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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 suggested that before we moved any further toward a plan, I should go and visit a local artist and church member named Shawn Bridges. I was thrilled with the idea for several reasons, but of utmost importance was the reality that the team was "buying in" to the project. As expressed by Lewis, Cordeiro and Bird (2005), "a disciplined vision is well thought out, prayed over, and shaped within relationships of godly gifted people" (p. 151).

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,

it was obvious that she had made a connection with each of the family members she was painting. It also became apparent that in the midst of her great talent was an unbelievable humility. She was concerned that through her painting she would represent each person in a way that they would embrace.

It was at this moment that I realized how impossible it would be to ask a person of such skill and artistry to just donate her work. The committee had been right. Shawn really was an amazing artist. How was I going to ask her to take on a task that seemed insignificant compared to the places her paintings were hanging?

I began to get “cold feet.” I decided that I would try to brush this meeting off as a first time meeting and get out of there. But my thoughts were so conflicted as I was trying to imagine the conversation I would have to have trying to explain to this team of highly successful businessmen in San Antonio that I had “chickened out.” How would I tell them that their trust in me had been misplaced? I was still arguing in my head when Shawn asked if I would like to have a seat on the sofa.

As I sat down I saw a book on the coffee table by Dutch artist Rein Poortvliet (1992) about Noah’s Ark. We continued to chat. Shawn told me about some of the other things she had painted and then she asked, “Now what do you want to talk to me about?” I had no choice; I had to tell her about the project. As we talked about the remodeling plans and what I envisioned for children at the church, she seemed interested. She especially connected with my goals to inspire creativity and imagination for the children at church. I told her how I had visited other churches and could not find a model that I wanted to emulate. Telling an artist you want to do something original and authentic is like sending a kid into a candy store with unlimited money; Shawn began to get excited about possibilities for children. This gave me courage to share my request for her to paint the two rooms.

She listened to my inquiry, but her answer was unexpected. “Debbie, what would be your real dream for children at church?” At that moment I felt like Shawn could see into my soul. She saw something in me that was deeper. As I reflect on that day, I realize that I had thought of myself as this great leader coming to inspire her to commit her talents to help the church. Instead, she was leading.

In response to her question, I began to paint my vision: I would love to have the energy and excitement of Disneyworld in a church setting. I want children to enter the church and know they are there to learn about God, but in a creative, fun way. I looked at the book on the coffee table

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 as God’s paintbrush.”

I am not sure how long it took for these words to sink in. The incredible had just edged closer to reality. Together we had created a vision.

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 would be skeptical about painting on the walls of the church. Two by two, starting with the elephants, Shawn began. Every morning she would enter the building and lay her hands on the wall. She would pray for God's guidance, thanking Him for letting her be His paintbrush (Gosnell, 2009, p. 1). The first elephant was a gigantic Asian elephant painted prominently in the middle of the three-story rotunda. [Picture: Potter Elephant] Shawn made a choice to "go big." She "knew that it was going to have to be the sales job" (p. 1). In another interview, Shawn says, "I painted the elephants first because I felt I had to win the



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]



To connect the downstairs animals to the upstairs stories, the wise men and their camels help guide the ascent up the stairs into Jesus' birth. Since the nativity was in the middle of the upstairs, it was easy to put Old Testament stories on one end and New Testament on the other. "As with the animals downstairs, Bridges wanted the images to be as life-like as possible" (Marini, 2006, p. 2). The upstairs was completed as rapidly as downstairs and soon life-sized Bible stories lined the hallways. "Goliath, for example, towers over the diminutive David, even as he is felled by the young boy's hurled stone. As Jesus teaches the Rabbis in the Temple, village gossips congregate in the back, their disapproval evident" (Marini, 2006, p. 2). Stories included Moses, Ruth, Hannah, David and Goliath, Daniel, and Esther. In the middle of the hall is the nativity story and on the other side are New Testament stories and parables from Jesus' life and resurrection.

The mural was complete when we had run out of wall space. This indescribable work includes 500 life-sized animals in Noah's Ark (not counting the many insects, mice and other small creatures), depictions of 21 Bible stories, and more than 80 scripture verses hidden throughout the mural.

It took an estimated ninety-three gallons of paint—that is, about \$10,000 worth of paint—which is enough to cover more than 32,500 square feet of wall space (three-quarters of a football field). Today the estimated value of the mural is over a million dollars. However, the best part of the mural is the fact that the walls proclaim what we're all about (Stecher, 2006, p. 12B). There is no confusion; children are walking into the Bible when they enter the doors of Trinity Baptist Church.



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 congregation, he expressed these words about the painting: "Here we see a remarkable example of someone who dedicated her talents to create a million dollars' worth of artwork for the life and ministry of the church. That's an affirmation and encouragement for other Christ-followers and churchgoers to use their talents for the kingdom and the church" (Gosnell, 2009, p. 5). In the words of Shawn herself, a church should be "a place to serve and to be served; a place to love and to be loved. We are His hands, feet, face – THE CHURCH." The story of Trinity is the story of the ability of God to work in amazing ways through His people, if they are

allowed to use their gifts. Can you imagine what churches could look like around the world if each church experienced an authenticity to follow God's voice? Just as different and distinct as fingerprints should be the churches of God's people.

The story of Trinity is meant to awaken the hearts of leaders to create an environment where God can truly work through the amazing gifts He has given to the members of the churches. Churches need to move from the age of the ordained to the age of the ordinary. There was a time when a desire to serve God meant to leave "ordinary" professions to seek a calling as an ordained leader, wholly devoted to serving God and the church. But today God is calling the ordinary to see their giftedness as the very vehicle to serve him in the world.

Holy moments occur when people recognize a gift or ability that God has given them and they share it with the world. There are many people within our congregations who have their hands raised in the classroom of life, calling out to God: "Pick me! Pick me! I'm ready to serve you!" Our job as leaders in these churches is to have the courage to break from the norm and allow God to express His creativity through us as individuals.

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