, after forty-two years as the pastor of Trinity, Buckner announced his plans to retire. The church immediately called a new pastor, Charles Johnson, who arrived six weeks after Buckner's retirement.

This was a time of deep transition for the church. The church began to restructure and look forward to what the future held. Could Trinity become San Antonio's church again? Were there still great years ahead, or were the best stories going to be told about the years gone by? The church had to deal with some difficult issues as they began to rebuild. As Jim Collins (2005) states, "You must retain faith that you can prevail to greatness in the end, while retaining the discipline to confront the brutal facts of your current reality" (p. 30). Collins explains further that "truly great organizations prosper through multiple generations of leaders" (p. 31). Trinity struggled to make this statement a reality.

I was "called" to move to Trinity during this phase of the church's life. I was following a children's pastor who had a twenty-five-year tenure with the church. One of the key initiatives I was given by the search team that hired me was to create change. They felt that the children's ministry

needed to make some innovative changes to create a new source of energy for the church. I was excited about the opportunity to be a part of this wonderful church body.

The senior pastor, Charlie, and I were both struggling to gain trust with the congregation as a result of the long tenure of our two predecessors. Change was difficult for the membership. It was a difficult time for everyone. But in the midst of this transition, I began to work toward some innovative ideas that I thought would help the children's ministry. Trinity was a church that was rich in resources and talent. So many people at the church had tremendous gifts that could be used to glorify God.

When Henry Mintzberg was asked in an interview what organizations (churches) have to do to ensure success in the future, he replied that "they've got to build a strong core of people who really care about the place and who have ideas" (as cited in Fullan, 2001, p. 134). The litmus test of all leadership, according to Fullan (2001), is whether it mobilizes people's commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things. "It is individual commitment, but it is above all collective mobilization" (p. 9). "Leadership is about helping release the positive energy that exists naturally within people" (p. 128).

As I prayed and studied the situation, I pondered a question that I had read in Jim Collins' (2005) book: "What can you do today to create a pocket of greatness, despite the brutal facts of your environment?" (p. 30). At this point I felt like David when he was called upon to slay Goliath. The church was in such turmoil that I struggled to see how what could happen in the children's ministry could possibly make a difference. I could just imagine that my words were similar to David's: "God, how can I possibly do anything that will make a difference?" I was not sure what I was supposed to do, but I did know that God had a plan for our church and I also knew that I was ready to do whatever He needed me to do to make it happen. Robert Quinn's (2000) words gave me great encouragement: "Productive communities become synergistic. As one part of the community is enlarged, all parts are enlarged" (p. 32). As I read further, God gave me the answer I had been searching for: "Productive communities usually emerge when one inner-directed and other-focused person begins to envision such a synergistic community" (p. 32).

The Vision

I have always believed that children are more productive in an energizing, stimulating environment. The children's building was in need of change. It was cold, sterile and lifeless; the walls were mono-

chrome in pattern and color. It was clean, plain and functional, yet devoid of energy or life. But the children of the 21st century live in a sensory world of constant stimulation; they live in a visual world. I visited with Charlie about what I thought we needed to do to update the building in order to create a positive environment for children at Trinity. I believe that church should and could have the same excitement and wonder as Disneyworld for children. Why couldn't church be the "happiest place on earth" for children? And why shouldn't we try to make that happen for the children God had given us in our ministry? God began to work out His plan.

The church leadership agreed that the children's center was in need of remodeling, so a team was assembled to work with me to accomplish this goal. The team decided it would be a good idea if I visited some other churches to get ideas for what we might want to do at Trinity. It took several months, but I visited some of the largest churches in the country, where I saw children's centers built to resemble spaceships, three-dimensional Hollywood movie sets, and cruise liners (Marini, 2006, p. 1).

On returning from these visits, I reported to the team that I had seen some amazing things, but they were not right for our church. I was frustrated. I did not like any models that I had seen, but could not get a clear vision for where I thought we needed to go. My goal was not just to create a kid-friendly space, but to engage children in learning the Bible (Gosnell, 2009, p. 3). At this point I wasn't sure which direction we needed to go. As leaders it is so easy for us to believe that we must have all the answers. Mintzberg dismantles this misconception when he points out that "effective leadership inspires; it connects more than it controls, it demonstrates more than it decides. It does all this by engaging itself and consequently others" (as cited in Fullan, 2008, p. 128). For me this meant that I needed to empower the laity at the church. Jaworski (1998) explains: "Leadership exists when people are no longer victims of circumstances but participate in creating new circumstances" (p. 3).

Creating a new circumstance was an exciting prospect for the members of the team and for other church leaders. During the next meeting, one of the team members sulan, 2008,

The Back Story of Shawn Bridges

I had never met Shawn Bridges, but some of her paintings were displayed throughout the church. Many of the paintings that hung in the church were purchased by church members for various reasons such as memorials to loved ones who had passed away. At the time I was going to meet her, she had just painted a picture in response to the September 11 attacks—a picture that one reporter described as “God’s hands embracing humanity and the American flag” (Stecher, 2006, p. 12B). This painting was hanging in the Pentagon. Shawn had high value with the laity at the church. She was loved, trusted and honored like a “home-church” hero.

The team had cautioned me to approach Shawn with care, as it would be insulting to ask someone of her stature to donate their time to a project for the church. Some of the members of the team knew she did not give her time for free. I was told that she had painted a portrait for one of the team members for which she charged \$1,000 per person. After much discussion, the team decided that I needed to meet with Shawn and see if she would be willing to give us a bid on painting two rooms that we were remodeling: the game room and the worship center. I now had clarity from the team and was ready to set up the meeting. I felt honored that the team had some degree of confidence in me as a leader; sending me to visit with Shawn alone was a significant indicator of that trust. W. Bridges (1991) explains: “The purpose that you need to launch a new beginning must come from within the organization—from its will, abilities, resources, and character” (p. 55).

Meeting with Shawn

I called and made an appointment to meet with Shawn. On the phone she was pleasant and agreeable, inviting me to come to her house the next day. On my way there I prayed, “Lord, help me to know what to say; help me to articulate my vision in such a way that Shawn will feel a calling to help.” God is so amazing! I had no idea the way He would not only answer that prayer but surpass it in unbelievable ways. As I knocked on the front door, I prayed again, “Lord, please help me.” The front door opened and there stood the person who would forever change my life.

From the moment Shawn said “hello” there was an immediate connection. She was delightful, fun, and passionate. She invited me into the house, which was filled with her paintings. She began showing me the paintings, sharing about each one and the inspiration behind it. Each painting was special to her. She was working on a family portrait that hung on her easel in the living room. As she talked about the painting,

and said, "Can you imagine if children entered church on Sunday and there were life-sized animals on the wall? Imagine preschoolers feeling like they were entering Noah's Ark when they came into church. Wouldn't that be amazing?!" I wanted something "where, when children walked in, the walls would somehow come to life" (Marini, 2006, p. 1).

As I talked, Shawn listened attentively; she never looked shocked or surprised. Whetten & Cameron (1995) say that "a key role of outstanding leaders is to unleash the creativity in their followers." When I had finished explaining my dream, a dream that I had never articulated to anyone, Shawn looked at me and said, "I'll do it." That response quickly jerked me back into reality and I said, "Great, would you give me a bid for the two rooms and I will take it to the team?" But what she said next still makes my heart beat faster: "Oh, I can paint the two rooms; that is easy. But I am talking about fulfilling the dream. I will paint the children's building. I want children to walk into the Bible at Trinity Baptist Church."

What do you say when a world class artist makes you the offer of a lifetime but you have no way to make it work? I was filled with an array of emotions. This was wonderful, even unbelievable, but I had a big problem: there was no way the team would give me the financial resources to pay for something of this magnitude. I knew the only explanation for Shawn's offer was God. So on the one hand, I was amazed beyond belief; on the other hand, this was a decision too big to be made so quickly! Later, Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Blink* (2005), helped me understand that we are taught to only trust conscious decision making. But there are moments when our first impressions and snap judgments can offer a much better means of making sense of the world. "Decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately" (p.14).

Perched at the edge of the fulfillment of an incredible dream, I must have looked like a bird not used to spreading her wings, just fluttering nervously, until I was finally able to articulate to her my dilemma: "I can't pay you to paint that much."

Shawn then spoke words that will be forever imprinted on my heart. "I could never charge the church to paint; that would be like charging God. I will paint for free. You provide the paint and I will paint." Before I could respond, she then said, "I don't want to be sacrilegious, but the greatest joy in my life would be to paint an offer

And what no committee could have designed—and what I certainly could not have anticipated—was announced in this moment because an artist had been waiting for an opportunity to use her God-given talents, honed to perfection over years of practice, to minister in a way compatible with her calling.

Shawn's offer mirrored the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963): "The end of life is not to be happy, not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain, but to do the will of God, come what may" (p. 144). Shawn then confided in me that she had been asking for years to use her talents and gifts for God at church, yet somehow no one would really let her. The teams and committees had so much "red tape" associated with them that it had prevented her from using her artistic abilities to glorify God. Now that the opportunity became available, Shawn was ready to respond. Bohm offers this advice to creative people facing this dilemma: "Be alert; be self-aware, so that when opportunity presents itself, you can actually rise to it" (as cited in Jaworski, 1998, p. 83). Shawn had been ready for a long time. It was the church that needed to get ready.

As I left that day, I knew church for children at Trinity Baptist Church would forever be changed. Shawn was ready to fulfill a calling from God. She would take her task as seriously as any doctor, teacher, mechanic, or pastor, all of whom are called to pursue their work with integrity and excellence. Mike Cospers (2010) states in his blog *Art For, From and Facing the Church*, Mike Cospers (2010) says that "art from the church is the work of the artist in the surrounding world. Here, artists pursue their calling and maximize their gifting" (p. 2).

May 4, 2005

Shawn began painting on May 4, 2005. She came into the building wearing her painting overalls and carrying paint cans and many brushes. Now, where do we begin? Throughout our planning sessions, Shawn and I both knew that the first painting on the wall had to "sell" the project to the church; some 110.5516 401.3cn((ai.1256ke-23TcET BT -0.0n7) -23(bb33 Tm/Tc2hw1g) project to

members with a big start—to give them an idea of the scale of the project” (Marini, 2006, p. 2).

The elephant did the job. Any concerns quickly were subdued; Noah’s Ark was coming to life for the children at Trinity Baptist Church. Shawn paints unbelievably fast, so each Sunday there were numerous new animals on the walls. The children were our measure of success. One Sunday, when a visiting family brought their child into the children’s center, the child was anxious about her parents leaving her there while they attended church. One of our workers brought the child out to see the animals on the walls, and within minutes she was petting the elephant, happy and calm. As Gosnell (2009) wrote, “the children could not wait to get here every week to see what was new on the walls” (p. 2). Not only the children were intrigued; each Sunday numerous members of the congregation would stop by the children’s center to peer in and see what was going on.

By the end of the summer the first floor’s blank walls had been transformed into a menagerie of animals, ranging from the very large (elephants, camels, gorillas, lions, zebras and tigers) to the very small (birds, fish and small mammals, as well as rodents and insects) (Gosnell, 2009, p. 2). Stecher (2006) also captures the moment: “To walk into the center is to walk into a biblical wonderland—a place where the walls tell

stories and where visitors are left in awe” (p. 7B). [Picture: Potter Group]

One of the great surprises was how the project crossed age boundaries. As Shawn painted this became clear to see. Her painting began to give life to everything it touched, causing our church to become truly authentic (Lewis, Corderio, & Bird, 2005, p. 33). There were as many adults coming to the children’s center every Sunday as children. What Shawn had done had turned into something far greater than anything either of us had imagined. Now every Sunday people of all ages file through the center to admire her work. The congregation is so excited that one of our own was able to do something like this (Wellinghoff, 2006, p. 142).

There was a new energy in the air at Trinity, and it was a testimony to God’s provision. Shawn was an inspiration to all of us; for eleven months, until the downstairs was complete, she showed up every morning to paint. Five-hundred life-sized animals filled the walls of the ark.

The painting created such a spark at Trinity. Once Shawn began to paint, the project gained momentum. It was apparent that God was using her to do something extraordinary. Who would have ever imagined that paint could change the attitude of a church? God uses means we have never thought about for His glory. The painting was something far greater than either of us could have ever imagined.

Now What?

The day came when the mission seemed complete; preschoolers had a life-sized Bible to walk through, with one of the greatest Bible stories coming to life. But Shawn was not ready to quit. She came to me one morning and said, “What about the older children? Do you have a dream for what you would want them to experience at church?” For Shawn, it was a “loaves and fishes moment” (Gosnell, 2009, p. 4). “Whatever’s in your basket, give all five loaves and both fishes; don’t keep any of it” (Stecher, 2006, p. 12B). Clearly she had more to give.

So we made plans to paint upstairs, too. It was hard to imagine that it could possibly be as captivating as downstairs. After prayer and discussion, we decided that the upstairs should bring to life the Bible stories that the children are learning about during Sunday school. Art can be a powerful tool to help children learn. Kathy Koch (2011) states, “Even if it’s not one of their strengths, all children do have the ability to think in pictures” (p. 2).

The decision about what stories to paint on the walls was difficult. There are so many wonderful stories to choose from in the Bible. So, she started with the middle, the story of the Nativity. [Picture: Potter Manger]

The Age of the Ordinary

Upon completion of the mural, Shawn initiated a children's art program for the church. [Picture: Potter Shawn] On the classroom wall is an inscription authored by the artist herself:

God, thank you for my talent,
Help me use it for your will.
Don't let me deny it, underestimate it or be lazy with it.

The story of Trinity does not only lie in the beauty of the mural; it lies in the empowerment of laity to use their gifts and talents to honor God. When Pastor Leslie Hollon arrived to become the fourth pastor to lead the

allowed to use their gifts. Can you imagine what churches could look like around the world if each church experienced an authenticity to follow

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