

Message on Friday, July 3, 2025

Dear church,

In their book, “The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations,” Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom reflect on the Alcoholics Anonymous community and the powerful lessons we can learn from them.

“Starfish have an incredible quality to them: If you cut an arm off, most of these animals grow a new arm. And with some varieties, such as the Linckia, or long-armed starfish, the animal can replicate itself from just a single piece of an arm... They can achieve this magical regeneration because in reality, a starfish is a neural network – basically a network of cells. Instead of having a head, like a spider, the starfish functions as a decentralized network...”

The authors use this metaphor to describe one of the best known de-centralized organizations.

“Let’s look at one of the best-known starfish of them all. In 1935 Bill Wilson was clenching a can of beer; he’d been holding a beer, or an alcoholic variation thereof, for the better part of two decades. Finally, his doctor told him that unless he stopped drinking, he shouldn’t expect to live more than six months. That rattled Bill, but not enough to stop him. An addiction is hard to overcome.

Bill had a huge insight. He already knew that he couldn’t combat alcoholism all by himself. And experts were useless to him because he and other addicts like him were just too smart for their own good. As soon as someone told him what to do, Bill would rationalize away the advice and pick up a drink instead. It was on this point that the breakthrough came. Bill realized that he could get help from other people who were in the same predicament. Other people with the same problem would be equals. It’s easy to rebel against a [counselor]. It’s much harder to dismiss your peers. Alcoholics Anonymous was born.”

Not long after I, Andreas, became pastor at St. Peter’s, I met some of our AA people who gather in our Fellowship Hall almost every day. They invited me to join them on a trip to the official AA headquarters in New York City, the figurehead for this de-centralized human network of recoveree groups which operate all over the US and in many other countries in the world. I remember being fascinated by the idea that all these groups are basically self-led and self-sufficient. They abide by a common set of rules, but they don’t pay fees or are required to ask for permission for exactly how they run their meetings.

“At Alcoholics Anonymous, no one’s in charge. And yet, at the same time, everyone’s in charge.... The organization functions just like a starfish. You automatically become part of the leadership—an arm of the starfish, if you will—the moment you join.”

I have been thinking about this since reading these excerpts last week, and I thought this represents my vision for St. Peter's, our church. I marvel time and again that we are NOT a pastor-centric church but one in which people with leadership skills take on ministries and shape them, often with great passion. Look at what Bernie did with the group of volunteers in North Carolina, what the women of the Thrift Store have been doing over decades, what Charlene Bance has established with the Green Team, the way Brian Brenfleck gathers volunteers for Family Promise in June...

And your pastor? He can encourage, help, support, recruit, enable people from the background but doesn't have to oversee everything. We are a church like that - and it's a good thing. Let us keep growing ministry arms! And don't hesitate to share your ideas.