

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

November 2019

### The Unity of New Westminster Church: Social constructionist research for a “future forming” congregation

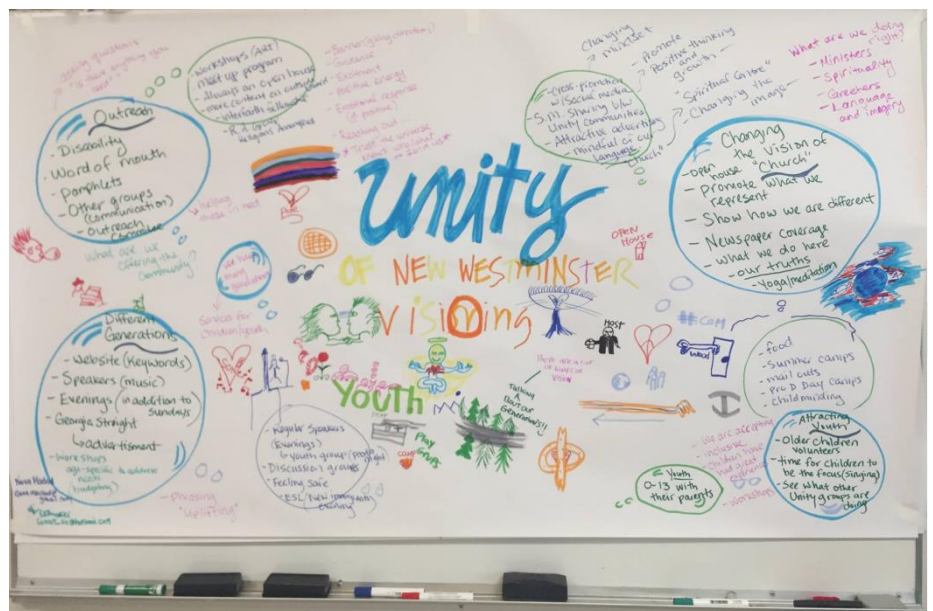


By Aaron Johannes, Ph.D., Taos Institute Associate

I started attending Unity of New Westminster church to support my son, and soon noticed that they were in a state of transition. I thought the research methods I had been using in other projects might help them find some clarity and when I approached them about this, the church board was excited about the idea of community based research that we could do collaboratively, and would be of use to them. As they began to learn more about social constructionism, they could see how those principles aligned with Unity theories, and that “research” might not be just the province of arcane specialists but can be tangible, useful, participatory and fun.

My research has focused on people with intellectual disabilities, and my co-facilitating colleagues Liz and Barb have both had various labels, so I wasn’t sure how they would be accepted by the congregation, which at that time included no one like them. However, very quickly, they were appreciated for their strengths and insights and this even added to the idea of an appreciative approach for our investigation. For example, as board members wrestled with bylaws, they wished Barb was there, “because she’s so good at helping to turn things into plain language for us.” They even asked her to consider becoming a board member. They loved our arts based approaches, graphically recording the group’s conversations so we can make ideas and plans tangible. This created conditions for change right away and they started using Liz’s drawings (graphic recordings) on their Facebook site.

As we debriefed our early findings, Barb and Liz said, “You all need a plan!” and explained a planning process we’ve used to help others groups dream, think and plan together. Barb used a quote by Ken Gergen that has become a favorite with the folks I’ve been working with, so often frustrated by bureaucracy and histories of inaction: “We need to be ‘future forming.’” The church loved it and used the quote in their overview of the year’s work.



“Research,” said Zora Neale Hurston, “is formalized curiosity.” For me, this is always about human connections. Who is in one’s tribe? Who else might be welcomed? Our social constructionist methods involved everyone over an eight month period, with opportunities to welcome friends, family and strangers into a conversation which led to more clarity on who they welcome and how. A few turning points were “Do we even need to call it a church?” (The minister asked!) and Liz’s drawing of the board members as characters from The Wizard of Oz. This critical planning session led to a clearer vision and also to a concrete plan for many areas of church structure, from the actual foundations to the volunteer infrastructure that was truly future forming.

We were really excited by how the big ideas of social constructionist thinking can be helpful to a small local group intent on doing good work in their community. Feedback from the congregation (which has grown in numbers, diversity and strengths) and other academics who have looked at our process has been really positive! Other congregations have inquired about using our process in their areas and we hope to do more of this work. See more of what we've been doing at [www.imagineacircle.com](http://www.imagineacircle.com).

