

# Reflection Guide

# IF THIS IS *the* WAY *the* WORLD WORKS

Science, Congregations, and Leadership

William O. Avery & Beth Ann Gaede

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### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

*If This Is the Way the World Works* began with conversations—between us as authors, in several focus groups we conducted with church leaders interested in the interface between science and theology, and in interviews we held with working scientists and a long-time teacher of leadership studies and spiritual practice. This book is only a resting point in these conversations, however, a snapshot of our thoughts at the time we turned in our manuscript. We developed this reflection/discussion guide to provoke your own thinking and to encourage you, whether an individual reader or a member of a study group, to extend the web, to build on the conversation we have begun.

—WILLIAM O. AVERY AND BETH ANN GAEDE

#### *Preface*

1. What theories of leadership have influenced your understand of leadership and yourself as a leader? How have they helped you grow as a leader? How have they limited your development?
2. Do you agree with Margaret Wheatley's observation that "leaders are best thought of as people who 'emerge from the group, not by self-assertion, but because they make sense, given what the group and individuals need so that they can survive and grow'" (viii)? Why or why not?
3. Through what theological lenses do you view your experience?
4. How do you respond to the authors' premise that faith communities and their leaders more faithfully carry out God's callings when they function in a manner consistent with "the way the world works"? (xi)

## *Introduction*

1. How does our worldview distort our interpretation of reality, both in the world and in the church?
2. In general, do we as church leaders explore the relationship between science and religion in a way that is meaningful to parishioners? Do we discuss the contributions of science toward our worldview as well as the limitations of science? How does science affect our interpretation of the Bible?
3. In what ways, if any, does the scientific enterprise put limitations on our faith statements? Our interpretation of biblical stories?
4. Avery and Gaede state that scientific insights often point beyond themselves to underlying values. (6) How could churches foster discussion of values that might guide what science does?
5. What do you think about the value of the theology of the cross for understanding the relationship between science and religion? (7 and following) What might you substitute in its place?
6. Avery and Gaede assume that we can use basic principles of science to arrive at characteristics of effective leadership. Is this assumption valid? Why or why not?

## *Chapter 1: Information: God's New Thing*

1. In what circumstances do you feel overwhelmed by the amount of information you must deal with? Have you developed any strategies for coping with this overload? If so, what have you found helpful?
2. Avery and Gaede comment, "Scientists themselves see their work—their interpretations of information—as always provisional, however, and remain open to the possibility that additional information will yield more accurate understandings" (17). How does their explanation compare with your own understanding of scientists' work?
3. What ideas about the way the world works that you once held have you changed in the face of new evidence (18)?
4. When have you seen a system respond creatively to a change in its environment? What forces promoting control, on the one hand, and disorder, on the other, were at work? How was each force tempered? (19)
5. Where within your congregation does information flow freely to and from the outside world? How does this flow affect the health and functioning of the congregation? (19)
6. Where in your congregation do you see the principle of self-organization at work? (20)
7. What feedback loops are at work in your congregation? Which ones are negative or regulatory? Which one are positive or amplifying? (20–21)
8. Do you think your congregation is clear about its identity (21)? Why or why not?
9. In what ways does your congregation isolate itself? In what ways does your congregation demonstrate it is open to new information? (21–22)
10. What additional Scripture passages can you think of that are consistent with the scientific principles Avery and Gaede lay out in pages 22 to 25?

11. What core beliefs and values does your congregation explicitly claim are central to its identity? (25–26)
12. Describe a time when a group you were part of responded to new information in a way that made the group stronger and clearer about its identity. (26–29)
13. Avery and Gaede quote Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch: “Right up front we want to confess our belief that the planting of new, culturally diverse, missional communities is the best way forward for the church that views itself in a missional context. . . . While some established churches can be revitalized, success seems to be rare from our experience and perspective” (29). Do you agree with this belief? Why or why not?
14. Have you seen a congregation attempt to “concoct an identity out of the handiest ingredients or to preserve a fragile one by any means” (30)? If so, what was the outcome?
15. What specific clues suggest a congregation might be “weak wooded” (32)?
16. In what ways does your congregation exhibit “unbridled curiosity” (34)? If does not currently do so, what practices might it adopt?
17. How is information shared in your congregation? Who has access to it? Who does not? How could information flow be improved?
18. In what ways is your congregation “nimble” or “agile” (37)? How could it limber up?
19. What external changes is your congregation dealing with, or what internal changes is it considering making, that require new information? How does your congregation’s identity suggest the change be addressed? (37–40)

## ***Chapter 2: Complexity: An End to Childish Things***

1. Avery and Gaede state that life is incontrovertibly complex (44). If this statement is accurate, how would you describe the complexity of your own life and that of your congregation?
2. In what ways is your congregation like a “spider web” or a “fishnet”? If a spider web, do you detect signs of emergence or self-organization? Explain your answer.
3. Is your congregation fundamentally a closed system moving toward disorganization, or an open system with new ministries emerging? What evidence do you see that supports your answer? (45)
4. Has your vocation as congregational leader become more complex during the years you have served in your particular congregation? If so, how? (46)
5. What is the balance between order and disorder in the congregation you lead?
6. Avery and Gaede quote Margaret Wheatley: “We want our organizations [read “churches”] to be adaptive, flexible, self-renewing, resilient, learning, intelligent—attributes that are found only in living [open] systems” (50). To what degree is your congregation such a system?
7. How would you describe your congregation’s identity? How strong a sense of identity does your congregation have? Is that identity articulated or simply assumed? (51)
8. Is your congregation genuinely open to new information, especially potentially disturbing information (52)? Why do you think so?

9. How well does your congregation listen to those “at the margins”—whether the margins of the congregation or the margins of the community? (52)
10. Avery and Gaede state that interdependence and connectedness are pathways for life to flourish (53). Do you agree that establishing, nurturing, and sustaining relationships is the chief need of good leadership? Why or why not?
11. How do you respond to the claim that meaningful change usually takes five to seven years to implement (55)? What does this fact suggest about how long a pastor should serve a congregation?
12. As a church leader, are you better at standing forward, standing beside, or standing aside? (55)
13. What factors in your congregation or denomination thwart efforts for leaders to form network of relationships? (56)
14. Have you tried to move a congregation from seeing itself as pastoral sized to seeing itself as a program sized? If so, what have you learned about your congregation and yourself as a leader? (58)
15. How do you interpret the statement: “We [pastors] ought to fail people’s expectations at a rate that they can stand” (59)? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
16. How might you use “because . . . therefore” language rather than “if . . . then” language in your teaching and preaching (61)? Is this language helpful in articulating the gospel of Jesus Christ? Why or why not?
17. How do you respond to the view of baptism as a completed/not-yet event? (62)
18. Is the circle child of God/disciple/steward a helpful way of looking at the complexity of a leader’s position, especially the task of keeping all three in constructive tension at the same time (62–66)? Why or why not?

### ***Chapter 3: Interrelatedness: Reconciling the World***

1. Avery and Gaede point to river systems and the human brain as examples of interrelatedness. Outline the interconnected elements, structures, and processes in another complex web of webs.
2. What additional Scripture passages can you think of that are consistent with the scientific principles Avery and Gaede lay out in this chapter (70–74)?
3. Give an example of an individual or group within your congregation that works well because the relationships with other individuals or groups are strong. Give an example of a web of webs within your congregation that functions effectively because the network is dense. (74–76)
4. Compare and contrast your own understanding of Christian vocation with that laid out by Avery and Gaede. (77–81)
5. The authors cite Douglas Schuurman’s assertion that “the distinction between spiritual and natural gifts breaks down: ‘In light of the comprehensive character of God’s kingdom and purposes, it is legitimate to extend the new Testament emphasis upon gifts and callings in the church into the gifts and callings in the broader society. . . . All gifts are given by the Spirit and are to be used to express love of God and neighbor, whether inside or outside the church’” (82). Do you agree or disagree? Why?

6. Avery and Gaede argue, in contrast to a well-known definition of vocation by Frederick Buechner, “Not every vocation is rooted in our personal gladness or provides us the opportunity to exercise the gifts we already know we possess. . . . Indeed, many callings that meet human needs, callings we undertake out of love, are in themselves hard or unpleasant. Further, some people, especially the poor and oppressed, have few opportunities to realize their many gifts” (83). Do you agree or disagree with the authors? Why?
7. Review Avery’s and Gaede’s list of clues to our callings (84–85). Which ones have been most helpful for your own discernment? What clues that they do not mention have been helpful to you?
8. In what ways does your congregation assist people who are discerning their vocations? How else might your faith community support them? (85)
9. What clues suggest your congregation might itself be called to help particular groups—youth, stay-at-home parents, older adults, recent immigrants, those recently released from jail or prison, the unemployed or underemployed, or others—to discern their vocations? How might your congregation respond to this calling? (85–87)
10. Avery and Gaede write: “Formed from the dust of the ground, all people are interrelated with the rest of God’s dust-born world, just as every aspect of creation is connected with every other substance and process—and with us. The dense, interconnected networks that make up all creation are God’s family—brought into being by God, nurtured and protected by the Creator” (88–89). Do you think God is as interested in the nonhuman aspects of creation as the human? Why or why not?

#### ***Chapter 4: Diversity: For All of Us Are One***

1. How can congregations foster genuine diversity without creating divisiveness? (92–94)
2. How can congregations enhance both uniqueness and connectedness? (94)
3. Avery and Gaede state that most churches are not very hospitable even though they think they are (95–96). Do you agree or disagree? Why? How hospitable is your congregation toward its own members? Toward strangers?
4. What steps has God taken and can we take to minimize the destructive results of “competitive individualism” while fostering “creative individualism” in the congregation? (96–97)
5. Where do you see signs of the “homogeneity principle” at work in your congregation? In what ways do you think the homogeneity principle is antithetical to inclusive community? (97)
6. Has your congregation tried pericope study groups (98)? If so, what has been the response?
7. Do leaders in your congregation vary their leadership styles depending on the issue, the people involved, the context, and the importance of the issue to the mission of Christ (100)? If so, how?
8. Are power issues openly discussed and analyzed in your congregation (101)? If so, how does this happen?
9. How do you interpret the phrase “relational power”? How about “compassionate obligation”? How are these two phrases related? How are they helpful to you? (101)
10. How do you respond to Nancy Ramsey’s four metaphors for ordained ministry: midwifery,

service, friendship, and shepherding (100–4)? Which of these metaphors is most important to your understanding of ordained ministry? Why? Which, if any, is problematic, and why? Do these metaphors together support an appropriate exercise of power and accountability, as Ramsey claims? Why or why not?

11. In your congregation, how would it be helpful to ask these questions: (1) What is the quality of relationships in this congregation? (2) Who is not at the table? (105)
12. Do you agree with the principle that “people have the capacity to work together, *no matter who they are*” (106)? Why or why not?
13. How might a physical object, a “talking piece,” help in conversations where there is great tension or where a few people dominate the discussion to the exclusion of others? (107)
14. Is the distinction between a person’s “contribution” rather than his or her “participation” as significant to you as it is to the World Café Community (108–9)? Why or why not?
15. Theologically, is the invitation to imagine a future and then try to live into it helpful for your work in your congregation? Why or why not? (110)
16. Would the sentence starters proposed by the World Café helpful be helpful for your congregation (110)? Why or why not?
17. How central is prayer to the life and conversation of your congregation? (111)
18. How can we encourage members of the congregation to share their stories, including personal testimony, as an avenue for mutual and outreach? (111–12)
19. Is “politics” a dirty word in your congregation? Are the political realities of your community, region, state, and the United States subjects of conversation, or are such topics avoided to avoid conflict? (113–14)
20. What does your congregation do to enhance diversity even beyond the congregation? With what other congregations or church bodies is your congregation directly related? (114–17)

### ***Chapter 5: Process: An Invitation to Adventure***

1. One of the claims of procWess philosophy is that “relationality is the key to all change” (122). How do you respond to such a claim? How would your congregation be different if it adopted this as a working principle?
2. Avery and Gaede cite Carol Albright: “We experience God’s reality as action, as what happens. Reciprocally, Albright continues, our response to God is also action” (124). How do you respond to this theological claim? What implications for mission and ministry follow from such a theological statement?
3. Family systems theory states that when it comes to change in families or congregations, clarity may be more important than empathy, that stating lucidly what is actually happening in the family system is the necessary precursor to change (125). How does this claim mesh with the claim that relationality is the key to change?
4. How can leaders help congregations understand and articulate the overall system of relationships (family system) within their church family?
5. Avery and Gaede argue that family systems theory helps us understand why lasting change is so difficult to accomplish—“the more things change, the more they remain the same” (127). How does family system suggest that a congregation work toward lasting change? What are the primary difficulties in bringing about change?

6. What is the self-differentiation level in your congregation? How can your congregation act to place more self-differentiated people in key leadership positions?
7. What is your response to this claim by John Ackerman: “It is my experience that few congregations listen to God’s call to them, and few help members to listen to their individual call and nurture their ongoing relationship with God”? (132–33)
8. Margaret Wheatley claims, “By attending to processes, we become gentler people, more curious and concerned about one another, more forgiving and more open to change” (136). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

### *Chapter 6: The Center: Where Trust Prevails*

1. Avery and Gaede contend, “All quality relationships are built on trust, and no substitute can be found for it. Thus, trust is the center of the healthy, faithful congregation. Further, as Christians we believe we can trust others because God trusts us” (140). Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. The authors observe, “Without necessarily realizing our bias, we examine our experience through the lens of science. We assume the world is regular and understandable and that phenomena are potentially falsifiable and can be tested by some kind of observation or experiment” (141). In what ways is your own “lens” that of science? In what ways nonscientific?
3. Do you agree or disagree with Avery’s and Gaede’s observation, “Congregational leadership is better envisioned as webs of influence than a chain of command” (142)? Why?
4. In what ways is leadership in your congregation exercised through webs of influence? A chain of command? How could the leadership webs be strengthened? Do you think your congregation would be stronger and healthier if leadership were more web-based? Why or why not?
5. Some Christians believe that God’s plan for salvation applies only to humanity, while others (like Avery and Gaede) hold that “God will redeem all creation, healing all torn relationships, restoring to wholeness all that has been broken” (143). What is your view? Why?
6. Have you ever seen an issue “complexified” in a way that made the issue clearer and easier to address? If so, what happened, and why was the complexifying helpful? (143–44)
7. The authors assert, “The Christian faith has always been about process—God’s ongoing work of creation, God’s unending efforts in Christ to reconcile all creation to Godself, as well as God’s patient formation and reformation of Christians and the whole body of Christ throughout our journey with God” (144). How does this claim strike you, and why?
8. Do you agree or disagree with the authors’ claim that healthy congregations are “always seeking new information from the most diverse, and sometimes even hostile, sources” (144)? Why? How would you characterize your congregation’s sources of information? What do you think about its practices in this regard?
9. How receptive is your congregation to change? What ideas have Avery and Gaede offered that might help your congregation become more open to change? (145)
10. To what degree is “dialogical team model of leadership” exercised in your congregation? Which of the four practices of a team that Loren Mead outlines are demonstrated in your congregation? Which could be enhanced, and how? (146)

11. The authors cite Wilfred Drath and Charles Palus, who “see the person in formal authority as one participant in an organization-wide process of the meaning-making that is going on all the time. . . . In this framework, leadership is seen not as a trait or an official role, but rather as a *process* in which people *make meaning together*” (148). What do you think of this view? Why? When have you seen this type of leadership practiced?
12. Avery and Gaede suggest “the pastor is *designated by the community* to pay attention to the vitality of the system” (149). In what ways is this understanding helpful to you? How might it affect your own leadership practice?
13. What practices does your congregation use to “make meaning”? (149–51) In what ways do they provide coherence for the congregation?
14. Avery and Gaede assert, “At its best, leadership is relational and, depending on the needs of the situation at hand, shared. The servant-leader image captures the essence of that foundational growing, trusting relationship” (153). Do you agree or disagree? Why? How might this image affect your own leadership?
15. Tell a story about the power of trust in a congregation’s ministries.
16. Avery and Gaede propose that vital Christian communities exhibit curiosity and charity, are open to change, celebrate creativity, and are centered in Christ (156). What characteristics would you add to their list?
17. The authors write: “Anyone who builds trust—who helps a system form more generous, truthful, and mature relationships . . . is a leader in the congregational web” (157). How might you as a leader help your congregation’s members form “more generous, truthful, and mature relationships” with one another, your community, and all of God’s creation?