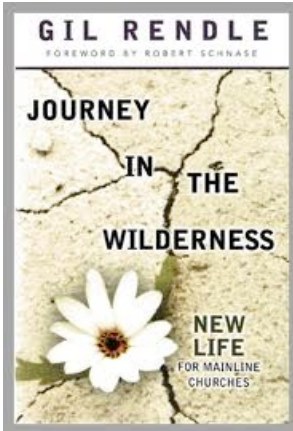


Jim's Tool Box

Journey in the Wilderness (Part 2)



Last month Jim began a review and summary of Gil Rendle's new book *Journey in the Wilderness New Life for Main Line Churches* (the book is available from [Cokesbury](#)). You can read Jim's January Tool Box article by clicking [HERE](#).

In the January article, Jim discussed the three paths (church growth, congregational transformation, and clergy development) that the United Methodist Church and other mainline churches have taken during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness while their numbers have declined and the culture around them changed radically.

In his book Gil Rendle offers a fourth path that derives from learnings from the first three paths along with a need to find other solutions. The fourth path is one of identity and purpose. The identity question is the question of *who we are*, and the purpose question is the question of *why we are*.

Rendle describes that difference in the work of the fourth path and the first three paths by making the distinction between *technical* work and *adaptive* work. Technical work is defined more as problem solving – as looking for known solutions to known problems. This technical work seeks solutions that can be acted on. It moves directly from problems to solutions. This is the kind of work that most of us are familiar with in the church. It is managerial work. We see a problem, and we seek to apply a solution to the problem. Most of us are problem solvers (it seems to come naturally to many pastors).

The Fourth Path requires local church leaders and denominational leaders to utilize adaptive work skills with congregational members and with leadership groups across the denomination. Rendle describes it this way, "*Adaptive work* requires *learning* that can help people change their beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions in order to face the questions that lie in the wilderness. It is much harder work."

To ask the questions and to seek the knowledge required by the adaptive work is a much more difficult task than problem solving. It requires different skills from pastors, local church leaders, and denominational leaders than the technical problem solving with which most of us are more familiar.

Rendle points out in his book that among the dangers of the adaptive work that congregations need to do is that framing adaptive questions increase the discomfit that people have with their leaders (recall how the Israelites grumbled at Moses when he had led them out of Egypt and into the wilderness?). Rendle states the challenge very well on p.92 of his book:

How do we in our local congregations shift our attention from satisfying the preferences of the people who already come to our church and learn to speak to the changed neighborhood and culture that surrounds us so that we can, through Christ, change people's lives in a way that makes a difference in the world? This is a very large and very adaptive question for congregations used to being membership organizations in which the primary agenda is making more members and satisfying them. It is a question that is not

sought out by many people who already come to church and are satisfied by what they find there. It is a question for which the answers are multiple and competing when viewed by the larger group in the now highly diverse community and culture. It is a question that requires both leaders and people to learn together.

Gil Rendle continues by describing what the new leadership for adaptive challenges looks like. Here are the characteristics that adaptive leaders will employ as we move into the future:

1. Frame the Adaptive Question

Rendle says that the new leadership requires leaders who can frame a good adaptive question as a way of giving people a better conversation to have. Remember: the Fourth Path is all about learning. Rendle reminds us that the primary tool that leaders use in framing the adaptive question is the power of the agenda.

2. Move to the Balcony

By moving to the balcony, Rendle says leaders will accomplish two things:

- a. They will not be as reactive. Leaders get caught up in the urgent rather than the important.
- b. Moving to the balcony is a reminder that leaders need to see the big picture. Sometimes we are too close to a situation in order to keep perspective on the challenges with which they are dealing.

3. Use Your Locus of Control

Rendle comments that in times of deep change leaders need to go to their “locus of control,” the place where they have their greatest control, in order to work with issues of change. The primary locus of control for a leader is over himself or herself. We can’t control others, but we can make decisions that will have much more direct control over ourselves.

4. Focus on Outcomes

Rendle describes this skill this way, “Continued focus on outcomes is a skill and a discipline for leaders to learn. But systems produce what they pay attention to, what they measure. A critical new skill that moves us beyond problem solving is the ability to describe outcomes and to measure the steps we take toward the described outcome.”

5. Protect the Voices of the Creative Deviants

“Creative deviants” is a name given to the original voices brought by people new to the system. These voices are creative because they represent new insights and understandings that come with fresh eyes, which can see beyond the norms and practices developed by “we’ve always done it this way.” These voices tend to be the newest, often the youngest, participants in the congregation. A new skill for leaders is to protect these voices, to keep them safely engaged without trying to speak for them.

6. Align Resources and Attention to Where Outcomes are Wanted

Rendle points out that highly relational systems like congregations or denominations have difficulty making decisions because such decisions can break relationships in situations of limited resources. Adaptive leaders will direct resources to produce wanted outcomes. Resources include such things as time, money, and people. But, according to Rendle, they also include the attention of the system, the learning agenda of the system, the prayers and discernment of the system, and the focus of leaders.

7. Practice Poise

The distinction that Rendle makes between management and leadership here is that management offers satisfaction to the system and leadership introduces discontent. He reminds his readers about the words of Edwin Friedman when he spoke of the leader as the “non-anxious presence.” He describes how in adaptive work, leaders should expect to receive “negative rewards” in a relational system like the church. Negative rewards include dealing with people’s personal dissatisfaction, losing personal support, and having friendships and nurture withheld. He says that in order to maintain poise needed in such a situation the leader must learn to live with “one foot outside the system” at all times. There must be a support system that comes from someplace other than within the system.

What I have shared above is only scratching the surface of Rendle’s book and his reflections on our journey and what we need in the church and as leaders in the days ahead. As he declares in the epilogue of his book, “In the wilderness, hope is an active verb. Saint Augustine said that hope had two beautiful daughters – anger and courage. Hope depended on anger over what could be but is not, and on courage to make it different.”

That is the challenge that faces clergy and lay leaders in local congregations all across the Capitol Area South District, the West Ohio Conference, and the United Methodist Church today. May God grant us the courage and the anger we need to be hopeful people in these days.