Resistance to change, if it is significant, is predictable. That’s not to say resistance—both internal and between people—can’t be overcome, just that resistance is a normal response as the familiar known starts to transform into something new. This stirring of resistance can occur for many reasons, but one reason this happens in the church, is that people perceive that change in how we do or structure things—changes to how we “do church”—is a betrayal of the past. That is a perspective I want to challenge.

I visit many congregations and hear inspiring stories of how God has worked through them as people enthusiastically describe to me their glory days when numbers were at their peak, participation was high in varieties of programs, and their building may have even seemed too small. Many times this is told in contrast to current circumstances, when too often people have stopped recognizing that God is still active amongst and through their congregation (or seeking to be!).

As participation in worship and activity has declined, with fewer people doing more work just trying to maintain what has been and wearing down in the process, all energy gets funneled to survival rather than into discernment about the changes God is calling the congregation into for continued vital participation in God’s mission. A depressed spirit begins to snuff out hope. Yet this is not the way of God (example: Jeremiah 29:11-14a).

If we have “always” done something a certain way, offered particular programs or ministry options, or set up our space/decorated our space in the same way, we will typically have come to see how we’ve been doing things as the “right way” and it becomes difficult to be objective. It doesn’t really matter how traditions first came to be, what matters is how they have shaped our understanding of what it means to be _x_ Lutheran Church. People who have been beloved to us are often associated with traditions, so a lot of emotion gets triggered when we start exploring whether or not those practices, objects, or structures still make sense in a changed world.

Changing familiar traditions is very difficult, even when there has come to be rational understanding that in a changed world, there are likely things that may need changing about how we do things, structure ourselves, and think about being church. And so it is that many congregations which take a step into a process toward renewal and transformation, quickly pull back to status quo, no matter how painful that has come to be. This happens just when they need to see the process through to new discovery of hope and potential.

What if, contrary to our assumed intentions, we are actually betraying those of our past whom we seek to honor, when we hold on so tightly to traditions that once worked well but have long provided diminishing impact? Adapting to new circumstances does not diminish the impact of what has gone on before, rather it carries forward the faith in which our forebears grounded us. We will take forward the learnings of the past, to be lived out in new ways. What if by insisting that we do things the way we have always done things because they are so familiar and (shabbily?) comfortable rather than inspiring and energizing for mission, we are betraying who we are meant to be as Church? Those who came before us worked hard, experiencing their own challenges and conflicts, even as they lived into the church they were called to be for their time. I
have no doubt that they intended a legacy of faith and faith practice that would continue into future generations. Yet how, I have been wondering, can we think that it is honoring them when we choose to let our congregations ingloriously fade away (at best) or dissolve in vicious conflict, because we can’t face becoming who we are called to be for our time? Living into our current reality, seeking to be the hands and feet that God uses to bring about God’s mission in these days, the faces that shine with the light of Christ in the world today—that is what glorifies God and honors the foundations provided through the efforts of our faith forbearers, not the denial of necessary change needed for our congregations to carry out our current purpose and live with faithful intention into the future.

Death is a natural part of life. (Note that none of the specific congregations of Acts exist today, yet the impact of their lived faith and witness continues to be felt.) It is not death that concerns me, not when it comes in natural time, but rather the sense that death too often is entered into prematurely and with less attention to legacy, as a choice to abandon hope rather than to change. Please. Honor God. Trust. Hope. Honor those who have come before you in faith by seeking transformation of spirit in you and your congregation whenever you enter a time of necessary change that nevertheless triggers a natural grieving process as some of the familiar needs to pass on to allow new life. When the way seems dark and the burden of loss too heavy, reach out for the support of others who have lived into the change demanded by a world different than it once was. Ask for support from those in the synod (including synod staff). Re-center in Christ.

Hear these words from Deuteronomy the 30th chapter:

11 Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” 14 No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God[b] that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods [unessential traditions….?] and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days…"