



Obviously, This Is Part of God's Plan:

More with Deb Swift

January 4, 2024

Transcript



Sara Hayden: This story makes me think about what's happening midway through the book of Acts, and previously a lot of the language around these visions that people following Jesus are having, the Apostles are having, is, "I have seen this so I am going here." And then all of a sudden it becomes a we and us, "Let us go to Macedonia." And it... when the congregation, for lack of a better word, begins to accept the visions of some among them as the collective vision and that level of trust and humility, or self-denial, that that embodies in a culture, being myself a very different age than a lot of the members of your congregation-

Deb Swift: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... it makes me think. I wonder-

Deb: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... what generational experience, how it plays into that. But it challenges that self-made person ideal.

Deb: Yes.

Sara: Or the pastor as visionary leader, and you're saying, "I'm gonna trust that what they heard is what we need to do."

Deb: Yeah. I think...

I mean, I'm a cradle Presbyterian and I was ordained a ruling elder in my early 20s, and I so value the role of the ruling elders in our congregations, that I think that surprised them too and doing that year of study right at the beginning, of what it means to be Presbyterian-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... turns out to be something that we've... have fallen back on many times to remember who we are.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: F- something happened to me just yesterday.

So, now we are piloting other innovations, I guess you would say. The things that are not common anyway. Right now we have a session of five because last year no one else felt called. We refused to fill in the slots with people-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... and so if we're not called, we're just gonna go with five instead of six on our session.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: And of those five, two of them live out of state, including our clerk of session, and so why not?

Sara: Hm.

Deb: If you're a church that is decentralized-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... and has ministries that are online as well as in person, and you have people participating in those ministries from six different states, why not have your clerk of session and another elder living out of state?

But we were also thinking, a couple of the people are of an age where we would like to have some younger people on, and they mentioned one woman in particular who served for a time as our evangelism coordinator and then had kind of taken a hiatus, wanted to step away for a bit, and then came back this last year, and they said, "Well, w- you know, what about her? Do you think we should ask her to be on session?" And I said, "You know, I have been praying about who might be called, and her name keeps coming up." And they said, "Well, we've been praying too and it comes up for us." And I said, "We- All right, I'll get a chance to talk with her."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And yesterday I took her out for her birthday lunch, and I'm sitting there and thinking, "Ah God, do I really wanna bring this up now?" But I said, "Okay, I need to say something about church and I know that you will say no to me because you're good at doing that if you need to." I said, "But I've been praying and your name keeps coming up and it did with the session too." And she looked at me and she said, "Yes."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I said, "Yes what?" And she said, "You're gonna ask me if I want to serve on session again." And I said, "I am." And she said, "It's been coming to me in prayer that I'm supposed to be on the session again." And I said, "You're kidding." And she said, "No."

She said because she doesn't worship with us at our fellowship of faith, act of faith.

She worships in a different location but she is a part of several of our acts of faith-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... and this is still her church membership and her home, and she said, "No, we need to be able to model how to be elders and deacons without being tied just to that one worship service, but to really honor the AOF model that says everything is a form of worship." And she said, "It's time."

Sara: Mm.

Deb: And I just looked at her. I said, "Well, how are you gonna argue with it when independently we're praying about it and both arriving at the same point? Obviously this is part of God's plan."

Sara: Mm.

Deb: So, it's that kind of faithfulness and attention to prayer life, I think, that everyone in that congregation has experienced. Everyone who went through that transition.

Course now we have, where we worship, with that one act of faith, a fellowship of faith. We have three worshipping opportunities every week. We have Sunday fellowship of faith and then we have an online evening prayer worship, and then we have our YouTube channel, and all told then, we have like, a hundred people worshipping with us every week, even though we've got a membership of, uh, 34, 35 or something.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And I think to myself, "What will happen with the future of this?" And I've decided September we had a huge gala, celebration that was South's 175th anniversary, and at the same time we are beginning our second decade outside the building.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And that was just too good to pass up the opportunity to celebrate-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... so we had this weekend celebration, and, uh, we had an all AOF potluck.

Sara: And these are all the people who are involved in these different expressions-

Deb: Yep. Yeah.

Sara: ... around the community.

Deb: Yep.

Sara: And could you just give us like, a quick list of the acts of faith so we can envision them?

Deb: Looking at a list here, a grid list that's found online also-

Sara: Mm.

Deb: ... of our current acts of faith, and right now we have 17 ministries, 15 of them are very active, one is a seasonal thing depending upon online studies that we do, and the other is linked to the broadcast of *The Chosen*, so, that's waiting for the next season to drop.

Sara: Hm. How do you decide what's an act of faith and what's just an act? (laughs)

Deb: Yeah. Oh yeah, that's great.

Sara: That's something that we really are always wrestling with in these new m- church movements is like, is that a church? Is that centered around the faith? What's the line when you know, well, it's just something people do together that's great, but it's not necessarily-

Deb: Yeah, how's it, how's it different from Kiwanis?

Sara: Exactly. Yeah. That's a great way to put it.

Deb: So, an act of faith is defined as an organic grassroots ministry growing out of the needs or interests of the people.

Sara: Mm.

Deb: And it sounds pretty simple but there are three or four basic precepts. One of them is that it should not meet in a church building. It should be community based.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: Another is that nothing can be pastor dependent. Pastor informed, yes. Pastor resourced, yes. But not pastor dependent. Even whatever day you're doing your worship service, ours happens to be Sunday afternoon but any day, nothing should be dependent upon the pastor.

Another thing is that we have a really simple way to start it. It takes two people. They do not have to be members of the church. Two people who have an idea. For instance, dinner and a movie.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And they come to the session and they say, "I'd like to do this. We have a place in, in Rochester where there's, um, like, a discount movie theater and right across from that is a diner."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And so they said, "We'll meet at the diner at six o'clock." On whatever night it was, I think a Tuesday, "And then we'll go across for the seven o'clock showing, and we will always sit in the same place." That ended up being row P for Presbyterian, "And-

Sara: (laughs)

Deb: ... we'll watch the double feature, whatever it is, and then we'll go home-

Sara: Oh wow.

Deb: ... and then next week we'll come back and we'll go to the diner and we'll talk about where was God? Where was the Spirit in the movies that we saw last week?"

Sara: Wow.

Deb: And then we'll go watch the new-

Sara: Wow.

Deb: ... movies. And the deal is you get two people to commit to a period of three months.

Why three months? Because we have figured out that you can always tell if something's gonna work or not, in a three month period. You can tell, if you're in a relationship, it's gonna tank. You know it in the first three months.

Sara: (laughs)

Deb: If you've bought a car and it's a lemon, it... you know it in the first three months is about the length of time it takes, and we have had some that started up and they were really exciting and people were excited, and then like two months in it's like, "Oh, God I f- It's such a drudge to have to go to this. Do I really... Ugh. I'm so sorry, I started this whole..."

Well then drop it, 'cause that's the other part of the precept; if it doesn't have energy and excitement, 'cause then we know the Holy Spirit is there, with energy and excitement, if it doesn't have that, we're gonna drop it like a hot potato. We are not going to be Presbyterian and set up a three year study on why didn't this work?

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: I can't tell you the frustration for all of us, because we all experience it.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: We know it's not working, why are we still doing it? And n- do I really care why it's not working?

Sara: Wasting time and energy. Yeah.

Deb: I just know it's not working, it's not what we're meant to be doing right now so we're gonna set it aside, and we drop it like a hot potato.

Now, in the case of that act of faith, it was dinner and a movie, which is not currently e- e-existing. Uh, it didn't survive COVID.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: It might start up again but it didn't survive COVID. But it went through I think three or four incarnations before there was continued energy and excitement. It i-

We'd drop it, people would come back like six months later, say, "Well let's try the dinner and movie thing doing this." You know, and they would try different ways.

We don't know why it didn't work, maybe it just wasn't meant to, but it has to have energy and excitement, so who has the energy and the excitement? Well, it might be those two people.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: We'll run an act of faith with only two people.

Sara: Mm.

Deb: But it could be the people around them because after a year, one of the diner staff people came up and said, "We see you here every week. What is this?"

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And they said, "Well, we're a church group."

"You're what? You're a church group? What do you mean a church group?" So that opens the whole conversation-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... then to talk about being church in the community.

Same thing happened with the movie theater owners. "You're a church group. O- oh, we didn't know churches came to movies."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: You know. I mean, crazy stuff is out there.

Sara: That's how bad it is for us-

Deb: Yeah, it's crazy.

Sara: ... on... in the PR world right now.

Deb: Yep.

Sara: Just. (laughs)

Deb: Crazy stuff is out there, so, that kinda changes it, and this whole idea of energy and excitement, we do not count participants, except once a year for my annual report.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: I don't care how many people are there. If we're reaching two, three, four people, that's two, three or four people who would not have been reached if we weren't there.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: So it has really changed the metric on how we measure success for this kind of ministry.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: Uh, what I ask for for the annual report is very simple. I wanna know how many different people you had in the course of a year, what was your average attendance, how many times did you meet? Send me some stories and some pictures.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And that's the annual report. And I can tell you that last year we had 32 official members, 15 acts of faith that reached 341 different people in the course of the year, and combined, it gave us over 6,000 contacts in the course of the year. Then you add on to that our YouTube worship and videos, we had another 2,433 views with 79 subscribers, so that's 8,500 opportunities for people to, as we say, "Bump up against Jesus through us."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: You know, we're not proselytizing hard. We're not out there saying, "Repent and be saved." That's not our job. Our job is to live our faith and let people get to know us, and through us, get to know Jesus and the Spirit and God's unfailing love and joy.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: 8,500 opportunities for that to happen with a little tiny church of 32 members, we think is a pretty darn good return on investment of God's time and energy.

Sara: Yeah. And just the beauty of that inverse of like, there's a smaller group and its ability to form these circles of relationship is so much wider-

Deb: Yeah.

Sara: ... when you stepped out of the building and you said, "Can't meet here anymore."
(laughs)

Deb: So, first thing, you can do the acts of faith model without selling your building. It's a mindset for missional ministry.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And there is absolutely a role in our world for tall steeple churches or other churches, medium steeple. (laughs)

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: That can afford to maintain their building and use that.

When we needed, uh, space for our 175th celebration, the big gala weekend, it was donated to us by our sister church, Third Presbyterian-

Sara: Mm.

Deb: ... Church. Tall steeple.

Sara: Awesome.

Deb: And we need to have them.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: What I think is happening is that we're developing new relationships that maybe, hopefully, keeps us not quite as siloed as we have been where every church had to offer everything.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb:

The thing that's important, I think, to know here is that part of this potluck, Ray Jones was here for the weekend and so Ray and another woman, friend who's a minister who's part of the acts of faith, they led the discussion at the potluck and I wasn't there. You know, it's, "What's worked in the last 10 years? What do you think is gonna work?"

Third question, "What are we looking for post Deb when she leaves?"

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I had read over the newsprint and then I talked with my friend who was scribing, and I said, "It looks like the first half of that question was all listing my skillsets."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And she said, "Yep." And then there was silence, and then one person said, "Yeah, but that's what we needed at the time and that's what God gave us, but we're not there anymore."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: "So we need to think about where's God calling us now? And trust that God's gonna send us what we need the next time."

And I just have to say, to all of my colleagues out there who wrestle with retiring and stuff like that, we've all seen the churches that fail when ministers leave because they were so pastor dependent. I feel like my legacy is done. My job is done, because I know that they will continue because they're already looking at, "Where is God leading us next? Where is God that we are being drawn into the future, with that God?" So, I'm so thankful for that.

Sara: Yeah.

And Deb, you've drawn the distinction between inactivity and equipping people, in the sense of like, I think that there's a difference between saying, "This is not centered around me and therefore I don't really have anything to do." Or, "I'm gonna be hands-off." But, I-

Deb: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... got the sense that you were very careful about what you're describing is investing in the folks who have been a part of this ministry and who are endeavoring to pray that dangerous prayer with you.

Deb: Yeah, there's a lot, and then, then I think I went into ministry in my 30s. Before that I had been a public school music teacher for 10 years, teaching K through 12, so I mean, you know, full spectrum there.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: I think that the emphasis for teaching elders to be on teaching is a good thing.

Sara: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Deb: It's really about equipping the saints, and that means today equipping them in ways that we didn't have to be equipped when we were younger.

What happened to our building? In the course of working with the realtor, he sent out request for proposals and we had 85 respondents by contractors and developers in the Northeast, so the realtor came back to us and said, "Okay, you need to come up with criteria. What don't you want to entertain?"

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And we said, "It needs to be in keeping with our values."

He said, "Okay, that's good."

In came Dunkin' Donuts with an offer to buy the property for about three times what it was worth because they had no drive-thru-

Sara: Okay.

Deb: ... in College Town, and we said no to that, and I just looked at the people in the congregation and I said, "You know that you're leaving this money on the table, right?" And they said, "Right."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: "We're not selling to have this raised in order to have a drive-thru."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: So, we had the discussions about, "What can you see here? What could you live with?"

We ended up selling to a Free Methodist congregation that was, I think at the time maybe five or seven years old, and they were ready to move into a church-

Sara: Ah.

Deb: ... building and own their own building.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: There was a little bit of, uh, hesitancy at first because we are very pro-LGBTQ+ in our congregation-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... and that is a denomination that is wrestling with that and is not-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: And so our folks really had to come to grips with how they felt about it, and we had several discussions with the pastors of that congregation and opted to believe that God is working through them to bring about change.

Sara: Wow.

Deb: Uh, so we sold to another church.

Presbytery approved the sale of the building in June of 2014. It still had to go to state superior court and make its way through the court system. We ended up closing on it in August, but we knew that we were going to set the date for leaving the building towards the end of July. Had no idea where we were going.

We started looking at storefronts, thinking maybe God is calling us into a storefront ministry. Didn't know. And the day after the Presbytery voted, I received an email from a friend of mine from seminary and he was head of spiritual life for a senior living community here in Rochester.

We had one of our acts of faith located on their campus because so many of our members lived over there.

It was a book study and one of the members of the book study was a Jewish woman who just thought that since she's on the spiritual life committee, she should go to everything that's spiritual on the campus, so she joined our book club and I became her pastor. She had a rabbi and a pastor, and she went to this friend of mine and said, "You know, South is selling their building. They need a place to worship. We've been trying to get a group in here to provide weekly worship for the last two or three years but nobody can do it because they all have their own services and their own churches. What would happen if we offered this space to them to worship here and formed something new and different?"

So it turns out, he gives me this call the day after, as I said, and I said to him, "Okay, well, what would you charge us for rent?"

He said, "Nothing."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: And I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because we need to have you here."

Sara: Hm.

Deb: "We could throw in an office and we can throw in storage space, all for free. What do you think?"

The result is that over the course of the next year we develop this new worshipping community, one of the 1001 new worshipping communities, and it's called Fellowship of Faith. It's one of our acts of faith and we worship on Sunday afternoons there.

We've been there for 10 years, carving out the time of COVID, and we get between 35 and 50 people for worship on Sunday. Between a quarter and a third were part of the original South church, so this is all new people-

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: ... th-

Some of them live on the campus there of the senior community but many live in neighboring streets-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: ... and, you know, we formed, like, our own community.

It's traditional worship in a non-traditional setting.

Sara: That's awesome.

Deb: It's very-

Sara: What a great-

Deb: ... exciting.

Sara: ... story.

Deb: It's exciting. Yeah.

Sara: It is exciting, and I love the ins and outs that you have explored with us in this conversation.

When you think about advice you would give to-

Deb: Hm.

Sara: ... another church that's either bored. (laughs) And wondering sort of like, "Oh, doesn't feel like s- anything's really at stake anymore."

Deb: Mm-hmm.

Sara: "We just go through the motions now and they... doesn't feel like a risk. It kinda is hard to separate from everything else around us." Or, one who's really led in this direction, what would you advise that they remember or practice?

Deb: Well, prayer is at the center of all that South Presbyterian has done.

Sara: Hm.

Deb: The dangerous prayer is very helpful because you can start praying it by saying, "Sure, put me where you want me. Show me what to do." But then when things start happening and you realize that God's listening and trying to put you there-

Sara: Wow.

Deb: ... you really have to come to grips with your own commitment to do that.

Our book, I think, is very helpful. I know there was a group of Korean churches in New Jersey that was using our book and found it helpful, as well as individuals around the country, but South ended up creating an act of faith that is its own not-for-profit.

The Presbytery came to us and said, "You know, you're being called on by so many churches around the country to offer advice or to walk with them on their journey or whatever, that we want to make sure there's some firewall between what you're doing and the church so we want you to create a not-for-profit." Which we did. It's called Firebird Spirit.

Sara: Mm.

Deb: It's a 501(c)(3) organization and we have amassed a team of people, our Firebird team, that includes retired mid-level execs, people in business, people in marketing, people in office, where... so that we, we are prepared to help groups of churches.

For instance, why does every church have to have its own copier and its own overhead of this, that and the other thing when they're trying to save money? What happens if we just bring a bunch of churches together? And the Senate of the Northeast gave us a grant to explore this, and, and we discovered, you know, churches can save money if they do this, so our director of operations at South, who's the treasurer of Firebird Spirit, he says, "Let me do the research." And he has put together a package of, "Here's the best software that you could use."

Sara: Wow.

Deb: "This will save you the most money. Let's pull all of these things together. We could house your websites for you, for instance, at a nominal fee." Those kinds of things.

It's so individualized, Sara, I don't really know how to answer it, but to suggest that if you were to get in touch with Firebird Spirit, we are happy to work with you one-on-one. We're not in this to make money.

As one of our elders said when we were in the midst of everything, "We have to document everything so well because we don't want anybody else to have to reinvent the wheel. It's been so hard for us. We just wanna-

Sara: Hm.

Deb: ... make sure that everything is documented and we will share whatever we can."

Sara: Wow.

Deb: Um.

Sara: What a gift.

Deb: I think it's such an individualized thing. Some churches are... need to get rid of their building in order to survive. Some churches should not probably survive. They should take whatever their assets are and, and dwell, and carry the benefit of their years and knowledge and spirit into enlivening other churches where they might join.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: Everything is very individualized. Should be.

Sara: I love that, and what a generous legacy that you're describing and offering. Deeply resonates with this thousand-and-one movement that of course you are a part of and I think like, yeah, we gotta call them. (laughs) You know? That's what we're all trying to figure out together and invent the wheel individually, but I think the greatest thing we could do right now is to figure out how to work together in faithful ways.

Deb: Yeah. Absolutely.

We had a total of three new worshipping communities that were a part of South and two of 'em just didn't survive COVID.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: So I think another thing to keep in mind is it's okay to let things go.

Sara: Yeah.

Deb: And it's okay to say, "That served its purpose for the time." And those people, you know, were like seeds that get spread on the wind, uh, can go do other things and carry with us everything that we have done so far.

I'm exceedingly grateful to the national church, Ray in particular and Paul Grier at the Foundation. Paul has been out with us since we started all of this and the two of them have really shepherded us and helped us to know that we're a part of what's going on.

And the Presbytery of Genesee Valley, I think in the beginning they weren't too sure. I mean, who would be with something so new? But now they look at us and they see us, I think, as one model, one way of doing things, and we've been so precedent setting at the Presbytery that it makes it easier for the next people to come along, so I just wanna say thanks to them too.

Sara: Mm.

Deb: Oh, I wanted to tell you about our latest act of faith. We have three members out of the 35, who are a man and w- two women of color who are in their 20s, and they were part of the last confirmation class that we had, the first time that South had ever had a confirmation class that was all people of color, and boy, didn't that rock their world, and now they're in their 20s, they're settled here in Rochester, and so the session said to me, "We're not doing anything for the kids." As they call 'em. "We need to go and involve them in the church." So had 'em over to dinner and they brought their significant others and I said, "All right, here's the deal." I said, "Here's what an act of faith is. I know th- a lot of what the church has been does not speak to you. You show up at Christmas or f- to potlucks or whatever-

Sara: Hm.

Deb: ... but I wanna have an opportunity for you. Now what is it that keeps you awake at night?" And they started talking and I said-

Sara: Hm.

Deb: ... "I'd like you to form your own act of faith." And they said, "Really?"

I said, "Yeah, you don't need an advisor." You know?

Sara: Wow.

Deb: "Go for it." And as a result, they have formed Soul Sustainability, which is designed to meet the sustainability of their needs as men and women of color in this world, their needs for their spirit to survive as they look at sustainability of the planet.

Sara: Awesome. Deb, what a gift you are.

Deb: Oh, Sara.

Sara: What a joy.

Deb: Well, for me it has but I hope I haven't talked too much. That's the problem; I get going on this stuff and I just love the people. I love what the Spirit is doing through this, you know, the merry little band of believers.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: Thank you my friends. It's been great.