

Present Reality and Future Possibilities for the Rural United Methodist Church

by

Ui Yeon Kim

Date: 4/12/2021

Approved:



Lacey Warner, Supervisor



William Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the distinctive nature, specific struggles, and ultimately hopeful future of rural congregations in the United Methodist Church. Drawing from my experience pastoring various rural churches, I address a set of critical questions that every rural congregation faces: What factors allow certain congregations and their pastors to sustain and renew their mutual ministries while most other churches and ministers continue their perpetual decline? What particular constellation of approach, community, leadership, and mission enables a rural congregation to turn from loss toward growth? I argue that the pastor of a rural Methodist church, recognizing that God uses seemingly small things to accomplish great purposes, must fully embrace her call to a rural congregation, even though such an appointment is temporary and may seem less important than appointments to larger, more apparently “dynamic” congregations. To be fully present, the pastor must commit herself wholeheartedly to the congregation’s flourishing, and to learn to see and embrace the particular gifts and challenges that a rural church presents.

I make this argument by articulating six specific practices of faithful pastoral leadership in a rural church: (1) embracing the particular context of pastoral ministry, (2) cultivating the habit of active visitation, (3) establishing a broad context for preaching that goes beyond the pulpit, (4) re-envisioning leadership as a cooperative venture, (5) framing a congregation’s mission with attention to its particular gifts, and (6) promoting a culture of celebrating God’s work in the world. These six practices serve, in turn, as occasions to explore specific methods and tools unique to small rural churches, given their particular needs and gifts.

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## **Acknowledgements**

To my wife, Hana – who always turns my eyes upon Jesus.

To my mom and my dad – always the first to say, “you can do it!”

To my mother-in-law – the one with the most courage.

To our kids, Joel and Chloe – for growing my heart.

To my brother, Paul – the more compassionate one.

To the church – without whom I would have no story to tell.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Three years ago, a former United Methodist Church (UMC) bishop observed that approximately one third of the eleven hundred churches in his conference would likely close their doors within ten to fifteen years. Indeed, as Lovett Weems writes in *Focus*, his careful study of the situation of the United Methodist Church in the twenty-first century, the baby boomers—who constitute the majority of weekly church attendees and give the most financially—will die over the next few decades, leaving the church mostly empty and with reduced monetary resources.<sup>1</sup> These tangible realities will no doubt affect the church profoundly, even as we seek to rekindle its life.

Having served as a full-time UMC pastor for the last fourteen years, I recognize the urgency in our denomination (and within my own Western North Carolina Conference) to plant new churches that will engage and disciple multiple generations of people who are currently absent from the church. Yet the truth remains that our radical initiatives to start new congregations, along with the tremendous financial resources and human capital this endeavor requires, simply cannot keep pace in counteracting the effects of an alarming number of church closings expected in the upcoming years.

This thesis takes as its starting point the claim that, instead of focusing primarily on building new congregations, pastors in the United Methodist Church must strive to revitalize and resurrect as many declining congregations as possible. Only a combination of new congregations and revitalized existing congregations can lead to a faithful and fruitful path for the UMC and other mainline denominations. While it is not the concern of this thesis to argue for this claim, this claim raises a number of critical questions,

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<sup>1</sup> Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Focus: The Real Challenges that Face the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011).

which this thesis seeks to address. What factors allow certain congregations to renew themselves while others ultimately die? What particular elements of theology, leadership, and community enable congregations to turn from despair and decline toward growth and vitality? These questions are relevant not merely in a local or even regional context. Indeed, the effects of decline or growth in the local rural churches will reach far and wide, as the overall health of these United Methodist churches will also pose global consequences for millions of United Methodist sisters and brothers around the world.

A former district superintendent recently raised concerns about the all-consuming chatter about our supposed denominational dwindling and eventual death, citing reports he had encountered of such church demise as early as the 1950s. Given that every couple of decades or so, we sound the alarm of our impending denominational doom, he questioned whether such warnings held real merit. I think they do, now more than ever, as we clearly see the tangible effects of such decline foretold many years ago.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the precipitous membership decline recognized over a generation ago, the overall financial giving within the United Methodist Church denomination finally declined for the first time less than a decade ago. This downward financial trend continues today. Thus, in a way unseen in past generations, the United Methodist denomination can now tangibly see, hear, and feel the decline in the closing of various global Methodist agencies abroad as well as countless local churches here at home.

I am convinced that reasonable and sustainable solutions to this crisis must be highly attuned to context. They must be indexed to a particular group of people in a specific locale. My focus, therefore, will be to examine the particularities of rural

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<sup>2</sup> According to Weems, 1965 was the last year of membership gain for the Methodists.

congregations and how these churches can turn from decades of decline toward renewed mission. While many current resources address how to revitalize local churches, most of them are out of touch with the realities of the small rural churches I have served. In this thesis, I explore new standards for leadership and recalibration of financial resources that congregations and their leaders must make in order to stay vital and relevant in our communities, especially for those in small rural churches.

Most conferences in the UMC offer abundant continuing education opportunities. But does the mass of information offered by the books and the seminars actually work for us in our current setting and climate? Contemporary church leaders face realities that are vastly different from those faced by previous generations of clergy, and they require new strategies and vision. Some of these new realities include people's migration from small towns to large cities, continuing cultural and religious diversities, and decreased birth rates among Christians. Yet so much of our clergy formation and continuing education focuses on innovative leadership and church growth that assumes population growth and economic prosperity, a situation far removed from the contemporary realities of most Methodist pastors.

This topic of decline and death is also important for seminary students to think through. Too many continue to graduate from seminary with idealized expectations for their ministries, believing they will go on to work in a big church with a large staff serving many important people. However, the reality is that the vast majority of them will end up in small rural congregations in isolated towns because this is where the majority

of UMC churches are located. It is no small wonder that pastors, especially young pastors, become disillusioned and quit within their first five years of ministry!<sup>3</sup>

The days of inheriting vibrant and stable churches are long past. Instead, when we assume our various appointments in the current UMC, our task will be either to revitalize the congregation or allow it to die a dignified death. Yet are we being given the tools—either in seminaries or by the denomination—to perform either of these tasks faithfully and fruitfully?

We also must remember that the decline of the United Methodist churches in the U.S. will have dramatic consequences around the globe, as so many people, particularly the most vulnerable, will be impacted by the decline of monetary resources flowing from the U.S. to churches located in third world countries. Given the UMC's commitments, we must be careful and sensitive about our priorities. Where and how should we invest our remaining human and financial capital so that we can continue to witness to those most vulnerable?

Most churches in desperate decline will probably hang on until they can no longer pay their utility bills. During my time serving two small rural congregations in North Carolina, I witnessed too many churches headed in this direction. Yet not all churches died or even declined. Some churches revived, revitalized, and renewed their vision within the church and their mission in their communities. Indeed, both of my congregations renewed our hopes, revitalized our mission, and grew in our attendance and finances.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In many denominations, the percentage of younger clergy has slipped close to 5 percent or even less. Lovett H. Weems, Jr. and Ann A. Michel, *The Crisis of Young Clergy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 1.

<sup>4</sup> The first church grew from eighty to over 140 in attendance, while the second church grew from seventy to hundred in attendance.

These transformations did not occur by random chance or luck. I discovered, during my years serving these rural churches, that my attitude and tone mattered just as much as, if not more than, any particular techniques and systems I sought to institute. This thesis seeks to draw on the lessons I have learned from my pastoral ministry to articulate a vision for faithful pastoral leadership in the context of the contemporary rural Methodist church. I argue that the pastor of a rural Methodist church, recognizing that God uses seemingly small things to accomplish great purposes, must embrace her call to a rural congregation, even though such an appointment is temporary and may seem less important than appointments to larger, more apparently “dynamic” congregations. This faithful response to God’s call requires that pastor to take actions that demonstrate to her congregation—and to the pastor herself—her full commitment to the congregation’s flourishing. It then requires discovering and embracing the particular gifts and challenges specific to the context of the rural church.

I make this argument by identifying six practices that I have found, in my own experience and through my research, to be effective ways of fully grounding my own ministry in the context of a rural church. Each of the following chapters explores one of these practices. Throughout the thesis, I seek to highlight how contextualized questions combined with appreciative approaches toward local churches can open possibilities and provide renewed purpose. Our outlook, leadership, preaching, relationships, and thanksgiving really matter! I see clearly now that my initial expectations and perceptions of the local church revealed my elitist bias. I now recognize that weekly morning coffees with my lay leaders taught me far more about church leadership than all the leadership books I read, and my sermons made less impact than the dinners I shared with

congregants. I learned the hard way that my talents mattered far less than my presence. In the end, I left all of the local churches with profound gratitude and restored commitment to my calling, contrary to my original despair and anger.

In what follows, I share stories of healing, growth, and revitalization from the local churches I served. Sometimes I wonder whether my sincere appreciation and deep love for the rural church exists because I experienced some unusual “success” in these appointments, something very few ministers get to encounter. Yet even amidst these successes, I clearly recognize that I squandered so many ministries and failed so many people. Despite it all, my relationships deepened, my heart was transformed, and I became more like Jesus. I now simply pray and long for such transformation to occur in all of my fellow pastors in the rural churches, and I hope that perhaps the following can help others to find that path.

## 2. ACCEPT AND EMBRACE

During our time as Duke Divinity School students, we shared beautiful dreams and spoke passionately about our strong commitment to the local churches that we would eventually serve. One did not need to search hard to witness hope, optimism, and assurance for the faithful work that seminary students looked forward to doing. During the final semester of our graduating year, the moment we'd long been anticipating finally arrived: we all began to receive news of where we would be appointed as pastors in the United Methodist Church. A few, especially those who were appointed as associate pastors at large churches, rejoiced with anticipation for their nascent pastoral ministry. But most of us, particularly those appointed to small rural churches, found ourselves disappointed, confused, and angry, feeling betrayed and passed over.

After over a decade of personal conversations with church leaders who make decisions about church appointments in the United Methodist Church, I believe many of them would agree with Lyle Schaller that, far too often, “talented ministers are ‘set up to fail’” by being invited to serve churches where their gifts, skills, experience, personality, and other characteristics do not match the needs and culture of that congregation at that point in its history.<sup>5</sup> Another complicating factor affects young ministers in particular. For the vast majority of recent seminary graduates, no matter how talented and gifted we consider ourselves to be, we will not be considered for any church until most of the older pastors are assigned their churches. In short, the young pastors wait at the very end of the lunch line, irrespective of their ambition and hunger to work. No matter how impressive the resume of seminary graduates and young pastors, when bishops and cabinets do not

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<sup>5</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *Small Congregation, Big Potential: Ministry in the Small Membership Church* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2003), 190.

consider the appointment of young clergy until the very end of the process, “the options are severely limited.”<sup>6</sup> The fact is that most young UMC clergy will be assigned to what many would think of as “bad” churches.

Although this attitude is so pervasive as to seem almost “natural” or “given,” I contend that it is poisonous both to a pastor’s view of her own vocation and to the relationship between a congregation and its pastor. What is necessary is a fundamental shift in the attitude of new pastors towards the various churches to which they might be called. They must relinquish a view of ministry that ranks churches from best (financially stable, culturally relevant, and with a large roster of members) to worst (financially struggling, culturally distant from urban centers, and with declining and elderly membership). Instead, they must learn to see the “bad” churches the way that God sees them. Doing so requires a fundamental shift in their expectations. The argument of this chapter—that faithfulness for the pastor of a rural Methodist church requires fully embracing her call to this congregation, in this place, at this time—serves as the foundation for the following chapters, each of which spells out specific practices that help both to undergird and to flesh out the pastor’s commitment to the rural congregation.

#### WHAT DO WE DO WITH OUR “BAD” CHURCHES?

Eugene Peterson observes that seminarians are forever complaining about the “gap between their expectations for the church, as engendered in seminary, and the reality of the church they experience as new pastors.”<sup>7</sup> I cannot argue with Peterson’s short summary of what many of us felt as we graduated from seminary and onto our first

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<sup>6</sup> Lovett H. Weems Jr. and Ann. A. Michael, *The Crisis of Younger Clergy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 22.



local church. So, what advice would I give my younger self and some of my friends in the midst of our dissatisfactions about the small rural churches we were tasked to lead? Quit your complaining! And instead take a “look at the pilgrim road and see where you have come from and where you are going.”<sup>8</sup>

A critical moment in Mark’s gospel narrative occurs when Jesus first fully explains to his disciples the extent to which his ministry would culminate in his rejection and crucifixion by the authorities. When Peter hears this, he scolds Jesus. This is not what Peter imagines the Messiah’s ministry should look like. In turn, Jesus rebukes Peter in harsh terms, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus clearly implies that his taking on this mission—and the death that is, for Jesus, inseparable from this mission—is a divine thing.<sup>10</sup>

Far too often, young pastors at rural churches are like Peter in their limited assumptions about what counts as meaningful ministries. In reality, a meaningful pastoral ministry includes far more than the apparently “important” ministries represented by such “human things” as large membership and substantial endowment. Through honest reflection, I have come to recognize a gap between my worldly understanding of the ministries I see as worthy of my talent, and God’s heart for all of God’s people, especially the invisible people and neglected churches. Indeed, I have realized that I am far better in competition than in patience. I am far better at “responding to my instincts and ambitions to get ahead and make my mark than I am at figuring out how to love

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<sup>8</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 134.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 8:31–33 (NRSV).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.

another.”<sup>11</sup> But the desire of God’s heart is “immeasurably larger than our imaginations can conjure,” and we pastors must work endlessly to peel away our self-delusional grandeur for bigger and better ministries, and strive instead for closer and deeper relationships.<sup>12</sup> Each of us ends up where we end up as pastors of local churches without much control over the process. But, once we’ve arrived, we are given the opportunity to make all sorts of choices that will determine our path of discipleship and ministry. Thus, much depends upon the pastor’s attitude toward the ministerial context into which she’s been placed. And here, faithful pastoral ministry depends on adopting God’s view of what counts as good or bad, important or insignificant, and big or small.

#### NO OTHER PLACE I WOULD RATHER BE

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we see time and again that “the same faith that works in the big things works in the little things.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the importance of one’s ministry will never be predicated upon the size of one’s church membership or funding. Instead, the most important thing the pastor can do in their ministry is to discern what God is asking that pastor to do within the life of that specific church in that particular season. In this way, the most important aspect of planning in your church is to “ask what God’s desire is for your congregation in its setting.”<sup>14</sup>

When asked about one word of advice he would offer young pastors, the American novelist Wendell Berry shared a single sentence: “Heaven is what’s underneath your feet.” Every pastor, regardless of age or denominational affiliation, would do well to

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<sup>11</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Lovett H. Weems, Jr. and Tom Berlin, *Bearing Fruit: Ministry with Real Results* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 44.

heed this counsel. Despite our lack of awareness most of the time, the very place that we desire and the very people God calls us to serve can be found exactly where we are in the present. So we must not presume to think that “better churches” lie somewhere on the future horizon.

Thich Nhat Hahn writes that “our true home is the present moment, the miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth in the present moment.”<sup>15</sup> Pastors who grasp this insight will proceed to serve and sacrifice for their current church as if that church might be the very last one they get the privilege of serving. This perspective will enable the pastor to plant strong roots that can weather the storms of ministry, for “the hope of new life is found through pain and suffering—not by fleeing it.”<sup>16</sup>

I confess that, in both of my rural church appointments, I wanted to pay my dues quickly, maybe even suffer just a little, and move on to the next best thing. I actually believed that such warped perspectives would enable me to survive the few years I needed to get through before the next transition to another church. Yet the very opposite proved to be true. My attitude of “quick, little, and next” brought nothing but greater pain and annoying dissatisfaction. Only when I accepted the potential of serving that church permanently did peace and comfort flood over me. Temptations of comparison and competition melted away and gave way to rest and contentment.

## GOD USES SMALL THINGS

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<sup>15</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 76.

In Matthew 13, Jesus teaches his followers using two parables—the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast. Contrary to the idealized modern image of the mustard seed, the mustard shrub was not a highly regarded addition to one’s garden in antiquity. Mustard is a weed that a farmer would typically pull from the ground, yet in this parable God’s kingdom is compared to the mustard seed one keeps, starting very small but growing into a shrub and growing into a tree. In the stark contrast it draws between the tiny, inconsequential seedling and the lush tree, this parable highlights the corresponding contrast between God’s way of seeing human endeavors and our own way of seeing them. What we see as inconsequential, God sees as crucially important. Where we see little potential, God sees the kingdom of heaven itself.

The parable of the yeast offers similar lessons that subvert our typical assumptions in order to contrast God’s attitude with our own attitudes. Yeast, the agent that bloats and rots corpses, represented something that a person would usually clean and throw away from the house in preparation for Passover. But here, yeast is cast in a positive light. Perhaps God is fermenting the kingdom of the heavens within the world using something that people would normally throw away, like the woman who mixes flour with yeast.

When we look at them together, these two parables offer profound lessons about faithful and fruitful pastoral leadership. The faithful pastor values and pays attention to small things and little churches, trusting that one day any of them might grow into a tree that provides a place of rest and sustenance for others. The pastors that I remember best exemplified this sort of faithfulness. They did not discard or throw away churches and the people within them that might be deemed broken and malfunctioning. Instead, these

pastors remained steadfast in nurturing and caring for all churches, especially the “troubled” churches with little to no potential with certain hopes for them and for what they may eventually become. Because of this faithful presence, these are the pastors that I remember and continue to learn from. May we truly consider and believe that “the quiet revolution of God’s kingdom doesn’t spring up big and tall, parading its supremacy over all the other kingdoms of the earth. Instead, it spreads underground. It thrives beneath the surface.”<sup>17</sup> But learning to see God’s kingdom in little things requires great faith, particularly when the place God sends us does not fit with our own hopes and dreams. Here, we must learn to interpret the apparent results of our ministry according to God’s terms, not our own.

#### EMBRACE REGARDLESS OF THE PERCEIVED RESULTS

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.<sup>18</sup>

The transition from my second church to my third and current church almost broke my spirit and spiraled me toward a pit of anger and despair. After three years of profound spiritual, numerical, and financial growth, the United Methodist church chose to move me to a church without my input or request.<sup>19</sup> The church I was sent to was in another

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 33.

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah 29:4–7 (NRSV).

<sup>19</sup> In three years, between 2010 and 2013, my second church doubled its average attendance to over 130 people every Sunday. Our giving more than doubled and our finances more than tripled in that same three-year period.

rural setting with half the congregation of my second church. I remember calling everyone that I knew in any sort of decision-making position in the church to express my displeasure and my disappointment. I fully acknowledge that sometimes you have to relocate “in order to really see the world and reimagine your role within it.”<sup>20</sup> However, I also must admit that those four months, the time between when I was told where I would be moving and when I physically arrived at my third church, represented some of the darkest and self-centered times in my life. My dreams had not merely failed to take shape as I’d expected; they had totally shattered. Yet I had to learn to dream differently.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove offers an insight that applies to many of us:

“Whoever loves their dream of Christian community more than Christian community itself will become the destroyer of every Christian community, no matter how honest, earnest, and sacrificial their intentions may be.”<sup>21</sup> Any fruitful and faithful pastor will learn, sooner or later, how to distinguish between their own dreams and God’s dreams. Sometimes both of these dreams intersect, but, more often than not, God’s dreams of community stand in contrast to our dreams of ambition. Practically speaking, this means the faithful pastor must remain alert and focused on the journey of building relationships, rather than being obsessed with weekly attendance. The faithful pastor must remain diligent to explore their environment as a neighbor rather than seeing everyone in sight as a potential member.

One easy yet powerful change we made upon arriving at this third church, a change that helped us alter our attitude toward the community to which we’d been sent and to plant real roots there, involved a shift away from online shopping. Ordering

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<sup>20</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

materials online provided so many more options and variety over what we typically found in our local stores. Online shopping also saved us time and trouble, as we could adjust everything to our own schedule while avoiding people who might distract us from shopping efficiently. But my family realized that going to the local grocery store and shopping mall (I'm using the term "mall" loosely here) offered so many opportunities to meet, greet, and connect with people in our community. Sure, the stuff we bought may not be exactly what we wanted, may have cost a bit more and took a lot more time, but we got to see, hear, and touch people that often led to coffee, meals, and friendship. Our family wanted the community to know our names and our stories. And we certainly learned a whole lot of names and stories, mostly from those who never stepped foot inside our church. Although the decision to shop at the local mall rather than buying our things online may seem inconsequential, it was in fact a profound way of aligning our ordinary, everyday activities with the reality to which God had called us. In focusing small things like our purchasing habits on the local community, we were able to grow deeper roots in that community. Doing so not only reminded us that we were there for the long term, it also showed our congregation that we were truly committed to the growth of God's kingdom in that place.

### STAY A WHILE

I still remember my friend and mentor, Jim Harnish, sharing wisdom about what pastors face in their local churches: "You will enter church to revitalize or close." And so, as Gregory Jones reminds us, "There is no one standard or criterion for measuring excellence, other than fidelity to the crucified and risen Christ."<sup>22</sup> My first advice to

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<sup>22</sup> L. Gregory Jones, and Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 7.

pastors going to rural churches is to plant a garden and plan on staying a while. While we pastors, especially those of us in the United Methodist Church, cannot determine or even know how long we will stay at any particular church, our congregants can easily spot the pastors who want to stay and distinguish them from the pastors who are anxious to leave. Wise will be the one who does not assume that another church, bigger and better appointment, awaits. Instead, the wise and faithful pastor will live and serve in a way that lets them realize their dream of a future appointment within the life of their current church. Perhaps my colleague from seminary put it best, writing, “I have stuck with Christian community because I believe it is part of something eternal—part of God’s plan to redeem the world through a peculiar people”<sup>23</sup> I invite all pastors of rural churches to find their own peculiar people and, by accepting the time and place God has chosen them for ministry, to embrace life in this present time with their given people!

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<sup>23</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 34.



### 3. VISIT FIRST AND VISIT AGAIN

Like most eager young pastors beginning their first appointment to a local church, once I had finally received my first assignment to a congregation, I read every book I could find about successful pastoral ministry. I dived deep into treatises on forming a vision, implementing strategies, and allotting roles. However, I learned within the first six months of ministry that the pastor in today's rural church needs to focus on "relationships rather than roles."<sup>24</sup> This fundamental truth about rural church ministry cannot be overstated. As Lyle Schaller explains, long gone are the days when the "role of the preacher was perceived to be far more important than the relationships a pastor enjoyed."<sup>25</sup> Although this fact surprised me at first, I have come to see it as the foundation of my ministry in rural Methodist churches.

The previous chapter addressed the crucial importance for pastors of rural congregations not to see their placement as a temporary stopping point on the way to a grander destination, nor even as a disappointing situation that they must make the best of, but instead to fully accept and even embrace their context as the very locus of God's kingdom breaking into the world. In this chapter, I turn to a particular practice—visitation—that helps to ground my recommendation to "accept and embrace" in a concrete practice that pastors can implement. I begin by connecting the practice to John Wesley's pastoral leadership, before offering some specific guidelines for developing a robust practice of visitation, which I base in my own experience. I also show that a robust practice of visitation enables a pastor to become a more effective and intentional listener,

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<sup>24</sup> Lyle Schaller, *Tattered Trust: Is There Hope for Your Denomination?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 24.

<sup>25</sup> Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 35.

which, in turn, enables a better understanding of diversity and difference within the congregation.

### JOHN WESLEY WAS WITH THE PEOPLE

Lovett Weems explores the core values of John Wesley's leadership in *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit*. He convincingly argues that Wesley's fruitful and faithful model of leadership is rooted in his pastoral concern for God's people and requires living among the people, even in times of tension, while seeking justice on their behalf. Since the pastor cannot lead with integrity as an outside visitor, Wesley realized, the pastor's location is extremely important for how they minister and lead their flock. The pastor should aim to be "present in a meaningful way where the people are—all the people."<sup>26</sup> Tracing the history of the Wesleyan movement, Weems shows that it became a "powerful spiritual force" precisely by going where the people were.<sup>27</sup>

The pastor of the rural church typically lives in a parsonage, a church-owned home near the church. In the eleven years I've lived in a parsonage, I've made it my goal to take every opportunity to engage with my neighbors. Every wave, every hello, and every conversation represent opportunities to connect, invite, and minister. The pastor should do this not to evangelize their neighbors or convince them to become members of the church. Truth be told, I can count on one hand the number of my neighbors who became members of my church through these many years of encounters. Instead, I simply want people in the neighborhood to know that we are still the church.

Weems calls on Wesleyan leaders to rekindle our heritage of passion for the people and the land we inhabit. Wesleyan leadership requires continually redefining the

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<sup>26</sup> Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

reality of the day so that a pastor can offer “fitting and appropriate ministerial responses” to stay with and serve the people.<sup>28</sup> In visiting people in their own homes, the pastor is able to meet them where they are, both physically and emotionally, within the context of their own stories and location, which allows the pastor to pay close attention to the full range of congregational life. As Weems points out, Jesus is rarely still. He is a “teacher with no classroom, an instructor who never told anyone to sit at a desk. Jesus is always in motion, moving from place to place,” walking down roads, going into villages and cities, and along the way, he talks, teaches, and heals.<sup>29</sup> And by being with others as Jesus was, the pastor is able to imagine lives that are not like their own.

Likewise, Weems repeatedly emphasizes Wesley’s focus on a “holistic concern” for God’s people, because faithful pastoral leadership always “begins with people” and emphasizes particular people over any agenda.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, leaders face a persistent temptation to prioritize pressing issues while forgetting the faces of the very people that these issues affect. Though the temptation is rampant, the answer to the problem may be painfully simple: spend time with people and do so consistently. Nothing amazing needs to be said, and the pastor need not feel obligated to view each gathering as a teachable moment. Instead, it’s important just to be present and spend time with the members of the church and the people of the community. Doing so makes all the difference when it comes to genuinely expressing concern and providing care.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Berlin, *Reckless Love: Jesus’ Call to Love Our Neighbor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 13.

## METHODS FOR VISITING PEOPLE

The foundation of my own way of spending time, as a pastor, with the people in my congregation and community, has been the intentional practice of visitation. During the first year of my ministry at a new local church, I make a point of taking the time to visit, eat, and pray with the people of the church. Through these relationships, I begin to learn the language of the people that I serve and the stories of the land in which we live. When receiving a new pastor, existing members of the congregation seek to draw connections between their own stories and those of the pastor. As a pastor, I feel I can graft my stories onto the stories of others only as I gain understanding, compassion, and appreciation for their respective narratives and situations. Indeed, I am able to best communicate and mediate the stories of our God to God's children when the message remains contextual, sensitive to the particularities of place, time, and people. The journey of faithful witnessing is off to a promising beginning when it includes the type of joyful storytelling that allows the pastor and congregants alike to mutually recount our blessings, perceived failures, and—most of all—assured redemption.

Within the very first month of my ministry at a rural church, I set out a visitation sign-up sheet with the intention of visiting everyone at church. Here, planning ahead is essential. In designing the sign-up sheet, I allow for up to three visits per day and set aside three days a week, for a total of nine potential household visits per week. I allow up to an hour for each visit. While I encourage people to share their personal stories and history with the church during each visit, I also make sure to ask specific questions. Some of the most fruitful questions I've learned to ask during each pastoral visit include the following:

- What does our church mean to you and your family?
- Tell me about your history with the church and your past ministries
- What concerns do you have about our church and our community?
- What makes our church unique and special?
- Share your dreams about our church with me.

I suggest that the pastor visit people in their homes to signal their willingness to meet people where they dwell, eat, and sleep. The safety of a person's own home often relaxes that person and enables the member to be more vulnerable and honest. If the family does not wish to open up their home, a coffee shop can serve as a suitable alternative. Do not feel anxious if the host does not talk much during the visit. I discovered early on that silence does not always mean that the host family does not desire your presence in their home.

After every visit, I drive a short distance and park my car nearby, so I can jot down every little detail on paper while memories remain fresh. Some of my clergy colleagues prematurely assume that such tasks of systematic visiting may prove too difficult, cumbersome, and time consuming. Remember, however, that the vast majority of rural churches have fewer than one hundred worshippers every week. One hundred people usually equates to fifty families or fewer. And so, by visiting just nine families every week, the pastor can visit every active family of the church in under six weeks. In a rural church context, I cannot think of a better investment of the pastor's time and resources than visiting people in order to be intentionally present, to listen, and to pray.

Within the first few weeks, I began to see and understand patterns of stories within the church and the community. The majority of the people shared similar church

stories involving beauty and pain, birth and death, and brokenness and redemption.

Visiting people allows the pastor to perform the desperately needed work of connecting isolated people to one another and to their God.

#### INVITE PEOPLE TO EAT AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY

When the practice of visitation is limited to the pastor's visit of other people's homes, it risks being one-sided, and this can limit the relationships that the practice is intended to cultivate. With this in mind, while I visited people in their homes at every opportunity, my wife and I also invited people to eat with us at our home weekly. By receiving one family per week, excluding some holidays and personal weekends, we discerned that we could welcome around forty families per year to join us for a meal. Again, with an average attendance of less than one hundred, I could potentially share a meal with every single family of our church within the first year of my ministry, a profound way to make real connections with the members of the congregation.

I began by intentionally sharing meals with selected lay leaders serving in particular ministerial roles. My goal was to spend time with them outside the context of the church to demonstrate my desire for hospitality. With this goal in mind, we prepared and cooked everything at home. I also avoided asking questions about the church unless the family asked specific questions about my ministry. The focus remained on the stories of the people present before me. I wanted my guests to recognize my care for them as persons.

Most of my weekday meetings have taken place at Waffle House. I cannot even begin to count the number of cups of coffee I have drunk in Waffle House during my ministry. Around the third year of ministry at a particular church, the regional manager of

Waffle House, not knowing that I served as a Methodist pastor, invited me to consider being the branch manager. He said, “I see you in here all the time with guests and you treat our employees really well. You’ve got managerial potential written all over you.” I kindly declined his offer, but I continued to frequent the restaurant, treating many more church members and other townspeople to a coffee date.

#### SHARING TIME WITH PEOPLE ULTIMATELY HELPS THE PASTOR

As I cultivated the habit of visitation in my pastoral ministry, I discovered an unintended gift: when a robust practice of visitation becomes foundational to the pastor’s relationship to her congregation, the expectation of the pastor as primarily a preacher diminishes, allowing the fullness of a pastor’s holistic presence to the congregation to develop. The truth of this dynamic is evident in John Wesley’s own ministry. As Weems writes, Wesley’s “profound care and respect for listeners” made him an effective communicator despite his lack of extraordinary oratorical skills.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps, much like the Apostle Paul, Wesley’s profound connection to others lay primarily not on the strength of his words but on the consistency of his presence with people.

As Wesley’s ministry suggests, the pastor’s desire for fruitful communication first requires active care and attentive listening. And in order for us to listen faithfully, we must be present in the midst of those we hope to serve. For example, after several years of ministering to God’s people in my current context, members frequently remarked that the quality of the sermons had improved over the years. Perhaps the sermons did improve—I would hope so—but I find that rather than the quality of the sermon

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<sup>31</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 15.

improving, we simply learn to listen better as we spent so many days and years in the same space and time.

The pastor does not need to go far in order to cultivate the skill of listening. Indeed, the opportunities are everywhere. Over many months of time spent with members of the congregation and the wider community, the pastor is given the opportunity to learn to listen differently to different sorts of people. This insight became especially tangible to me in my interactions with Lance, one of the lay leaders of a rural church I served. Lance cared deeply about all aspects of the church's ministry. He showed up for every opportunity to serve, but he yelled at people, including at me, his pastor. At first, I was quite offended at how Lance spoke to me. I initially thought that Lance did not like me, and I assumed he was angry with me. However, in due time, as I ate, drank, and prayed with Lance, I came to recognize that he spoke to everyone in the same loud, aggressive tone! In reality, Lance did not harbor ill feelings towards me or anyone else. He simply did not know how to speak in any other way than with the aggressive tone that had offended me so badly. No doubt I would eventually have to work with Lance on how to communicate differently. But before we could engage in that necessary work together, I first needed to learn to listen to Lance differently from how I listened to other people.

We live in a divided world, and our church can be just as divided. Therefore, as we witness to division, suspicion, and violence, in both the world and the church, the principles of Wesleyan leadership call us to be “agents for connecting individuals and groups so separated from God and one another.”<sup>32</sup> This is why, when asked to describe the most difficult aspect of ministry, I often respond saying, “putting out fires!” The

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 107.



pastor often finds herself in the role of communicator and mediator between vastly different people in her congregation. Indeed, the pastor may often find herself be at odds with other members of the church and other people in the community. But no matter the situation, spiritual love invites and moves the pastor to “recognize that true image of the other person” that she has received from Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> This recognition requires the pastor to act with patience and hopefulness amidst the divisions that will inevitably emerge from time to time.

### HOSPITAL, NURSING HOMES, AND SHUT-INS

Another aspect of the pastoral practice of visitation deserves special mention. The pastor will seldom find a better way to connect with people within the church and the wider community than via regularly scheduled visits to the nearby hospital, local nursing homes, and those confined to their homes. With every rural church I have served, I have visited hospitals regularly every Monday and Thursday. Beyond my regularly scheduled hospital visits, I have made a point to be present before any church member’s surgeries. In addition, I have visited nursing homes monthly and visited shut-ins quarterly.

In the beginning, although I certainly recognized the need to visit hospitals, nursing homes, and shut-ins, I struggled with actually doing so, mostly because I felt so useless and helpless in those settings. I could not provide medical care for those physically suffering and dying. My sense of helplessness was most strongly palpable when I visited those with various forms of dementia. My words about God and what I perceived as wisdom about life simply did not seem to matter much to those sick and dying in these institutions. It took me quite some time to recognize the intrinsic value of

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<sup>33</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1954), 36.

being present even if those I visited never even recollected my visit. But, through the grace of God, I kept going to see those who never recognized my presence or appreciated my time. I clung to the simple verses from Matthew 25, which tells us that “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”<sup>34</sup> I went to hospitals and nursing homes in order to see the invisible and to touch the untouched. After several years of forcing myself to make these visits, I began to see and “trust the value of simply showing up.”<sup>35</sup>

I always found it surprising and somewhat scary that members of the church, as well as others in the rural community, found out when and whom I visited in hospitals or nursing homes. I told no one about the pastoral visits I conducted, yet apparently unconnected people, both inside and outside the church, consistently commented on my visits. The truth I discovered is that, regardless of the pastor’s awareness, people keep track of the different visits, sometimes even unconsciously. To be sure, I did make these diligent visits to please the people of my church. But make no mistake, a pastor who becomes known for not visiting the sick or shut in will not be able to do much else in rural communities and churches. People simply will not respond to a pastor they perceive as neglecting people in their time of need.

#### GAINING PROPER PERSPECTIVE ON DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCE

The practice of visitation, when done well, has widespread consequences not just for the pastor’s relationship with the congregation, but for the pastor’s leadership. Here again, Weems’s remarks on John Wesley are insightful. Wesley’s pastoral leadership, Weems shows, embodied radical inclusion. This inclusion did not simply accommodate

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew 25:40 (NRSV).

<sup>35</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 127.

and accept everything and everyone. Rather, inclusion in the Wesleyan spirit is defined by “unity of purpose, direction, and commitment, but never uniformity.”<sup>36</sup> Today, more than ever, we desperately need to lead our people toward living into this vision of unity without uniformity. Visiting the people of the church, while also being in the midst of the community, provides the pastor with tools and the opportunities to be the bridge that brings people together. One anecdote from my own experience shows how this truth became manifest in my pastoral ministry.

Jenny, who is now in her late sixties, lived with strong and definite feelings about her God, her church, and her politics. She would regularly send handwritten notes, which were really more like a review of my sermons, bible studies, and pastoral care. I must admit that I dreaded getting those notes from her. Not only did her criticism make me feel inadequate, but I felt angry about the huge chasm that apparently existed between us. I thought, “How can Jenny think these things about the divinity of Jesus, the role of the church, and extreme political radicalism?!” I often did not reply to her, but instead, visited her at her home once a month. During our visits, I did not speak much, but listened always. I allowed Jenny the time and space to share stories of her formation. I wish I could write that we came to a mutual agreement and compassionate understanding of one another. But the truth is, we never did agree much on anything until the very day that I left that rural church. Jenny did not convince me much of her theological notions or other ideologies, and I certainly did not change her mind about anything or anyone. But shortly after it was announced at church that I would be moving on to another appointment, Jenny wrote one last note. Within this long note, full of many confusing and

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<sup>36</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 93.

contradictory thoughts and convictions, she wrote, “I really don’t agree with you, but I trust you. Thank you.” As my relationship with Jenny showed me, spending time and breaking bread with people will deepen the trust between differing people and allow for mutual connection to despite contrasts. As Father Boyle writes, “It always becomes impossible to demonize someone you know.”<sup>37</sup>

Even in a rural church and community, the pastor faces the “insoluble problem of comprehending the communities” in which the church is situated.<sup>38</sup> Without explicitly investing time and energy to be present, to listen, and to share, the pastor cannot learn to value the jobs and tasks held by members of the congregation, or the daily callings to which they commit themselves. Compassion isn’t just about feeling the pain of others; “it’s about bringing them in toward yourself.”<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Wesley’s theology was always a “theology for people.”<sup>40</sup> There is something about experiencing the reality of people’s hopes, dreams, trials, and suffering firsthand that exposes how out of touch sentimentality or ideology is to the actual needs of real people.<sup>41</sup> Visiting people in times of death profoundly shifted how I viewed my ministry of presence in the local church. Sitting inside a family’s living room moments after saying earthly goodbye to their loved ones, the pastor rediscovers the transformative power of a truly Christ-centered presence. Early in my ministry, I desperately attempted to conjure up some wise words for those grieving to bring about relief. None of those futile attempts did much good. Instead, I learned to simply be present with the people in

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<sup>37</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 142.

<sup>38</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

need of comfort. I saw that my presence, as the pastor of their church, represented something far more than I grasped. By stepping aside and becoming a vessel of Christ, I was able to make his own presence known to these people in need.

As Father Boyle also notes, “nothing of our humanity is to be discarded.”<sup>42</sup> Today, more than ever, the church needs to find new ways to “recognize and value distinctive identities and cultures.”<sup>43</sup> No person or groups of people grieve, celebrate, laugh, worship, listen, and speak exactly the same way. Visiting people allows the pastor to gain a small glimpse of the infinite varieties of how people live and express the lives to others. It’s highly unlikely that the pastor can master any of these nuances no matter how long they serve at a particular church. However, the people of the church and the people in the community will ultimately honor a pastor’s sincere desire to understand them and their ways.

### WE MUST LEARN TO STAY TOGETHER

While the regular and intentional practice of visitation comes with many benefits—such as cultivating the skills of listening and understanding, which the previous two sections explored—the most important benefit to my own ministry was the way that visitation rooted me in the community. This, too, is a crucial part of Wesley’s legacy. In its commitment to being with people, Wesleyan leadership regularly catalyzed “social reform and service of massive proportions,” providing leadership for the labor movement, prison reform, and the abolition of slavery.<sup>44</sup> One can be sure that such modes of presence, especially with the oppressed and the marginalized, presents unexpected

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<sup>42</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 144.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

challenges for the pastor and the church. Yet, as Bonhoeffer writes, Christian witness consists primarily in bearing others, and such “bearing means forbearing and sustaining.”<sup>45</sup>

But in order to bear others, the pastor must be rooted within the context of the land and the stories of its people. It is called forth by the needs of a particular situation: good theology is “situated.” It is “not simply done in a vacuum.”<sup>46</sup> Through the intentional practice of visitation, we slowly and surely build trust among strangers. And trust, as I emphasized earlier, is an “essential component of a strategy” for building voluntary associations.<sup>47</sup> As I learned in my experience with Jenny, and others with formations that differ vastly from my own, trust will not be built solely through demonstrating competence or intelligence as a pastor. By contrast, I gained trust most of all through my visits, by being present with people, especially in the midst of their greatest of needs, offering nothing less than my honest and vulnerable self.

Leadership in the Wesleyan spirit means for us to constantly “view ministry through their eyes,” focusing on the basic needs and future hopes of people.<sup>48</sup> Wesley teaches that our leadership techniques, strategies, and visions must always align with God’s love for God’s people. Jesus sees our whole selves, lives among us, and stands up for the oppressed in their everyday needs. Leaders who live only at the edge, standing at a distance from these needs, can “become detached from their communities and unable to lead.”<sup>49</sup> Participating in Christ’s ministry, however, calls the pastor to engage with

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<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 100.

<sup>46</sup> Peter C. Hodgson, *Revisioning The Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>47</sup> Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 45.

<sup>48</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

vulnerability in order to relate and connect with the people. Through visitations, the pastor can help cultivate a “new parish attitude” marked by a vision that encompasses both the familiar and the unfamiliar.<sup>50</sup>

Visiting people probably changed me more than it changed those I visited. I am embarrassed to admit that, at the beginning of my ministry, I visited people mostly out of an obligation to fulfill my pastoral duties and my desire to be liked by church members. But I came to see and feel so clearly the transformation in my life and in the life of my ministry through these visitations. Looking back, I see that much of my fruitfulness in ministry has been directly correlated to my faithful visitation with God’s people.

The Apostle Paul testifies to the early Christians in Corinth of his leadership methods to reach and disciple new and nominal Christians: “I have become all things to all people.”<sup>51</sup> Paul was able to know what and who to become only after he spent enough time with people he desired to lead. John Wesley lived into the Apostle Paul’s wisdom as he proclaimed the good news “simply and clearly to all kinds of people.” But, like Paul, he was able to do so only after spending enough time with God’s people to learn their language, desires, and needs.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:22 (NRSV).

<sup>52</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 16.

#### **4. PREACHING REQUIRES MORE THAN WORDS**

As a ten-year-old first-generation immigrant from South Korea who knew just two English words, “banana” and “table,” I was immediately set apart as an outsider when I began fourth grade in a small town in Texas. Having a first name with five vowels made my attempts to blend in even more difficult. My inability to communicate isolated me from the other children, while robbing me of any sense of safety. I felt alone and confused for my first three years in grade school, as I struggled to understand and to be understood. I recall memorizing the dictionary at home and learning English grammar from a local Korean college student for a couple of years, but I still found communicating with my peers in school extremely challenging. Eventually, a retired schoolteacher took me under her tutelage. Under her care, I finally recognized the intimate relationship that both written and spoken language share with the history and stories of the land. To truly connect with those around me, I needed to learn to speak both English and Texan.

There are striking parallels between my own experience as a first-generation immigrant in Texas and that of pastors who’ve been sent to small rural congregations. Just as I was limited in my ability to connect deeply with those around me, so also a pastor of a small rural congregation cannot comprehend the existing truths of a community, let alone communicate new truths to its people, without first learning the language of the people and the stories of the community. As pastors of small rural local congregations, we must remember that contextualized communication is an act of hospitality, community, and the Gospel itself. Such communication is essential for making disciples and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. In this chapter, I explore another concrete practice by which pastors of rural congregations can fully “accept and



embrace” their calling, namely the practice of preaching. As I argue, this involves not merely the weekly sermon that so many of us associate with preaching, but also a whole host of related practices. The practice of effective communication begins as the pastor learns the language of the community. Having learned that language, the pastor is then equipped to use that language to establish a narrative that guides the community towards greater faithfulness, not only in their words, but in their actions. After establishing the connection between community and narrative, this chapter explores three particular ways in which a faithful narrative becomes manifest in the community: (1) growth in unity despite differences, (2) growth in Christian maturation, and (3) growth in worship, both formal and informal.

### COMMUNITY LANGUAGE

Holly E. Hearon states that “words are inseparable from the people who speak them.”<sup>53</sup> As I preach and teach in small rural local churches, I find profound truths in Hearon’s observations. Various narrative boundaries of my past experiences continue to frame and shape the scripture that I read, interpret, and communicate to those I serve. Likewise, the preacher cannot accurately understand the interpretive lens of the people in the local congregation unless the preacher learns the stories of the people and the land in which she stands. Indeed, human communities, as word-created social matrices, “are themselves word-creators, speakers and hearers, word-interpreters, [and] employers.”<sup>54</sup> This is why a truly fruitful and faithful form of pastoral communication, including

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<sup>53</sup> Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 22.

<sup>54</sup> Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 33.

preaching, will take at least a year to establish as the preacher learns about the land, its people, and their unique narratives in any new church that she serves.

To make communication even more difficult and drawn out, as Michael Jenkins aptly observes, “the relationship between communities and the words they use, their texts and discourses, remain tenuous, virtually in a continuous state of flux.”<sup>55</sup> I found out all too soon that the interpretive domain of those I serve, the very people who would hear and read what I communicate, differs starkly from my own, and the standards of their interpretive lens change constantly on certain biblical and cultural topics. Consequently, the task of learning a church’s “language” is not static, but must be ongoing throughout a pastor’s tenure.

Unfortunately, many seminary graduates, who typically are sent to small rural churches, begin their ministerial journeys with prophetic convictions that challenge society’s typical assumptions and established social norms. While God calls pastors to preach to transform our earthly values and bring them closer toward God’s desires, we must first take the time to listen and learn people’s stories before we begin proclaiming visions of the heavenly kingdom.

Whitney Shiner writes that audiences look for “associations between narrative and their own situation.”<sup>56</sup> However, as a preacher, I feel I can graft my stories onto the stories of others only as I gain understanding, compassion, and appreciation for their respective narratives. Therefore, during the first year of my ministry at a new local church, I intentionally take time to visit, eat, and pray with the people of the church. Through these relationships, I begin to learn a new language—that of the people

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<sup>55</sup> Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 33.

<sup>56</sup> Hearon and Ruge-Jones, *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, 61.

that I serve—and the stories of the land that we share. The preacher can communicate best, perhaps can communicate only, when the message constantly remains contextual of its place, time, and people.

For all these reasons, the sermons that I preach often include my personal story, our church members' stories, and the stories of the people who grew up in our communities. Sharing common stories is not only a key component of fruitful and effective communication but is especially important when preachers attempt to convey difficult messages that go against accepted theological and social norms. If my particular ways of interpreting and knowing differ greatly from my congregation's ways of interpreting and knowing, this is all the more reason for me to highlight our shared narratives before introducing new and challenging stories that seek to transform our community. Shiner rightly notes that oral communication "adapts like a living organism," which means that the preacher must then live near, eat with, and listen to those she seeks to serve in order to know the appropriate tone, timing, and tension to best convey an effective message of change.<sup>57</sup>

As pastors, we simultaneously undertake this exegetical task of "reading two sacred and living texts, Bible and the people of God. This task comprises our hermeneutical ministry of discernment": a ministry that remains fundamental to and necessary for every other task of ministry, especially as it relates to our ability to preach the word of God for the people of God.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hearon and Ruge-Jones, *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, 50.

<sup>58</sup> Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 100.

## PREACHING UNITY

Richard Lischer insightfully observes that the crisis facing the modern world is a “crisis of speaking and hearing, of call and response.”<sup>59</sup> As such, preachers in the twenty-first century minister to the most “biblically tone-deaf generation,” one drowning in a sea of words, facing a flood of “compensatory words” void of the paradox of the cross.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, we increasingly find ourselves living in a bifurcated universe, with the church mirroring the world’s partition rather than acting as its reconciler.

We in the church, for the most part, fail to discern the truth behind the many symbols around us, and we do not adequately interpret ourselves within our dominant culture. Instead of defining ourselves as ones wonderfully made in the image of God, we succumb to comprehending our values through the eye of the “universal camera” created by might and money.<sup>61</sup> In the small rural church context, I have observed three specific divisions in our church and in our community that must be addressed and remedied through reconciliatory communications: a political divide between liberals and conservatives, a congregational care divide between those inside and those outside the church, and a demographic divide between young and old. The preacher plays a critical role in such communication. As preachers, we must intentionally name these divisions, even while offering the comforting reminder that these divisions do not necessarily represent a theological divide but, instead, are a series of manufactured differences created through worldly powers that seek to become our gods.

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 3.

<sup>60</sup> Lischer, *End of Words*, 12, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Lischer, *End of Words*, 15. Here, Lischer writes on the cultural and the political forces that shape our theological narratives.

The brokenness of our modern rhetoric is most clearly evident in the political sphere. How can we, as preachers, provide a competing narrative that counters messages from divisive principalities and corrosive powers that attempt to swallow us whole, robbing us of our ability to discern our lives and our world through the lens of the Gospel of Jesus?<sup>62</sup> Lischer states that the preacher, with the help of the faith community, allows people to inhabit a “new linguistic world, one in which pride, hate, lying, and insincerity will have no place.”<sup>63</sup> A church can begin to embody its call to reconciliation in the context of political disunion by engaging in three steps: 1) consistently proclaiming from the pulpit the stories of unity found in the Bible; 2) creating small group classes to teach congregants how to use our virtual community in a fruitful and faithful way; and 3) providing a safe space for people to connect face-to-face to gain a better understanding of our respective politics, while recognizing and affirming the greater force of our unity found in Christ.<sup>64</sup> In this way, small rural churches possess an advantage over larger congregations in bigger cities. In rural churches, most congregants live geographically close to each other and typically share many common experiences, having attended the same schools with mutual friends. In such rural contexts, pre-existing foundations of trust and history make it easier to start and sustain conversations. For this reason, the preacher

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<sup>62</sup> Although I recognize various reasons to avoid political dialogues, I now see that we must, at the very least, address the harmful effects of our politics on Christian discipleship in America. In fact, many pastors already openly endorse a particular political party, and so we must provide an alternative voice and a different way of giving faithful witness to our politics as Christians.

<sup>63</sup> Lischer, *End of Words*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Virtual community in this context refers to Facebook, and I draw primarily on Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015). See also Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012).

will no doubt discover, rural congregations exude a deep sense of belonging to one another and a commitment to the community uncommon in other contexts.<sup>65</sup>

### YOUR PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE

As the chief communicator within the local church, the pastor possesses the special ability to lead the congregation in the tricky matter of political differences by preaching on the theme of unity and reconciliation. While this theme is found throughout the Bible, with an abundance of passages that invite fruitful study, I have found the book of Ruth to be a fruitful basis for engaging the congregation in conversation around various divisions that we face in our church, in our homes, and in our community. Next to the Gospels' depictions of Jesus's love, the story of Ruth and Naomi may contain the most beautiful and most powerful expressions of love and unity found in the Bible. Ruth, upon facing the prospect of separation from Naomi, responds saying, "Where you go, I will go; Where you stay, I will stay; your people shall be my people.... Where you die, I will die."<sup>66</sup> Ruth the Moabite and Naomi the Israelite, upon the death of Naomi's two sons, share nothing in common culturally. In fact, their respective tribes consider the other to be their enemies.<sup>67</sup> Yet we discover a beautiful language of mutual love and unity between these two people despite the many forces that seek to separate them.

I imagine that Ruth and Naomi, the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law, spent much time together prior to the death of Ruth's husband, who was Naomi's son. Could it be possible that, through their many years of breaking bread each day and sweating in the

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<sup>65</sup> Much like the dynamics of a household, I found members of the rural church to engage in personal conflicts like a family as well as standing by one another regardless of any conflicts.

<sup>66</sup> Ruth 1:16–17 (NRSV).

<sup>67</sup> "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.... You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live." Deuteronomy 23:3, 6 (NRSV).

fields each season, they learned stories of one another deeper their cultural animosity previously? Perhaps Ruth and Naomi grasped and used language forged through their mutual humanity beyond and more powerful than their respective upbringings. Moreover, I dare to say that Naomi and Ruth even overcame their differing politics, which seems almost impossible in our current world. Rural townspeople take their politics seriously, far more earnestly than any academics I have encountered from my past. In my own experience, sympathy for differences of religion has been far more common in the rural context than sympathy and compassion for political differences.

As my friend from New York City said to me after the 2016 presidential election, “the Trump train rolls pretty strong where you live.” Over 74% of the people in Caldwell County voted for Donald Trump. I imagine that the people of my church were no exception. They probably mirrored the voting percentage of our county. Someone like me, a first-generation Korean-American immigrant, may be tempted to conclude that the people of my church and I share nothing in common given these statistics. However, Holy Scripture and my personal experience inform me otherwise. Although I cannot understand why or how members in my church and people in my county can get on that “Trump train,” I do undoubtedly know that I love the people of my church, and that they love me and my family.

Indeed, my connection to the people of my church has been fundamental to who I have become. As Lischer insightfully observes, the preacher interprets the Bible “on location [with] those who consider themselves active players in its drama.”<sup>68</sup> I am fully convinced that my life, my family, and my ministry have been healed and blessed by the

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<sup>68</sup> Lischer, *End of Words*, 54.

collective Christ-like loving witness of Trinity UMC in Caldwell County, where so many see the world very differently from how I see it. I cannot imagine all of me without all of them, as the story of my Christian journey would be made incomprehensible without all of their stories. I trust that the members of my church would feel and believe the same way about me and my family despite our political differences. Hence, we must continually remind ourselves of this redemptive connection that we share in the Gospel of Jesus, which far surpasses the perceived differences of our temporary politics. Such reconciliatory communication must be named weekly from the pulpit while being lived out in daily relationships.

Ultimately, the preacher, following the example of Jesus, guides his flock toward a “radical re-reading of the Scripture in support of a radical new truth.”<sup>69</sup> In the beginning, I am sure, Ruth and Naomi knew their respective social norms and attempted to practice the cultural laws that prevented their love for one another. But circumstances brought these two vastly different people together in a particular place for a particular time, which provided the opportunity for compassionate understanding and mutual transformation. Similarly, the preacher’s task is to provide opportunities for congregants to re-read their lives and their place in the world in light of life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, far above and beyond the news channels and newspapers that shape and form their worlds. We can no longer view the world, including our politics, from a dualistic perspective of “either–or,” for we are not binary creatures. Dualistic thinking, because of its simplicity, lacks the capacity to address our intimate questions and deepest longings, diminishes the awesomeness of our God, and erodes the beauty of God’s image in us.

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<sup>69</sup> Lischer, *End of Words*, 51.



When we allow our political differences to become the dominate narrative, taking precedence over our commitment to community, our connection to God becomes distorted and our relationships with one another become destructive. To be sure, these lessons and opportunities for reconciliation need to be communicated lovingly and consistently from the pulpit and other forms of communication from the church. In so doing, the church dares to imagine a future that might be lived differently, progressing from the conventional binary thinking of the “either–or” to the transcendent reality of the “both–and.”<sup>70</sup>

### THE POETICS OF TESTIMONY

As we engage in such difficult conversations from the pulpit and other mediums of communication, especially controversial dialogue about politics, writer Rebecca Chopp may be able to offer us some wisdom through a type of public discourse she calls the “poetics of testimony.”<sup>71</sup> Through the “poetics of testimony,” we can enter into an ethos of cultivating compassion for those who believe and see differently from us, while reimagining and embodying a new public space where the unique textures of our stories and the particularities of our perspectives can be shared and valued. Here in this space, we dare to imagine a future that might be lived differently, progressing from the conventional binary thinking of the “either–or” to the transcendent realities of the “both–and.”

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<sup>70</sup> This reality of the “both–and” cannot and will not disregard sins and evils that exist in our politics and in our world, for reconciliation requires that we be truthful.

<sup>71</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, “Reimagining Public Discourse” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 103 (March 1980): 40.

As we explicitly acknowledge our differences and divisions in our preaching and other forms of pastoral communication, we work to always hold our thoughts about the other more gently as we seek to practice reconciliatory communication. To be sure, we will also need to provide space and time for intentional connections that foster the journey toward mutual understanding, while always trusting God's church to be the place for creations of redemptive community in the midst of so many divisions. The overarching message of unity that bridges any and all gaps that exists between God's people will always center around our Christian claim that Jesus is Lord.

Early on, serving as a young pastor, I stayed up countless nights discerning how I could bring about reconciliation between various people by reframing their differences and rearranging their schedules. I finally came to the realization that nothing I did could really change the specific differences between these people. Instead, I recognized that the divergence between various people could best be bridged by emphasizing the greater strength of all that we held in common, over the things that seemed to put us in opposition to each other. In retrospect, this message seems easy and simple. After all, Jesus continuously preached and taught on the unifying truth of God's kingdom rather than the particularities of all the division in all of us. Here, the "poetics of testimony" that Chopp describes can become the very foundation of reconciliation.

In addition to the political divisions I described in the previous section, I have discovered two other common divisions that must be addressed through reconciliatory communication. These both center on congregational care: the divide between those inside and those outside the church, and the demographic divide between young and old. I group these two divisions together as care for those inside the church tends to focus on

the older generation, while care for those outside the church tends to focus on a younger generation of people that we wish to receive into our church.

Both the younger and older generations in the church tend to find it difficult to communicate and connect with the other. The younger generation, for their part, finds it difficult to navigate the different language and values held by the older generation. Conversely, the older generation fears that they possess little of value to offer to future generations. However, I find that many of these perceived disconnections can be bridged given enough space and time. As these supposedly divergent groups engage in treasured traditions and shared habits, like weekly worship, small group studies, potluck meals, and mission outreach, mutuality becomes far more prominent than disconnections. For this reason, the church may represent the last institution that offers something that still resonates to multi-generations of people, bringing families together using language that stretches far beyond our own time. Mutual language love, service, hope, sacrifice, and forgiveness, proclaimed and lived within the life of the church, provides the common and perennial rootedness which bridges the gap of difference and connects various people of different stories.

As we continue to discern the unifying truth about God in the midst of the worshipping congregation, the pastor will do well to “pay close attention to the living texts of the people of God” in the ambiguity of the lives we live under the unambiguous claim of God’s reign.<sup>72</sup> In so doing, the church can be the community it is called to be, one that affords the space and time where diverse people can come together for the

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<sup>72</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 70.

simple purpose of proclaiming Jesus as Lord of all, a proclamation that bridged their vast differences, subordinating these to a common purpose.

## CONTINUING EDUCATION

The preceding sections of this chapter addressed the role of preaching in cultivating unity in a congregation. While this is crucial part of the pastor's task as preacher, especially in our current context, another task is just as important: encouraging the congregation's Christian maturation. According to Howard Hanchey, many adults drop out of church because "their knowledge of God doesn't keep pace with the reality of their adult lives."<sup>73</sup> Such disconnection presents one of the biggest challenges for any church, including small rural churches. Part of the work of Christian maturation is setting ourselves to the task of "broadening our childhood and adolescent understandings of God" in ways that provide a faithful response to the doubts and questions we will certainly face in our adult lives.<sup>74</sup> In light of our own need, as preachers, for continuing education, we can fall into the trap of treating the pulpit and small group settings as advanced seminary classes, which results in alienating those who need to learn the most in order to mature in the Christian life. In order to evangelize in a post-Christian world, the church and its preacher must first find ways to "communicate the gospel in its most basic form."<sup>75</sup> In this way, preachers become the resident theologians of the church in order to enable the congregation to speak about Jesus Christ in "words and images that connect with life."<sup>76, 77</sup> Because such preaching and communication can occur only

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<sup>73</sup> Howard Hanchey, *From Survival to Celebration: Leadership for the Confident Church* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1994), 88.

<sup>74</sup> Hanchey, *From Survival to Celebration*, 88.

<sup>75</sup> Ben Johnson, *New Day New Church* (Decatur: CTS Press, 1995), 33.

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, *New Day New Church*, 41.

<sup>77</sup> See chapter 5, which explores the need for pastors to lead small groups and teach Sunday school.

within relationships built on trust, we must minister to those in our congregations with loving intentionality and sustained patience.

Second, the preacher must educate and guide their congregation and community about how to discern and share information that they encounter in the virtual community.<sup>78</sup> More than ever, I am convicted that my role as preacher must extend beyond discerning the truth about the words in the Bible to correctly differentiating and understanding facts from falsehood in what we see, read, and hear in the world. Here, the lessons I have drawn from Meredith Gould's *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News* have been vital. I have learned to teach specific techniques on how to conduct ourselves as Christian disciples in the virtual world, consistent with expectations about how we should behave in the physical world. I have found that small group sessions especially useful, during which we focus on how to effectively write and read online content, manage online conflict, and share best practices for digital communication. The aim of such virtual community is to provide another means for communicating reconciliation, and not yet another self-justifying silo.

And much like our other small groups, which meet in a physical space, this small group focused on virtual community seeks to maintain mutual accountability as to how we conduct ourselves in our virtual community. "Reconciliation cannot occur apart from truth-telling," and so permission to acknowledge and correct one another must be explicitly stated and agreed upon from the beginning of our time together.<sup>79</sup> This measure of group accountability is critical. Indeed, I often discover that many people, despite their best intentions, generally struggle to adequately discern the appropriate tone for their

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<sup>78</sup> Virtual community in this context refers to Facebook.

<sup>79</sup> Lischer, *End of Words*, 145.

online communication, to a degree far beyond what they find with communication in the physical world. Our virtual community can thus become an instrument for redemptive connections that build grace-filled community, and not another way of vilifying and objectifying the other.

Finally, the virtual community serves to provide an intentional space for people to encounter one another face-to-face, and to listen and share in the presence of one another. Radosevic warns that the modern manifestation of written words, through means of technology, robs us of our ability to be “truly intimate.”<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the modern use of written words on the internet limits our ability to converse in person, while allowing people to inflict casual harm without much discernment. In this way, private bias and personal assumptions often fill the information gap between communications. In contrast, face-to-face communication allows participants to “co-create the story” in real time, allowing reciprocal relationships to discern and learn truth in community.<sup>81</sup> Communication from the pulpit and in the virtual world must inevitably lead to a physical space that enables people to share stories, break bread, and worship together. The virtual community can never replace the embodied community. Instead, the virtual community must always lead toward a physical place of mutual service, sharing, and worship.

In all these endeavors, we must continually seek to learn the language and stories of one another, especially those pertaining to topics that seek to divide us. Therefore, we continuously encourage and practice personal engagements with one another to foster redemptive relationships and nurture reconciliatory communication as we seek God’s

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<sup>80</sup> Tracy Radosevic, “Facebook or Face-to-Face,” originally published as a “Scholarly Musing” Constant Contact Email for NBS, December 2013.

<sup>81</sup> Radosevic, “Facebook or Face-to-Face.”

truth in our lives. In small rural churches, the preacher will certainly find far greater flexibilities in people's ability to gather in the churches, in people's homes, and community centers, compared to people in bigger cities. Opportunities for face-to-face dialogues will be far more accepted and welcomed among those who grew up together. Given these realities, the preacher of a small rural church may find herself at an advantage, precisely where many would see a disadvantage.

### WORSHIP MATTERS

By preaching and fostering opportunities for Christian education, the preacher can establish a clear theological identity for the church. Likewise, contextual preaching in the worship service connects the parishioners' faith with their weekly lives. Here, the preacher becomes the "nurturer of interpretive and transformative appropriations" of Christian texts in light of the contemporary situation.<sup>82</sup> This process will always be ongoing, as our cultural context will constantly change along with the church's faithful witness according to God's revelations to us. Surrounded by so many shifting and evolving variables, people will need constant reminders to help focus their attention and remind each other of the mission of the church. This anchor is communal worship.

On the very first day in the office for each of my small rural church appointments, I received multiple reports from lay leaders who shared the challenges of our local church—budget shortcomings, declines in attendance, conflicts between families, and costs of building maintenance. Notably, none of the lay leaders ever mentioned worship as a point of concern. Yet, I have discovered that the revitalization of worship may be the "single most important challenge the transitional congregation faces."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Hodgson, *Revisioning The Church*, 100.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *New Day New Church*, 71.

If we want people to take the church seriously, then we must “recapture the vision of church that stresses what it is that the church has to offer that cannot be readily found elsewhere, namely, salvation, transformation, and deep healing.”<sup>84</sup> Through worship, we must recover a sense of the presence of God in the life of the faith community. Only by means of such a recovery can God’s people counter the impression that the church is incidental, rather than “instrumental, to salvation.”<sup>85</sup> This means that worship represents the highlight of our weekly Christian discipleship, a place where we come to give witness, receive forgiveness, and be reminded of our call to discipleship. Despite this grand vision of transformative worship, attention to small details throughout the week will make a huge difference in preparing for the worship service. To this end, at each church, after a month of being present, a pastor should systematically review and carefully study the various components of the worship service, examining the quality of musicians, the accuracy of the bulletin, the flow of the order of worship, the atmosphere of the sanctuary, and the function of the ushers. Often, problems both large and small involving details that accompany the worship service will emerge from such review. The quality of the sermons matters so much, yet people often get distracted by various worship dysfunctions that take away from the listeners’ ability to hear, despite all the time and energy a pastor may have put into the sermon.

For example, one can often find places like the bathrooms, the hallway, the nursery to be in complete disarray, ranging from disruptive clutters to sanitation problems. These physical issues involving the church building shift people’s attention

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<sup>84</sup> Jason E. Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground: A Theology for Church Renewal* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 91.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.



from what goes on inside the sanctuary to the problems they observe outside the sanctuary. A heater's malfunction in December due to poor maintenance will surely diminish the preacher's ability to convey the message of the Gospel to those gathered in a cold sanctuary.

At one of the churches I have served, within the first few weeks of my appointment, I noticed a consistent lack of care regarding details related to the flow of the service. Bulletins were riddled with misspelled words, worship leaders did not pay attention, missing their cues to speak, and services chronically ran long, not because of the movement of the Holy Spirit, but due to unnecessary chatter during announcements and prayer concerns. Although I often find that members have a very high tolerance for these problems, I worry that these missteps indicate a lack of hospitality that will repulse new and nominal members, while slowly wearing out the patience of regular worshippers.

While the commitment to excellence I urge pastors to model for their congregations will always be important, we must also remember that the church is ultimately a place of "radical healing and holiness."<sup>86</sup> The church that responds to the felt needs of those both in the church and outside the church will offer a powerful witness to the gospel.<sup>87</sup> But this is not a purely rosy vision. Despite our best efforts to strive for excellence both inside and outside the worship space, mistakes will happen, and preachers will falter. Most importantly, through worship, the church's members embark on a "journey from brokenness to holiness" as worship reminds us to know ourselves as

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, *New Day New Church*, 33.

we are known by God.<sup>88</sup> God often uses worship to reveal to God's people their deepest wounds and redirect them toward the perfect healer in Jesus, who turns our past brokenness toward restoration for the future. Ultimately, then, the commitment to excellence in Christian worship is not an end in itself, but a means of welcoming this healing into our midst.

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<sup>88</sup> Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground*, 89.

## 5. LEADERSHIP

As a child, I frequently hid under my desk in class or behind the bushes during recess because of my anxiety and fear of other people. I hardly need to say that I did not adjust well to new environments or relate well to unfamiliar faces. Then, shortly before I started fourth grade, our family moved from South Korea to the United States. This unexpected trauma forced me to make a fundamental decision—would I allow my fear to turn into despair, or would I use this fear to adapt, learn, and grow? My leadership journey began at that moment nearly three decades ago, when I landed at the airport in Lubbock, TX. Since then, it has taken me places I never expected to go. As Eugene Peterson plainly states, “there is no church without leadership.”<sup>89</sup> Although I shudder to think of my various failures and follies over years of leadership, a profound sense of gratitude overwhelms me as I recount the lessons learned and forgiveness received from all those who taught me and allowed me to be a leader and a minister. And now, as I continue on my journey as a leader, I strive to strengthen my resolve to lead by duplicating leaders, take bold risks, inspire Christ-centered resolve, and persevere toward a more fruitful and faithful future.

This chapter explores the theme of pastoral leadership in the context of a small rural church. As the introduction to this thesis suggested, many of the resources offered to future pastors by their seminaries and the Methodist church are ill-suited for the realities of pastoring a small rural church. The reflections I offer in this chapter seek to address this lack. While I am certain the insights offered here are equally applicable to other contexts, they are rooted in the lessons I have learned in serving small rural

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<sup>89</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 15.

congregations. The chapter begins, then, with the importance of learning the history of a congregation, studying the past in order to serve most effectively and faithfully in the present. It then offers seven brief lessons that I have learned in my experience as the pastor of rural Methodist churches.

### KNOW THE PEOPLE AND THEIR NEEDS

From time to time, the church finds itself in a season where “it is hard for the church to remember God’s resurrection power.”<sup>90</sup> Nowhere has this seemed truer, in my own pastoral experience, than in issues related to church finances and growth, or the lack thereof. During my tenure in rural churches, I have typically found myself sitting with the chair of the finance committee within the first few weeks, listening to them share the bleak realities of the church’s finances. Shortly after these financial updates, I would meet with membership secretary, who would disclose the disappointing lack of membership and baptisms over the last several years. To make matters worse, the chair of the trustees would provide a report on a church building that needed many renovations, which would require every last penny in the reserve bank account.

In the beginning, I must admit, I wanted to ignore these depressing numbers. But, as Lovett Weems wisely counsels, we need to look carefully at such numbers because “there is a difference in intent and impact.”<sup>91</sup> Neglecting real data is likely to lead to delusions about the present problems, resulting in ineffective solutions. Regardless of how bleak the outlook might be, the pastor must accurately monitor the numbers in order to grasp the church’s history, while at the same time carefully assessing its current reality.

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<sup>90</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 20.

<sup>91</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 132.

We do well to remember that administration with integrity, honesty, efficiency, and compassion is itself an act of worship, a mode of ministry that flows from the “church’s ancient concern for faithful distribution of the gifts that have been given to God.”<sup>92</sup> To this end, I recommend that the pastor, within the first few months of her tenure, read carefully and filter through existing church documents, pictures, files, and newsletters. All the while, with every chance afforded, she should talk to the lay leaders of the church. In such conversations, the pastor will not need to say much, but instead, should listen to the people tell the stories of their church.

As John Calvin characterizes one aspect of Christ’s ministry, Christ acts as the King who will remain the “eternal protector and defender of his church,” securing it in “perpetuity.”<sup>93</sup> In obedience to Christ, therefore, the pastor should never leave the church destitute, but is called to “govern, nourish, sustain [the church], keep it in his care, and help it toward victory over the world.”<sup>94</sup> Yet in the face of the apparently endless needs of the church and its people, the pastor can easily fall into the trap of imposing her will instead of protecting the people, or leaving God’s people behind rather than remaining present with the people while together discerning God’s vision for the church. No matter the season, and no matter how overwhelming the church’s needs may seem, the pastor must “avoid a leadership based more on the leader’s goals and values than on the actual needs [of the people] in a particular time and place crying for faithful attention.”<sup>95</sup> Only

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<sup>92</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 88.

<sup>93</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.15, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 497.

<sup>94</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.15, 499, 500.

<sup>95</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 18.

by exercising a mode of leadership attuned to the real needs of the community can the pastor truly serve Christ the King.

For us United Methodists, within the Wesleyan tradition, “leadership begins with people.”<sup>96</sup> Accordingly, a holistic concern for the children of God provided the “starting point for leadership decisions and actions” for both John and Charles Wesley.<sup>97</sup> Hence, for the early Methodist movement, theology and leadership did not occur in an abstract vacuum, but was closely attuned to the context of the daily lives of God’s people. For this reason, As Allender puts it, the Wesleyan pastor strives to connect the people to a wider story, thereby establishing meaningful individual and corporate identities that lead to a communal life of sharing and healing.<sup>98</sup> In this way, the pastor plays a role of a narrator who orients and shapes people’s lives with rules and boundaries that include inward matters of morality as well as external necessities. In other words, the pastor instructs people to live well and live well with others, while addressing the people’s real daily needs. Freeman similarly depicts one of the main roles of the pastor as the one anointed to perform rituals, “enacting the reconciling promise of God’s faithfulness,” while at the same time attending to the ever-growing spiritual and physical needs of people.<sup>99</sup>

As an ordained elder in the UMC, my weekly task as a local church minister follows the paradigm of the role described by Freeman and Allender. I narrate the stories of my people and interpret symbols around us, all the while framing them within the boundaries of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I baptize and administer

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>98</sup> Dan B. Allender, *Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without: Why You Need a Prophet, a Priest, and a King* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2006), 191.

<sup>99</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.15, 393.

communion to remind individuals of their connection to one another and their place in the corporate story of God's relationship to human communities. This also means that I must take seriously the needs of others near and far. The corporate story of our lives with God necessitates attention to our neighbors who live with hunger, sickness, and loneliness. As a pastor, I constantly remind my people of their new identity as God's holy people who are called to pay attention and serve intentionally to alleviate suffering around us. This identity involves discipleship just as much as it involves prayer and worship. The vocation of the pastor, then, has its identity in Jesus Christ, "who makes [us] into a new race, a holy nation, the people of God."<sup>100</sup> And, following Christ's own example of leadership, the pastor most faithfully and effectively leads by genuinely being with the people. In the next section, I explore one challenge to this type of leadership, as well as some simple but genuine solutions to the challenge.

#### CONFLICTS CAN FIX PROBLEMS AND OFFER POSSIBILITIES

Being with people is not always easy. Growing up as a pastor's kid, I saw the inner workings of the local church and heard my father speak of different leadership dynamics within the congregation. At the time, however, I failed to grasp the full extent of the broken relationships and procedural dysfunctions in most local churches, especially within the rural church. The normal childhood formation, which most of us undergo, leads us to wrongly assume that healthy relationship entails the absence of conflicts and disagreements. Nowhere does such tendency toward artificial harmony show itself more than in mission-driven nonprofit organizations, and most notably in churches. People who work in those organizations, especially within the rural church, tend to hold the

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<sup>100</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, "Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church" (*American Baptist Quarterly* 31/4, Winter 2012), 399.

misguided notion that they are not allowed to be frustrated or disagree with one another.<sup>101</sup>

Anyone who leads God’s people will inevitably face dissenting voices, but leaders cannot run away from this challenge, because—paradoxically—“dissonance is an integral part of harmony.”<sup>102</sup> A great leader “cuts against the grain of conventional wisdom,” demonstrating the courage to go against the crowd and lead not only from consensus, but also from the front when those following resist.<sup>103</sup> Jesus leads not to please us, but to transform us. In turn, the pastor must continue striving to become a “transformational leader” who raises the sights of the followers to adapt and change in order to reach out and influence people around them.<sup>104</sup> To be sure, such bold leadership always encounters resistance, because individuals inevitably “resist the pain and dislocation that comes with changing.”<sup>105</sup>

Still, the faithful pastor makes room for various conflicts and dissonances within the church. In doing so, the pastor’s aim is to provide space and time for people to express their concerns, fears, and wounds. Such expression will prove to be critical if the church wishes to move from their past toward a new future. During much of my time in church leadership, I have had to address to heal Christians who were raised to believe that churches are not safe and hospitable places to express doubts. As others have also

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<sup>101</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 44.

<sup>102</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 6.

<sup>103</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 22.

<sup>104</sup> Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 273.

<sup>105</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1994), 30.



observed, these young Christians seem to struggle far less with their faith in Christ than with their experience of church.<sup>106</sup>

Conflicts may emerge at every step along this journey. As the pastor leads the rural church to redefine what faithful witness means in their new context by choosing different modes and forms of ministry, we will certainly encounter doubters and naysayers who will dismiss this change of path as us simply giving up on our present church. Such change always involves “a recalibration and a reassessing of attitude and the old, tired ways of proceeding,” which are hard for any of us to shake off.<sup>107</sup> As humans, we tend to become most comfortable with what is most familiar to us. So, as pastors, we must frame our ministerial decisions to allow people in our church and its leaders to see this different path as a new beginning that will be birthed by our march toward the end goal. This mode of leadership is marked by an apocalyptic imagination that “draws us way from perceived present despair and into the promise of God’s sustaining future.”<sup>108</sup> This participation in Christ’s prophetic ministry can open us to seeing differently by expanding our consciousness and imagination and to proclaim God’s words in a timely way.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, the prophetic role of a pastor entails a call to “keep hope alive in nearly hopeless situations,” offering a bridge between “the struggles of this world and the joys of the world to come.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2011), 27. Kinnaman later remarks, “We have not provided a clear, compelling, prophetic voice to answer the issues that cause young people to stay ‘stuck’” (100).

<sup>107</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 121.

<sup>108</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, class PowerPoint presentation (Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, August 16, 2017).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Lischer, *The Preacher King*, 30, 17.

Prayer and accountability partners will be necessary to maintain encouragement and remain on this narrow and difficult path, full of resistance and confrontations. Furthermore, to prevent complacency and avoid blind spots, it is important for prophetically attuned pastors to constantly seek out and learn from those beyond their immediate setting. While the pastor must keep hope alive in all manners of trials and tribulations, she cannot do this important work alone. Every church leader will need partners in ministry, both near and far, to avoid trying to bear the unbearable burden that comes with being the sole curator of hope. Indeed, even for those of us who insist that pastoral leadership consists of work *with* the people, and not merely *for* the people, the temptation to bear the burdens alone persists. But, as the next section suggests, to give into this temptation risks making pastoral leadership into something pathological.

#### TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF TO TAKE CARE OF OTHERS

Being a first-generation immigrant, I learned to adapt and adjust to the desires and needs of those around me in order to survive and thrive in foreign contexts. Such skills of observation and propitiation served me well. That is, until I began to lead as a minister in the United Methodist Church. Beginning in my first year of full-time ministry, I recognized the dangerous traps of leading to fulfill other people's expectations. As Eugene Peterson has noted, one reason many pastors become so exhausted by the demands of ministry is that they "enter ministry with little basis for it other than meeting people's needs."<sup>111</sup> Subsequently, I constantly struggled against my fundamental desire to be liked and appreciated by others. As I have had to learn, if such longings are not

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<sup>111</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 60.

graciously acknowledged and properly redirected, they will surely result in disappointment and burnout by the pastor.

The story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 illustrates the disastrous consequences of a leader's attempts to placate their followers. As cliché as it may sound, over and over again, even the best of leaders falls onto the traps of pleasing people that voids difficult and necessary truth about our shortcomings and sins. In the end, everyone suffers, finding such arrangement of artificial agreements to be unsustainable and resentful. Elijah, exhausted and disappointed, simply cries out, "O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."<sup>112</sup>

Not even Jesus was able to please his own disciples, let alone everyone he encountered. A leader should never be "a celebrity seeking popularity."<sup>113</sup> This does not mean that the pastor should not strive to develop genuine relationships, rooted in mutual affection and trust, with those she leads. Especially in rural churches, relational capital will empower pastoral ministries far more than strategic skills. But pastors simply cannot determine their own faithfulness and effectiveness based on how much they perceive others to like them.

Instead, an effective leader must consider how to run the race in order to "cross the finish line without the assistance of a stretcher."<sup>114</sup> So how do we, as pastors, stay off the proverbial stretcher? In a word, friendship. Eugene Peterson argues that, before all else, Christian leadership is first and foremost, "collegial."<sup>115</sup> The necessity of friendship cannot be overstated for pastors serving in rural churches who often find themselves in an

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<sup>112</sup> 1 Kings 19:4 (NRSV).

<sup>113</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership* (New Milford: Maggid Books, 2015), 137.

<sup>114</sup> Weems and Berlin, *Bearing Fruit*, 79.

<sup>115</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 48.

unfamiliar land with people vastly unlike those they knew before. The pastor will not be able to find any manuals or guidelines that provide step-by-step help for solving all the problems that face rural churches. The greatest resource, instead, will be friends that the pastor speaks with, prays with, and fellowships with. Personally, I connected with two other pastors who serve in similar rural churches within the western North Carolina. We utilized different technologies to meet virtually every two weeks to share prayer concerns, short devotions, and offer support for our respective needs for the season. Together, we helped one another discern effective and faithful solutions to pressing problems. The simple truth is that no one can complete this pastoral journey alone.

In addition to seeking support from others, wise leaders recognize the “difference between the hills and the flat areas in ministry.”<sup>116</sup> These cannot be run with the same intensity. One requires effort, while the other offers the opportunity for recovery. Perhaps the pastor can assume the rural church to be the easier and flatter path leading toward a different type of ministry that resembles the hills. But this attitude is pathological and hurts a pastor’s ministry in two ways. First, the pastor is sorely mistaken if she thinks that ministry in a small rural church is equivalent to flat, easy terrain, simply because the church she serves is small. Such an expectation can lead to disaster once the pastor recognizes the reality of the terrain she finds herself on. Second, if pastor thinks of the rural church as a steppingstone to some bigger and a better place, she risks alienating her congregation. The people in the congregation must know and see that their pastor plans to plant roots and stay a while in their land and within their lives. Nothing worth doing will be done in one season, and the pastor must be prepared to exercise patient leadership. As

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<sup>116</sup> Weems and Berlin, *Bearing Fruit*, 85.

Peterson advises, time and again, amid the challenges of the pastoral ministry, this divine, more-than-subjective calling requires significant pastoral perseverance.<sup>117</sup>

Lovett Weems calls on pastoral leaders to stay the course even when the work is challenging, for greatness “demands persistence,” and perseverance is the indispensable competency for lasting change.<sup>118</sup> Yet, as a young pastor, my predominant instincts were to seek short-term success and short-sighted gains so I could demonstrate my effectiveness to my superiors. So, every few months, as I continued to encounter small disappointments and micro setbacks, I would find myself doubting God’s presence in my church, loathing my perceived failures, and pondering whether I could better serve God and God’s people through a different vocation. What helped me most through these times was reaching out to my mentors and seasoned pastors, all of whom reminded me that leadership demands a “ferocious resolve, an almost stoic determination to do whatever needs to be done.”<sup>119</sup> My former superintendent, for instance, would often stress the importance of proactive patience—the need to wait for certain ministry fruits to come to bear while actively and consistently doing “the little things.”

Ultimately, the kind of leadership that has been shaped by the Wesleyan doctrine of holistic salvation is “characterized by hope.”<sup>120</sup> Only hope can serve as the sustainable fuel for lasting patience for any pastors in every ministry setting. At our best, “we combine responsiveness to God’s prior action and a commitment to hope” so that we

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<sup>117</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 15.

<sup>118</sup> Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Take the Next Step: Leading Lasting Change in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 143.

<sup>119</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 30.

<sup>120</sup> Kenneth L. Carder and Lacey C. Warner, *Grace to Lead: Practicing Leadership in the Wesleyan Tradition*, rev. ed. (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2016), 28.

remain resilient and persistent witnesses to a new and renewed future.<sup>121</sup> Without hope, the past will surely and easily succumb to disappointment, disillusionment, and even disdain for one's ministry and one's church. Instead, we must always remember that we never wait by ourselves, for "ours is a God who waits."<sup>122</sup> If God can wait, we can wait and wait with God for the coming of God's kingdom that will surely be should we pay close attention.

### ACCOUNTABILITY IS YOUR FRIEND

As a teenager, I remember eagerly anticipating the weekly family trip to the local Blockbuster store to pick our favorite movie for the weekend. Remember those brightly lit blue and yellow signs in your local neighborhood where people of all different ages congregated? You will no longer find a single Blockbuster store in the country.<sup>123</sup> So what happened? Do we as people no longer entertain ourselves with movies and video games at home in the twenty-first century? Of course, we do! The same desires for entertainment don't merely persist with U.S. consumers—such appetite for diversion grew. So why did Blockbuster declare bankruptcy? While our cravings for movies and video games grew, the methods by which we satisfied these demands changed: we shifted from an era of physical delivery to an era of digital platforms. And despite the changing of entertainment consumption, Blockbuster never adapted or adjusted to the shifting

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<sup>121</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 10.

<sup>122</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 113.

<sup>123</sup> Christopher Harress, "The Sad End of Blockbuster Video: The Onetime \$5 Billion Company Is Being Liquidated as Competition from Online Giants Netflix and Hulu Prove All Too Much for the Iconic Brand," *International Business Times*, December 5, 2013, <https://www.ibtimes.com/sad-end-blockbuster-video-onetime-5-billion-company-being-liquidated-competition-1496962>.

market. Why? Blockbuster was ultimately doomed by its fear of failing in new endeavors and lack of accountability to innovate.

Blockbuster's failure has lessons to teach the church. One of the greatest challenges in contemporary pastoral ministry is "having something more important to do in our ministry than simply offering love and service to our people."<sup>124</sup> There is no doubt that, in certain seasons, God's people desire their pastor to care for them like a mother hen does for her chicks. But people also crave discipline, boundaries, and accountability that help to provide the clarity necessary to accomplish a common goal. And there is no doubt that the church and its leaders will greatly benefit from the "conscious choice and discipline" that lead to greatness.<sup>125</sup> We must, however, always remember who Jesus called as his disciples, those whom many considered the wrong people on the bus. Likewise, we must remember how those disciples went about their business of radically inclusive ministry.

Fruitful churches, just like successful secular organizations, live and breathe in terms of accountability and results. Even well-intentioned members of a team need to be held accountable. Hence, the pastor will do well to create an atmosphere of accountability rather than playing the sole supervisory role of keeping everyone account as "peer-to-peer accountability is the primary and most effective source of accountability."<sup>126</sup> Collins advocates for an environment where "hardworking people would thrive and lazy workers would either jump or get thrown right off the bus."<sup>127</sup> Although effective leaders may shout "amen" to such a "rigorous culture" of discipline and consequences, the pastor

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<sup>124</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 22.

<sup>125</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 31.

<sup>126</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 54.

<sup>127</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 51.

must wrestle with the demographics of the people positioned for various leaderships in the church. By no means should Christians permit their leadership to be complacent or fruitless. But contrary to “great” companies, Jesus’ accounting of talents, progress, and results turn the world’s ideal of performance upside down. In Matthew 20, Jesus describes the people on his bus, a place where workers show up at different times producing uneven results. Yet, the landowner compensates equally, motivated by generosity rather than individual productivity.<sup>128</sup> Many more of Jesus’ parables challenge our basic and studied assumptions about what makes an organization great.

The pastor must continue to nurture and foster the qualities of “relentlessness, ceaselessness and constancy” as the church moves forward, facing new problems and inevitable setbacks and heartaches.<sup>129</sup> The pastor should formulate specific measurable goals with set time frames to keep the joys and crises of ministry in perspective. It is easy to lose perspective in periods of strife and decline. Our church needs to do a better job of communicating facts and metrics as we speak of our hopes and fears, journeying into the future together. Lastly, remember that accountability is a “selfless act, one rooted in...*love*. To hold someone accountable is to care about them enough to risk having them blame you for pointing out their deficiencies.”<sup>130</sup> And here the pastor must always remember that “there is no future without forgiveness, and there are no shortcuts to the future; forgiveness requires perseverance and patience and hope.”<sup>131</sup>

Accountability is a two-way street: it is just as important for the congregation to remain accountable to the pastor as it is for the pastor to remain accountable to the

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<sup>128</sup> Matthew 20:1–16 (NRSV).

<sup>129</sup> Weems, *Take the Next Step*, 151.

<sup>130</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 57.

<sup>131</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 82.



congregation. Two related temptations that arise for a pastor involve taking risks: either being unwilling to take necessary risks, or being so risky as to become reckless. Both threaten a pastor's ministry, though in different ways. And avoiding both temptations requires accountability to others,

I am naturally averse to taking risks and prone to over-examining data. It made sense, then, for me to major in economics in college, so I could ready myself for a life of investment banking upon graduation. To my great surprise, God instead called and equipped me to be a leader and a pastor in the United Methodist Church. Unlike banking, leadership—especially pastoral leadership—requires taking bold and necessary risks to go where God leads. “Good is the enemy of great,” and simply being a good pastor who makes calculable and marginal improvements at a particular church will never allow me to fully live into God's calling in my ministry.<sup>132</sup> I can never be completely satisfied by the current status quo, no matter how comfortable and profitable it might be, for the desire of God's heart is “immeasurably larger than our imaginations can conjure.”<sup>133</sup> Rather than settling for good enough, I must “take risks and lead changed lives rather than to do what comes naturally.”<sup>134</sup>

Taking risk is not the same thing, however, as being reckless. From my leadership experience in the rural church context, I have learned that taking risk means nothing less than shifting specific ways of doing ministries. No positive transformation can occur without such disruption, because disruption is an “essential component of organizational

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<sup>132</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 1.

<sup>133</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 28.

<sup>134</sup> William H. Willimon, *Bishop: The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 67.

innovation.”<sup>135</sup> This emphasis on disruption can be distorted, though. Too often, I have heard the language of “faithfulness” being abused in order to justify and explain obvious missteps and gross neglect in areas of ministry. Indeed, Gregory Jones warns that “mediocrity masquerading as faithfulness” is equally problematic for both congregations and pastoral leaders.”<sup>136</sup> The fear of failure looms real for all leaders, including for young confident pastors who begin with lofty dreams of transforming the world. But risks, and the mistakes that accompany all risks, are inevitable. The truth remains that we grow the most from our worst mistakes. This is why “if [we] lack the courage to fail, [we] will lack the courage to succeed.”<sup>137</sup> Knowing the difference, though, requires listening to others. In the next section, I explore one way for a pastor to foster accountability in her ministry, namely sharing the work of leadership with others.

#### EVERYONE NEEDS HELP SO DUPLICATE LEADERS

An ancient African proverb teaches, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” In the short term, leading alone can be faster and can make it easier to accomplish small goals. In the long run, however, leading alone results in lapse of judgment and eventual burnout. If any pastor hopes to continue their journey as the leader of a rural congregation, they must do a better job of mentoring and duplicating fruitful and faithful leaders around them. My ultimate longevity as an effective leader will depend on my ability as a pastor to “create multiple leadership” that involves others outside of my own immediate leadership.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*, 72.

<sup>136</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 23.

<sup>137</sup> Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*, 310.

<sup>138</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 67.

This means that the leader, especially the young pastor, must fight the “Western Myth” of self-sufficiency.<sup>139</sup> Contrary to our natural instincts, the team of the right people, including the leader, cannot be the “larger-than-life heroes” we place on a pedestal, or “plastic people” who blindly submit to their leaders.<sup>140</sup> In my experience, most lay leaders of a rural church want to be identified for their gifts and graces. Too many leaders falsely assume people to be lazy when, far more often than not, people want their time and their resources to be used for worthy efforts. Excellent pastors are gifted at “calling laity to vital discipleship and helping them live their vocations faithfully in the world.”<sup>141</sup> So the leader must be a talent scout as well as a commander. In filling both roles, the effective pastor acts to recognize and recruit talent to equip and enable the whole body to accomplish a mission together so that the church can be an instrument of God’s reign in the world now.<sup>142</sup>

Pope Paul VI rightly states that the divine institution of the Holy Church is “ordered and governed with a wonderful diversity.”<sup>143</sup> Likewise, the prophet Joel envisioned a time when “the Spirit would be poured out on all.”<sup>144</sup> This vision of the church as a community in which all members are called and empowered to actualize Christ’s reign is not simply a future reality. Rather, it has definite implications for the present. It means that the laity exists not simply to be served and led by the clergy, but that by virtue of their baptism, “every Christian shares in Christ’s threefold office as

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<sup>139</sup> Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground*, 50.

<sup>140</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 28, 43.

<sup>141</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 22.

<sup>142</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, class PowerPoint presentation (Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, August 17, 2017).

<sup>143</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, §§31-35, in *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, new rev. ed. (New York: Costello, 2004), 16.

<sup>144</sup> Freeman, *Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church*, 397.

prophet, priest, and king.”<sup>145</sup> And so the pastor also must affirm the universality of the roles of prophet, priest, and king not only for clergy but also for laity, who “consecrate the world itself to God.”<sup>146</sup>

Leaders must trust their environment and the people within their context as faith in God should lead us to have faith in people, for “God’s image is in each of us, and we have to learn how to discern it.”<sup>147</sup> Power is “all around [me] to draw upon, but it is rarely raw, rarely visible” so I must intentionally place my trust and reputation on “seemingly ordinary people in familiar situations.”<sup>148</sup> Doing this will mean “giving the work back to the people” and allowing people to fail and learn as they bear the weight on their own responsibilities.<sup>149</sup>

The pastor, living into her leadership role, handles crisis, exercising order over the chaos while leading the people with “contagious optimism and brutal honesty.”<sup>150</sup> The pastor acts to recognize and recruit gifted servants within the community to equip and enable the whole body to accomplish a mission together. No doubt that the pastor will often make the final decision while also bearing the burden of its consequences as the pastor is “anointed to govern the people as God’s personal regent.”<sup>151</sup> As a pastor, I must exercise my leadership by compassionately communicating to the present challenges and decline of our aging congregation while, at the same time, expressing optimism for what we can do together to be faithful witnesses.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>146</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, §§31-35, 17.

<sup>147</sup> Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership*, 149.

<sup>148</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 10.

<sup>149</sup> Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answer*, 142.

<sup>150</sup> Allender, *Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without*, 189.

<sup>151</sup> Freeman, *Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church*, 393.

Jim Collins offers a surprising lesson about how to transform a declining organization and guide it toward greatness: “the leader must first position the right people in the right places before determining the appropriate vision and future destination of that company.”<sup>152</sup> With the “right people on the bus,” an organization can change directions and methods, maintaining flexibility to accomplish whatever goal it envisions.<sup>153</sup> Conversely, the wrong people on the bus will ultimately derail and sabotage all destinations and any visions. While Proverbs warns “where there is no vision, the people perish,” Collins cautions, “Great vision without great people is irrelevant.”<sup>154, 155</sup> Tom Berlin puts this into a biblical perspective, writing, “Pruning is as much a part of a fruitful harvest as is planting.”<sup>156</sup> The “right people” must embody a “paradoxical mix” of personal humility and professional will.<sup>157</sup> Ultimately, successful transitions and transformations require the leader to answer the question of who to bring on to the team before answering the question of what the team can accomplish together.

#### SMALL THINGS WILL LEAD TO BIG THINGS

During the Lewis Fellow conference, Lovett Weems spoke to a small group of pastors about his upcoming meeting with the bishops of the United Methodist Church, noting, “we are gathering to make some decisions before those decisions are made for us.” The UMC found itself on the precipice as it faced the tangible repercussions from over four decades of numerical decline. The union of The Evangelical United Brethren Church and The Methodist Church in 1968 had not only failed to propel our new

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<sup>152</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 41.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Proverbs 29:18 (KJV).

<sup>155</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 42.

<sup>156</sup> Weems and Berlin, *Bearing Fruit*, 10.

<sup>157</sup> Collins, *Good to Great*, 39.

denomination from good to great, but we had “deluded [ourselves] into thinking that we didn’t have to worry about fruit.”<sup>158</sup> Leadership “is about change,” and the UMC needed to find ways “to change to meet new situations.”<sup>159</sup>

As the pastor strategizes and initiates necessary changes, the leader also considers the capacity of the people to internally negotiate changes, since “radical change can impose more stress on an organization than it can bear and end up destroying what makes it viable.”<sup>160</sup> So simply getting to know the people will be as important as knowing what changes to make within the context of the rural church. The pastor’s role is an “odd interplay of coach, poet, visionary, and therapist,” one whose task it is to disrupt and disturb the comfort and complacency of routine and status quo.<sup>161</sup> The pastor plays the dual role, then, of both providing “order and stability” and using “symbol to unnerve and reveal.”<sup>162</sup> Therefore, the pastor’s function involves calling the people to “covenant fidelity.”<sup>163</sup> Even though changes may lead to more heartaches in the short-run, the pastor may take heart, for when people discover and experience the beauty of an excellent Christian congregation, “they are drawn to reorder their lives to become part of it.”<sup>164</sup>

Eugene Peterson writes that “no pastor rises much higher than being a butler.”<sup>165</sup> I experienced this truth acutely during my first appointment as a senior pastor of a rural church. Within my first week at this church, I began surveying the physical layout of the building. I noticed countless areas that looked neglected, in need of repair and cleaning.

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<sup>158</sup> Willimon, *Bishop*, 50.

<sup>159</sup> Weems, *Take the Next Step*, 13.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>161</sup> Allender, *Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without*, 195.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Freeman, *Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church*, 393.

<sup>164</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 21.

<sup>165</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 35.

Above all, I noticed a foul stench coming from all of the bathrooms. At the time, the church could not afford to hire people to clean the physical facilities, so the lay people volunteered to clean the church. Unfortunately, the people were doing a very poor job of maintaining their church.

During our first church council meeting, I asked if I could be one of the volunteers to clean the church, especially the bathrooms. The lay leaders all happily agreed to allow me to do this work. Every Monday and Friday, I cleaned those bathrooms as if my ministry depended on it. I made sure that the bathrooms looked and smelled like those you'd find in any five-star hotel. After six months, the church finances improved, and we were in a position to hire people to clean our church. But all of us unanimously decided to continue cleaning our own church, as that weekly activity became a time of fellowship for the dozen or so folks who gathered weekly to do the work. Several lay people asked me to relinquish my cleaning duties after a while, as they did not want their pastor to be the church janitor. But I held on to those bathroom duties all three years of my tenure at the church not only because I liked the work, but also in order to set an example for others to serve and witness. In doing so, I believe that I was able to embody the sort of leadership Lacey Warner describes when she writes that leadership is “a quality of being as much as or more than doing.”<sup>166</sup> In a sense, what mattered about my bathroom duties wasn't so much that the bathroom was finally receiving the thorough cleaning it had long needed, though this was certainly important. What mattered more was that I demonstrated, in my actions even more than in my words, that service to others

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<sup>166</sup> Carder and Warner, *Grace to Lead*, xxiii.

in small matters is how God will use the church to achieve the truly momentous things God has in store for us.

I cannot help but marvel at God's bold and mysterious plans to use the church to transform the world. Statistical probability could never have predicted that a first-generation Korean-American immigrant would come to serve a small local church in Caldwell County, North Carolina. Yet the people of that community embraced my presence and trusted my leadership for three years. In turn, this relationship demanded that I be increasingly more courageous to lead these good people and to challenge them so that they could serve as effective leaders in their own contexts. May God empower all pastors to take bold risks with full assurance that God will always walk beside us in uncertain terrains as we follow God. I pray that our churches and its pastor will persevere together through the highs and lows of ministry, always keeping our eyes fixed on the mission to share the Good News of Jesus and to make disciples.



## 6. MISSION POSSIBLE

The preceding chapters have discussed four practices by which the pastor of a small rural church can faithfully and effectively minister to the particularities of a rural congregation: embracing the call in its particularities, (2) cultivating the habit of active visitation, (3) establishing a broad context for preaching that goes beyond the pulpit, (4) and re-envisioning leadership as a cooperative venture. All of these practices, though they have real implications for a church's outward-facing ministries, focus primarily on the inner life of the church. In this chapter, I turn to the practice of reorienting the church's mission to the world, though as will quickly become evident, this practice has a profound effect on the inner life of the congregation as well. I share the insights I gained from looking at a rural church's mission with new eyes, which enabled me to recognize both unexpected needs and resources to address those needs. As I will show, its mission to the world represents yet another instance in which the apparent "shortcomings" of a small rural church are in fact strengths and, indeed, gifts of the Spirit to both the church and the world.

As it faces a precipitous decline of both membership and finances, the local church can easily come to see the enactment of its mission as a future luxury to be pursued once numbers improve, rather than as a present necessity that enables future transformation. However, the pastor must remember that, regardless of the numerical and spiritual reality of a particular congregation, the church is always "called to be faithful and fruitful."<sup>167</sup> Especially in a season of discouraging trends, the pastor must be the one to remind the congregation that God is "deeply interested in all of us," especially when

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<sup>167</sup> Weems and Berlin, *Bearing Fruit*, 19.

that congregation sees itself in institutional decline, and that the daily signs of God's care are clearly evident in our church and in our world.<sup>168</sup> How, then, can the mission of the church guide its people to faithfully and fruitfully live into the fullness of their discipleship when resources look insufficient and energy seems invisible? As the following sections will show, the answer may be closer than it seems.

### YOU'VE GOT WHAT YOU NEED

A simple but profound adage says, "If everything is important, nothing is." This remark contains an important truth for those pastors hoping to take concrete steps toward enacting a sustainable and contextual mission, especially those with a declining congregation.<sup>169</sup> Both laity and clergy, particularly in the midst of uncertainty and fear, tend to wear themselves out trying to do too many things in a last ditch effort to become vital, while at the same time lacking any sense of cohesiveness and direction.<sup>170</sup> So, in times of trouble, the pastor must constantly ask the question, "What does fruitfulness look like in *our* context?" The question cannot simply mean "Are we doing more?" Rather, it must mean "Are we *accomplishing* more?" The church's mission is not to be busy and numerous, but to be fruitful. As Father Gregory Boyle learned in his mission field, "our choice is not to focus on the narrow, but to narrow our focus."<sup>171</sup> Such focused approach in mission, especially for people in a declining rural church, will reduce the many burdens that drain the energy of the remaining few, while providing a season of needed reexamination and rest. But what happens when the act of reexamination draws a pastor's attention to a depressing reality?

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<sup>168</sup> Hanchey, *From Survival to Celebration*, 45.

<sup>169</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 119.

<sup>170</sup> Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground*, 49.

<sup>171</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 31.

When examining bleak financial figures and hearing sad stories from the recent past, the pastor can easily fall into a state of emotional gloom and a mentality of scarcity in all aspects of mission. Here, the pastor needs to reclaim her sense of purpose and to receive “new eyes to see the abundance of God’s grace, new ears to behold the beauty and excellence of God’s word.”<sup>172</sup> In my experience the problem is often not so much a shortage of economic resources as it is a “lack of faithful interpretation, of vision, and ambition for the gospel, and of willingness to engage in the accountability and support.”<sup>173</sup> Indeed, an attempt to improve an existing system that caters to an irrelevant mission can never bring about a different outcome. Instead, the pastor should rethink and innovate her approach to mission itself, as well as the measurable outcomes. In many cases, a pastor already has the resources she needs within her congregation, if only she has the eyes to see this.

One important need in the case of many rural churches is to accommodate and inspire retirees to increase their participation and roles in leadership. Freeman offers a theological basis for his insistence that the laity should not simply be served and led by the clergy. Rather, the laity should acknowledge that, by virtue of their baptism, “every Christian shares in Christ’s threefold office as prophet, priest, and king.”<sup>174</sup> With this truth in mind, the pastor should regularly remind members of the privilege and the responsibility to be active agents of ministries within and for the world. Early on in my ministry, I wrestled with guilt when asking people to take on more ministries in the life of the church. People in a rural church often struggle to make ends meet, and I assumed that

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<sup>172</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 55.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>174</sup> Freeman, *Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church*, 397.

they simply did not possess enough time or energy to participate and serve. As it turned out, I was very wrong. An invitation to serve, especially presented with a clear vision and sound strategy, in fact energized people and engaged them in all areas of our shared mission. The increased expectation did not drain energy and brought about renewed energy to our mission and our church. As I learned the hard way, we must ultimately approach the mission of the church from the standpoint of a “generous pneumatology.”<sup>175</sup> This means learning to recognize that the Spirit has already poured out a variety of gifts and graces into the congregation. It means cultivating the skill of seeing and identifying those gifts, which are sometimes hidden by our prejudices and conventional expectations.

#### UNEXPECTED MISSION NEEDS

As the pastor takes the lead in revitalizing and reclaiming the mission of the rural church, she will likely encounter an unexpected challenge from within the congregation itself. Within my ministries, the oldest members constantly shared how they felt taken for granted and repeatedly ignored. As a result, they believed that the church no longer treated them as a priority. To make matters worse, every mission communication from the church seemed to focus solely on younger people outside the church. As it often happens, the local church seemingly finds itself with two diametrically opposing views of how best to pursue Christ-centered mission moving forward. With limited financial resources and dwindling human capital, should we continue to focus our mission explicitly on reaching and serving those outside the walls of our church or should we care for those sick and dying within our own established faith family?

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<sup>175</sup> Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground*, 71.

I find such stories from my rural church to be common among many other churches like ours. Imagine a church with approximately one hundred worshippers gathering every Sunday with a median age that far exceeds sixty-five years. Many of the members grew up in the church with their parents and their grandparents attending with them. This means that, for the majority of weekly worshippers, this local church represents holy ground, a sacred space full of treasured memories of God, family, and friends that stretch over multiple generations. Yet, many of the oldest members continue to express their displeasure as they no longer feel seen in their own church, and their community treats them as a second-class citizen. At the same time, so many of the oldest members end up financially and emotionally caring for their children, grandchildren, and their church. Has the rural church really become so blind so as to completely neglect our existing members above a certain age?

I can certainly understand the frustrations of the older members who claim that the church no longer prioritizes their needs or values their presence. So much of our mission focuses on attracting and discipling young families, but all the while these young families simply do not see our church as where they belong. By contrast, the vast majority of our active church members are elderly retirees who find much of their meaning in life from the church community. When we reflect on this unfortunate dynamic, perhaps such disparity between what the pastor wants to do in the rural church and what people in the rural church seek is not so surprising. All of my previous United Methodist missional education opportunities centered on revitalizing existing churches and birthing new congregations. I do not remember a single gathering that discussed how we faithfully minister by caring for the retirees and providing a dignified closure to

existing ministries before giving new birth to a congregation full of elderly members. Yet, this very demographic not only constitutes the fastest growing population in our society, but also represents the majority of our churches in the United Methodist Church.

So how can we communicate that we genuinely do care for the older established members while also communicating our need to reach out and faithfully witness to younger people outside the walls of our church? And how can we compassionately and honestly address the present challenges and continuing decline of our aging congregation, while expressing optimism for the mission work we can do together to be faithful witnesses?

#### START WITH WHAT AND WHO YOU'VE GOT

According to John Wesley, as we discern the mission of a rural church, regardless of growth or decline, we must “begin with the needs of the people,” and then focus on meeting those needs through serving in the name of Christ.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, in the rural church, we must begin by attentively addressing the needs of those who have long been established in our faith community while, at the same time, patiently listening and courageously responding to the cries of the lost and the wounded in our midst. To do so, the pastor must be intentional about listening to the people’s stories before determining what the primary mission will be for the local church. The church is not driven solely by the needs of persons but by the Spirit of Christ, yet the Spirit “motivates the church to respond to the needs of persons.”<sup>177</sup> Much of this work, then, will be achieved by visiting the people and sharing meals with them.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 35.

<sup>177</sup> Johnson, *New Day New Church*, 37.

<sup>178</sup> See chapter 3 for a more robust discussion of the importance of intentional visits and regular eating with lay people.

Becoming an instrument of God’s reign in the world involves “cultivating eyes to see and ears to hear.”<sup>179</sup> This work, in turn, demands careful, loving attention to the particularities of the situation in which we find ourselves. Instead of attempting to reach and serve everyone, the pastor in a rural congregation should consider carving out a “distinctive niche.”<sup>180</sup> Perhaps many of us simply need to shift the attention of our mission, even if just for a season, so that we can faithfully and intentionally address the people God gave to us in the present before we race toward a group of people God may give to us in the future. As so many of our churches enter the end of their life cycles, we often forget that we still possess a choice. Despite seeing a certain kind of end in plain sight, we can still faithfully and fruitfully witness as the church—we simply have to change the context of our mission to fit our talents and strengths and recognize that “our strength and the strength of a community are deeply connected.”<sup>181</sup> With this in mind, we must change our strategy and make different choices for the future so that we can best utilize the remaining human energy and financial resources available to us. Ultimately, our driving motivation is to “direct the power of the Christian faith to the transformation of lives” by responding to unmet needs both inside and outside the walls of the church.<sup>182</sup>

What would happen if the rural church, instead of targeting a very limited segment of young people—just as countless other churches do—aimed to reach out to the retirees in our town? In the first place, by doing so we respond to God’s call to “fiercely advocate on behalf of the excluded.”<sup>183</sup> Moreover, the explicit choice to gear our

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<sup>179</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 19.

<sup>180</sup> Schaller, *Small Congregation, Big Potential*, 108.

<sup>181</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 15.

<sup>182</sup> Schaller, *Small Congregation, Big Potential*, 110.

<sup>183</sup> Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014), 392.

ministerial focus toward the retirees and the elderly will immediately set us apart from other churches, allowing us to gain a unique position in the community. Given that the elderly and retirees constitute a numerically significant segment of people typically taken for granted and overlooked, this focus would permit the church not merely to obey God's call to serve God's people, but at the same time to become "demographically advantaged."<sup>184</sup>

This temporary shift in emphasis from outward mission to inward mission requires the pastor to become an open leader "who seek[s] out unconventional methods and solutions."<sup>185</sup> The reality of the church's historical decline can, at times, become an unexpected advantage insofar as it provides an unconventional freedom to engage our church in mission practices instead of reverting to past patterns and routines.

Furthermore, given that the lay leaders of the rural church love their church as much as any institution in their lives, they will often demonstrate willingness to try anything and everything to pass on the blessings they received from the church to the future generations. Contrary to my initial, uninformed assumption, the lay leaders of the rural church demonstrated a striking propensity to engage change and explore ideas precisely because they desperately wanted their church to be vital and fruitful.

Such a shift in the church's mission provides space and time for those who often feel taken for granted, while at the same time expected to give financially, to share their stories and to reclaim their past as they boldly journey toward their earthly end with

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<sup>184</sup> MissionInsite (<http://missioninsite.com/>) provides in-depth demographic information that was useful in our church's attempt to better understand our surrounding area.

<sup>185</sup> Focusing on existing members will not be the primary focus, nor a permanent focus of the church's mission. Rather, the church will address and continue to heal and mend the brokenness of the existing people as we reach out to the people outside the walls of the church.



dignity and grace. By leading the church in this intentional endeavor, the pastor brings “broken people to a place of healing.”<sup>186</sup> In my own rural church setting, we found that taking some simple and practical steps further enabled existing servants to incorporate the church’s mission into the normal flows and established rhythms of their lives.

We changed the gathering times of our church fellowship and ministries to better accommodate the elderly. Nothing started after 6:00 p.m. This also meant that our small-group Bible study was moved from the evening to the morning. We set aside three to four thousand dollars every year to host monthly trips for our seniors, who did not often get to travel, let alone travel with their friends. These monthly activities (some involving overnight stays out of town) brought a welcomed way for the seniors in our church to strengthen their existing bonds while allowing the opportunity to invite their friends and neighbors without a faith community to make ours their home.

We revamped and repurposed our virtual community to resonate with the “Silent Generation” and the “Baby Boomers.” As many of our church members continue to age, we witness an increasing number of people being confined to their homes or transferred to residential care facilities. Such transitions often disconnect people from their family, friends, and church. No longer able to attend our church worship services or participate in weekly ministries, these members watch television for a Sunday service and spend much of their time during the week online to connect with people for spiritual growth. Recognizing a need here, we decided to provide an online witness by expanding our

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<sup>186</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, class PowerPoint presentation (Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, August 15, 2017).

virtual community so that we could begin to minister to those who could no longer physically attend our church services or join in our ministries.

We accomplished this by livestreaming our Sunday worship services each week through our church's Facebook page. We did not worry about so-called "production value," since we knew that people care about seeing familiar faces and hearing familiar voices. Through an internal survey, we discovered that a vast majority of our elderly, especially those confined to their homes, used Facebook to connect with the outside world. We also created a pastor's blog website, connected directly to our Facebook page, that provides weekly articles and ministry updates from the pastor that allowed people to leave their own reflection and feedback to deepen conversations and relationships. There also was a forum for congregational care and prayer concerns so that all members could remain informed of daily needs in our community. This allowed our congregational team to utilize new information to provide the best care for people both in and outside the church.

I recommend that the pastor form a media team that can advise and assist with the congregation's technological needs. For me, creating a team of three people (including the pastor) allowed the church to troubleshoot its parishioners' virtual media needs. Here, it will also be helpful to expand your circle of servants in creative ways. I formed a partnership with the local community college (about 30 minutes away) and created a service project opportunity for several students who would be the Information Technology specialists for a semester to earn extra credits. As we discovered, our decision to focus on the older and often forgotten members of our church led us to growth in areas we had never anticipated.

## THE RELIGIOUS AND THE SECULAR

Once it overcomes its preconceived notions of what mission should look like, the rural church will find itself with endless opportunities to serve and respond to the vast needs in its local town. It simply needs to keep open eyes and ears. While our shift towards the church's internal mission, described in the previous section, focused on serving the needs of the existing members within the walls of the church community, the mission must always and eventually expand to the needs of the wider community outside the walls of the church. The rural church will not need to look too far in identifying opportunities for such mission opportunities. Indeed, the effectiveness of the church's witness will often directly grow out of a recognition that "the mission [lies] immediately outside the door."<sup>187</sup> This requires that the rural church become a communal self by giving up "private selfhood," thus opening the door to others and "extend[ing] the blessings of the covenant to those around them."<sup>188,189</sup> While we will certainly continue to reach out to the established church families, our local town—with its high rates of addiction and unemployment—will continue to call on the church to give our witness and our service.

Rural towns face many unique challenges, and it is easy for the pastor to notice only the limitations of the local government to grasp and solve local community problems. In our rural context, we recognized a lack of education that affected the

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<sup>187</sup> Johnson, *New Day New Church*, 24.

<sup>188</sup> Hodgson, *Revisioning The Church*, 96.

<sup>189</sup> Weems and Berlin, *Bearing Fruit*, 3.

physical, emotional, and spiritual health of our town. We did not see any government organizations that addressed any of these needs, and we concluded that the church needed to become a place of community organizing as well as a place of spiritual growth. As we gathered representatives from the local government to help us find ways to address the needs of our town, we quickly saw that community organization held a “symbiotic relationship with religious beliefs and practices” possessing “contextual narratives” to solve circumstantial problems.<sup>190</sup> In retrospect, our church practiced what Gregory Jones labels as “social entrepreneurship,” which “takes direct action and seeks to transform existing system.”<sup>191</sup>

This type of “asset-based community development,” which begins by identifying existing strengths in a local community instead of dwelling on the problems, seeks to mobilize a community’s assets and build on them in strengthening the community and making it more sustainable.<sup>192</sup> People within the congregation often possess direct working or personal relationships to various social institutions in town. Subsequently, many people who struggle with addiction and unemployment are not anonymous strangers, but are in fact church members’ acquaintances, friends, and relatives. For this reason, the church’s external mission to minister and witness to the outside world is actually directed toward our friends and families.

In order to implement a community-oriented mission, the pastor must avoid a top-down leadership model dictated by expert specialists, for such models function to disassociate leaders from the people they are called to serve. Instead, the pastor needs to

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<sup>190</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>191</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 7.

<sup>192</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 62.

be rooted in the land and with the people she leads in order to gain their trust and loyalty. This means, in turn, that those who wish to organize and lead a community must be stationed in that particular place, developing first-hand local knowledge through sustained attention to the people of a community, while “simultaneously developing broader accounts of the relationships and social transformation at work within those places.”<sup>193</sup> The pastor of a rural church can never overestimate “the terrific importance of personal relationship” when seeking to serve the community.<sup>194</sup> This power, based on relationship, requires discipline and loyalty, a type of faithfulness “vital for developing any kind of common life, whether civic or religious.”<sup>195</sup>

This vision of the rural church and community organizing we were able to imagine brought us a desperately needed hope and helped us forge new paths in the midst of the decline and despair that I saw in my rural county. People with whom I break bread and serve constantly feel ignored and powerless to express their own interests in face of the unjust status quo. Subsequently, we repeatedly witnessed to people’s frustrations resulting in different forms of self-harm and little outbursts of violence. In response, the church represented the recovery of politics as it “arises out of common speech and action between ordinary people ... those who are depoliticized or excluded from the decision-making process.”<sup>196</sup> Indeed, such community organizing offered the type of prophetic imagination and boldness that was absent from so much of our church’s prior mission work. So how can the rural church, given its predominately elderly members and limited

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<sup>193</sup> Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 28.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

finances, effectively mobilize its people to connect and serve the people of the wider community?

In the rural church, one will discover “organizational flexibility” in ways of doing mission absent in bigger member and better funded churches.<sup>197</sup> First, with most of our members being retirees themselves, we can readily provide a fellowship for those outside the walls of our church sharing many commonalities and interests with shared language. Second, the existing members of the church, given that they are retired, will be free to give their full attention toward people they already know and who may be without a faith community. Although the pastor of a small rural church will often run into strict financial limitations, she will also find her church to be extremely “rich in social capital,” as people within congregation will be connected to a vast network of people in that town.<sup>198</sup>

Imagine the unique energy and renewed excitement that can be evoked in the older members of our congregation when they feel fully empowered invite and witness to others like them, saying, “We have made an intentional commitment to the elderly in our church and in our community and we want you to be a part of this mission.” In the rural church I serve, we found that this commitment shifted our mindset toward abundance rather than scarcity, for “treasures are abundant when our ministries get infused with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>199</sup> Intentionally shifting the focus of our church’s mission and ministry, while providing a proper frame for the change in ministry direction, only added more energy and innovation to what God had already started in our church. We continue to minister and practice radical hospitality with the elderly by establishing personal

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<sup>197</sup> Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 40

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>199</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 142.

partnership, ministering within their respective gathering places, and expanding ministry opportunities within the church. Moreover, our redirection has enabled us to take full advantage of the abundance of connections and resources already in place.

### EASY AND NEEDED CHANGES

In order to specifically and intentionally minister to the elderly, a pastor must identify and work within given constraints to arrive at new and better solutions.

Establishing a mission team to develop relationships with the elderly retirees in our community helped us identify the unique challenges they faced, including limited access to transportation, places of gathering, and times of availability. For retirees who spend most of their time homebound or in care facilities, we offered rides to church, to medical appointments, and to group fellowships. Above all, the homebound elderly, especially those with families living out of town, needed the church to serve as their liaison, to communicate and advocate for their interests.

The church also shifted the times and places of our missions and ministries in order to intentionally reach retired people outside the walls of the church. Previously, we only hosted missions and fellowships specifically for young families while taking for granted that the elderly in our church will “do their own thing on their own.” Instead, we now leveraged our relationships with various senior gathering places in our town to form new relationships with those without a faith community. This requires the pastor to establish relationships with a variety of institutions in town. I enjoyed this exploratory work, as it helped me to acquire a deeper appreciation for the history of the town, as well as to gain new friends who would help along the way.

Three focal places were the fitness center, the senior center, and the women's center. In our town, the majority of the local fitness center's members were men and women who received free membership through their health insurance. Many of our church members exercise there regularly, forming many relationships within the gym community along the way. As a gym member myself, I had already developed a good working relationship with the manager of the facility. We used the meeting room, located within the gym, as a hosting place for workout meals, bible studies, and health education opportunities for those present. The retired nurses of our church agreed to host various health awareness events at the gym to bring about greater awareness for healthy living and ministries of our church.

The other two places are the town's senior center and the county women's club. Just as with the local fitness center, we have existing church members who hold leadership roles in these two gathering places. As these organizations continue to remain relatively active and fruitful in their own ways, we will seek to partner with them to add to their respective ministries while sharing opportunities for worship and fellowship at our church.

So often, in an attempt to imitate other missions or innovate impossible missions, we forget that what we have to say does not need to be clever or new. What we have to say has "already been articulated in our hymns and scriptural texts."<sup>200</sup> Indeed, the most effective strategy for change, for revolution, at least on the large scale that the kingdom of God, "comes from a minority working from the margins"<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>201</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor*, 16.



## MISSION TO THOSE WHO DISAGREE

Throughout the years, the church has offered the world a moral basis that “transcend[s] and reach[e]s beyond political and economic self-interest.”<sup>202</sup> As Luke Bretherton argues, only through such language of moral traditions can any community-organizing endeavor sustain faithful relationships and accomplish its own mission. The Christian faith offers a vision of human community that emphasizes “centrality of the dignity of the individual, the priority of common over particular goods, and the principle of subsidiarity.”<sup>203</sup> In due time, the pastor must recognize and teach that there is ultimately “no distinction between sacred and secular.”<sup>204</sup> This insight leads, in turn, to a recognition that the strength of the church “and the strength of a community are deeply connected.”<sup>205</sup>

But as we seek to partner with existing community organization, we will encounter conflicts and heartaches with those who possess a different philosophy of mission. We can never forget that, while the church is clearly a human institution, it is also divine, which means that her most important resources are those she receives from God. In other words, we must recognize that our hope ultimately lies not in our own ingenuity and effort, but in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit who “animates and empowers the church, incorporating her into the trinitarian life of God.”<sup>206</sup> Indeed, what motivates every mission and ministry in the local church is the hope of creating new spaces for the silent and invisible in our midst, spaces where the Holy Spirit might bring

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<sup>202</sup> Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 37.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Weems, *Leadership*, 41.

<sup>205</sup> Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 15.

<sup>206</sup> Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground*, 23.

about reconciliation and redemption. We intentionally communicate and connect in order to relate to one another, for we need each other. We talk, visit, eat, and pray with one another so that we can graft our stories onto the stories of others in order to gain understanding, compassion, and appreciation for one another's narratives. And so, in all of our modes of communication, there must be a joyful storytelling that allows us to mutually recount our blessings, reclaiming God's past faithfulness as we boldly journey toward the future with dignity and grace. We need not fear our differences. As Lillian Smith writes,

The symbolic truth is that we are equal as human beings: equal before God; equal in that we are born and will die; equal in that we get sick, get well, grow, and learn and become aware and are hurt and can be reasoned with ... equal, too, in our need of each other, for the weak need the strong and the strong cannot long survive without the weak.<sup>207</sup>

As we journey together, seeking to discern right from wrong and truth from lies, we remember that all of us share commonalities far stronger than our differences. We need each other, far more than any of us fully realize, in order to faithfully live out our witness to the world and accomplish God's mission as Christian disciples. I simply cannot become the creature God made me to be without my connections to this community and, in this community, we will always encounter brokenness and disagreements.

Instead, we can enter into an ethos of cultivating compassion for those who believe and see differently from us, while at the same time reimagining and embodying a new public space where the unique textures of our stories and the particularities of our perspectives can be shared and valued. Here, in this new space, we dare to imagine a

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<sup>207</sup> Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 247.

future that might be lived differently, progressing from the conventional binary thinking of the “either–or” to the transcendent realities of the “both–and.” The pastor “formed by grace demonstrate[s] courage in venturing beyond the familiar and into new avenues of mission and ministry.”<sup>208</sup>

#### GOD’S WILL BE DONE FOR SURE

So often, our anxiety about the uncertain future robs us from remembering the past memories of God’s goodness and faithfulness. But as Father Boyle writes, “anything worth doing is worth failing at.”<sup>209</sup> Perhaps the decades-long decline of the rural church can free us from our fears of failure! Here, the pastor finds an occasion to exercise her role as narrator, connecting the people to the wider story of their individual and corporate identity.<sup>210</sup> This pastoral task of narration is one way in which the pastor enacts her calling as a priest, the one anointed to perform rituals that enact “the reconciling promise of God’s faithfulness.”<sup>211</sup> The aim and hope of the ministries I have described in this chapter is to create “new spaces for the Holy Spirit to act” on behalf of those most silent and invisible in our midst, and to enable people in the church to continue to connect with those who can no longer be physically present.<sup>212</sup>

The church is “most attractive” when it pursues its vocation freely, remaining unconcerned with its own survival.<sup>213</sup> Because we need not fear the end, we should not desperately attempt to recruit young people simply out of fear of demise. To the contrary, God surely invites certain churches to focus on ministering to the elderly. For the rural

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<sup>208</sup> Carder and Warner, *Grace to Lead*, 58.

<sup>209</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 8.

<sup>210</sup> Allender, *Three Leaders You Can’t Do Without*, 191.

<sup>211</sup> Freeman, *Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church*, 393.

<sup>212</sup> Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer*, 369.

<sup>213</sup> Johnson, *New Day New Church*, 84.

church in particular, the new beginning we hope for can come only when we faithfully meet the needs of those at the end of their lives while guiding our churches toward a specific closure of its current life cycle. To put it another way, we can no longer neglect the cries of those right in front of us in our vain attempt to bring in those who simply do not wish to be present with us.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable chasm that exists in the church and in our community, reconciliation is and must be the “final destination of alienated people.”<sup>214</sup> We will reach this destination through mission work that focuses on reconciliatory communication and redemptive connections. The problems that this chapter has shared and the solutions it has offered pertain to a specific church located in a particular place and time. It is crucial to remember that we cannot take whatever worked in other churches and hope simply to duplicate the results. Amid so many contrasting proposals for what the church should do in order more faithfully and more effectively to carry out its mission in the world, the temptation is to think that there must be one and only one “right” answer. Instead of thinking that we must identify and implement the one approach to renewal that will enable the church more faithfully and effectively to carry out its mission, we carry out its mission we can begin to think of the contrasting and competing proposals for renewal as an embarrassment of riches that reflects the “creativity and generosity of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>215</sup>

Every church and its surrounding community has its own contextual narratives, which involve their own circumstantial problems. All this means that the pastor who desire to lead a community must be grounded and committed to that particular place as

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<sup>214</sup> Lischer, *End of Words*, 149.

<sup>215</sup> Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground*, 70.

one needs to develop firsthand, local knowledge through sustained attention to the people of a community while developing broader accounts of the relationships in order to properly discern the problem while working to give reconciliatory witness. My experience pastoring in rural Methodist congregations has left me both hopeful and excited for the future of the rural church. When we follow the Spirit's lead, shedding our preconceived notions and narratives, and instead looking with new eyes, we can offer the type of prophetic imagination and bold truth-telling absent from so many of our social arenas, including our churches. In such acts of imagination and truth-telling, the church realize the essence of its mission to the world, to be a "community of faith, hope, and love, a sign and sacrament of the kingdom of God."<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Hodgson, *Revisioning The Church*, 98.

## 7. CELEBRATION

Having just arrived at my third church, which was my second appointment as a senior pastor, I met with the chair of the trustees on the first official day of work in my new office. We exchanged pleasantries, and I shared my excitement about serving this church of about seventy people in weekly worship attendance. The trustee chair, Jim, smiled, shared some jokes, and gave me a stack of papers with numbers. These numbers reflected totals from the weekly offerings, the checking account, and the savings account across the previous year. “We’ve not gotten enough weekly offering to cover our expenses and we are almost out of savings to cover our bills,” he shared with a tone marked by sadness and frustration. Jim tried to force a smile as he continued to relay some alarming trends, but I could tell he was fighting back tears. Jim had grown up in this church, which he had attended all of his life. About a third of the congregation was related to Jim by blood or by marriages that stretched over three generations. The church represented not just his congregation, but his family and his home. The tone of sadness and frustration Jim shared during our first encounter is not unique. Sadly, it seems to represent the norm for most small rural churches today.

This chapter’s focus is the sixth and final practice I explore in this thesis. It represents, perhaps paradoxically, both the culmination and the foundation of the other practices. This is the communal celebration of God’s work in the world. This practice begins with recognizing that we have much to celebrate. And as we begin to celebrate, that very act brings the church more closely in line with its very purpose, thus bringing about even more occasions for celebration. I begin by exploring the necessity for celebration, before turning to some concrete suggestions for how pastors of rural

congregations might find occasions for celebration and implement these formally in the communal life of the church. I conclude, then, in the final three sections, by exploring what the practice of celebration does for the church.

### SEEMS LIKE IT'S ALREADY OVER

“The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’”<sup>217</sup>

Upon arrival at most churches, whether urban or rural, the new pastor will find herself asking a question much like the one we read about in Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” With the very survival of the church seriously in doubt, renewed growth and revitalization can seem impossibly distant for the pastor called to lead a declining and dying congregation. This situation is not so different from finding oneself in the middle of a valley full of dry bones, and the pastor faces the temptation to simply give up even before beginning her ministry, let alone finding opportunities to celebrate. The problems, shortfalls, and decline can overwhelm the sense and rob any energy to dreams and vision toward what could be and should be in ways of vitality and fruitfulness.

Sometimes it seems that the church, or at least most of its members, is seeking hospice care rather than journeying toward revitalization and renewal. This has been true of my own ministry in rural churches. Each time I brought some specific vision or new strategy to fulfill the mission of the church, the lay leaders often reacted initially with skepticism and even cynicism. Why would people who genuinely care for their church resign themselves to a slow death? Because they have experienced numerous disappointments and even embarrassment in the past for branching out into new

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<sup>217</sup> Ezekiel 37:1–3 (NRSV).

ministries in the name of revitalization. The church members, especially those in declining rural churches, have been wounded by a lack of leadership in the past and have been hurt by pastors who saw them as steppingstones to something bigger and better, rather than as their own family. Given these past congregational traumas, the new pastor of a rural congregation will often face resistance toward any new leadership not because the people lack care for the well-being of their church, but because of their history of disappointment.

Recognizing this sad reality that lies beneath the surface of many rural churches, I have learned to take about three months, after each appointment cycle to a new congregation, to intentionally recalibrate my pre-existing expectations and to reaffirm God's divine providence. Every new church has represented a new set of challenges with no clear solutions moving forward, which has forced me to improvise often as a leader. While some may welcome and even enjoy improvisational leadership, such a way of being exhausts me and leaves me anxious. So why bother with celebrating anything amid such circumstances of decline and despair? And what can we actually celebrate in the first place? In what follows, I turn to some concrete ways to cultivate the practice of celebrating God's work in the world, not matter the particular situation a congregation may find itself in.

#### WHY WE MUST CELEBRATE NO MATTER THE CURRENT SITUATION

For the better part of two decades, Jim's church, like many others, operated with a survival mindset. We should not blame such churches. These folks have lived through factories closing, young people moving out to the cities, a steady rise in crime and poverty, and their aging friends and family slowly dying year after year. Having gone



through so many heartaches, such churches live their communal lives with a focus on merely surviving, which hinders them from making room to witness to God's ministry in any impactful and sustainable way. People in such churches do not mean to give up on their church. Rather, they seek to protect their own hearts from further disappointments and pain. Well-meaning local pastors and conference leaders from the past made big promises to these local churches and asked them to take big risks. But these risks led to few results, if any, thus accelerating their financial and membership decline.

So, how can the pastor find any real and authentic reasons to celebrate consistently in situations like so many of us our churches in despair? Does it make any real tangible difference whether we celebrate or not? How can we evoke and inspire genuine joy and thanksgiving to lead our people in celebration while continuing to face the storms of decline and loss?

Henri Nouwen writes, "When we truly believe that God is life and only life, then nothing need have the power to draw us into the sad realm of death. To choose joy does not mean to choose happy feelings or an artificial atmosphere of hilarity. But it does mean the determination to let whatever takes place bring us one step closer to the God of life."<sup>218</sup> Such determination was especially evident in Fanny, a woman who belonged to a rural church I pastored. Although Fanny never held a formal church office, she led countless ministries in the church. The congregation simply knew to look to her before making any major decision. Fanny, in her late eighties by the time we got to know one another, made our church bi-weekly newsletters from her office in her trailer. She used a computer that I did not recognize, typed on her keyboard with two fingers, and manually

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<sup>218</sup> Henri Nouwen, "Choosing Joy," *Daily Meditation Archives*, *The Henri Nouwen Society*, November 11, 2020, <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/choosing-joy-2/>.

taped the pictures for the newsletter. She also visited church members in hospitals, taught bible studies, and sang in the choir. Fanny had lost her husband to a house fire two decades prior and lost her oldest son to a heart attack within the first year of my ministry at our church. Despite all this, she worshipped weekly and faithfully typed her newsletter. I visited her quite often at her trailer. One day, without being asked, she spoke about the joy of doing all things church. The reason Fanny provided for her joy was neither awe-inspiring nor especially prophetic. Instead, she simply said, “I love my God, and I am so thankful for the church.”

Now more than ever, we must recognize that Christian joy “is not an escape from sorrow.”<sup>219</sup> The church will always face pain and hardship, but these things can never completely drive out the joyfulness of the redeemed. For this reason, the church’s ability to authentically celebrate God’s ministry does not and cannot depend on any specific numerical growth or even the church’s internal feelings about themselves. Eugene Peterson speaks to this aspect of Christian discipleship, stating that “the joy that develops in the Christian way of discipleship is an overflow of spirit that comes from feeling good not about yourself but about God.”<sup>220</sup> Such joy transcends the ups and downs that are a natural part of any human community, and provides a reason for otherwise desperate churches to celebrate in genuine, meaningful ways.

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<sup>219</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 100.

<sup>220</sup> Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 101.

## TYPICAL OPPORTUNITIES TO CELEBRATE

We must never forget that “humans are social animals” at all times, in all places, regardless of the circumstances.<sup>221</sup> With this fact in mind, every single church I have been a part of has offered at least two platforms for gathering—Sunday worship service and Wednesday fellowship meal (which often is followed by a bible study). Each of these gatherings can provide an opportunity to celebrate. Every Sunday, for instance, the pastor and the congregation can take five minutes to celebrate and give thanks during worship. In my experience, I have found that the reason for celebration matters far less than the actual act of celebration. People simply wish to remember the stories of their past, share the present, and look forward to the future together with a sense of shared joy.

To foster a culture of celebration during weekly Sunday worship services, the pastor can include space in the service for a brief moment of thanksgiving, usually at the earlier part of service. This space allows members of the congregation a weekly opportunity to share their respective thanksgiving stories. Doing so helps to designate specific people with deeply rooted in the church and the community to share celebration moments of the past and hopes for the future. We did this every week, and no one ever complained about these five minutes or got sick of the practice, even after doing so for many years. To do this weekly worship celebration well, I made an inventory of every ministries of our church routinely done each week. I systematically observed and named all the implicit and explicit traditions of the church because “communities respect one another best of all when they know who they are.”<sup>222</sup> We simply and honestly shared

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<sup>221</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 316.

<sup>222</sup> Hanchey, *From Survival to Celebration*, 115.

financial and membership numbers as well, acknowledging and celebrating every number.

Another weekly opportunity, Wednesday fellowship meal and bible study, provides even a longer and flexible space and time to invite people to celebrate. In all my rural churches, we have typically welcomed around fifty people (slightly less than our average weekly worship attendance) each week to our Wednesday fellowship meals. While the food was decent enough, people came to sit around a table and talk to one another to catch up on personal stories and local news. In the middle of the meal, we asked certain designated people to share updates on the ongoing ministries of the church. But mainly, we provided intentional and prepared opportunities to share past memories of thanksgiving and present ministries of our church. Never underestimate the desire of a community to act, as collective whole, to remember, give thanks, and celebrate the past. One simply cannot underestimate the importance of saying thank you and offering praise for work well done.<sup>223</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that “visible fellowship is a blessing.”<sup>224</sup> Certain of this truth, we worked to ensure that people, small or large, got the opportunity to see each other and share aspects of their lives with each other. Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship; it is a consequence of discipleship. Joy is not a prerequisite for experiencing life in Christ; “it is what comes to us when we are walking in the way of faith and obedience.”<sup>225</sup> This kind of joy, coupled with discipleship, will be immune to

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>224</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 18.

<sup>225</sup> Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 96.

any negative or declining measure, such as church attendance or finances, for true joy can be found in all circumstances, including those of both relative wealth and poverty.

#### CELEBRATION PROVIDES OXYGEN FOR DECLINING CHURCHES

Regardless of the current realities of our church, the choice to celebrate means choosing to live “in response to the abundance of God and not under the dictatorship of our own poor needs.”<sup>226</sup> For a season, I thought the local church needed to celebrate for the sake of encouragement, a kind of pat on the back for job well done. After several years in the ministry, however, I realized that celebration served to reveal the already existing abundance of God’s gifts in our lives. Our intentional and consistent celebration certainly did bring about something new and exciting, but more than that, our celebration revealed and reminded us of what was already present in the church.

I also found out that promoting a culture of celebration “fuels the sense of unity and mission” essential for retaining and motivating staff and lay servants.<sup>227</sup> Servant-volunteers, even more than the paid staff, need space and time to celebrate with one another to acknowledge job well done while naming challenging moving forward.<sup>228</sup> Some of the most fun, joyful memories center around celebrating after completing a big project. Such occasions allowed space for thanksgiving for one another and time to recount stories of preparation and presentation of said projects. Such rewards provide energy and incentive for future projects while strengthening the existing bond of the group. The act of celebration reminds us that the fellowship of Christian brethren is “a

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>227</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 309.

<sup>228</sup> Oddly enough, in my experience, servant-volunteers often perform better in ministry tasks than even paid staff members.

gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>229</sup> Yet, despite all the positive benefits of intentional and systematic celebration, the church, unlike almost every other non-profit organization, is “often guilty of underappreciating key leaders, volunteers, and donors.”<sup>230</sup>

Celebrations should always serve a dual purpose—one is to honor a principle or an achievement, and the other is to create community. While serving in a declining institution can be emotionally draining and mentally uncertain, working with others should be rejuvenating, inspiring, and fun. In fact, performance improves when leaders bring people together to rejoice in their achievements and to reinforce their shared principals to “create a spirit of community.”<sup>231</sup> And celebrations are the most significant ways we have to proclaim our respect and gratitude, to “renew our sense of community, and to remind ourselves of the values and history that bind us together.”<sup>232</sup> Ceremonies and celebrations are opportunities to build healthier groups, to enable members of the organization to know and care about each other.

#### CELEBRATION SERVES TO REMIND US

How quickly we forget past memories of laughter, joy, and goodness. I am not entirely sure why we human beings, including those of us who follow Jesus, fail to remember, but such forgetting is a basic fact of human life. However, in many ways, prayers, meditation, and worship, serve to help us to correctly recollect the past. Intentional celebration enables the church to reclaim the truth about our past so often and easily forgotten, God’s abundant presence within the life of the church. To instill such an

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<sup>229</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 20.

<sup>230</sup> Weems and Berlin, *Bearing Fruit*, 75

<sup>231</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 309.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

“attitude of abundance,” we engage in discernment, not to obsess and occupy ourselves with all the things that we thought we needed to do, but instead, to “reaffirm the vital ministries already in existence while sharing such stories to the body of the church.”<sup>233</sup> So, in ritual celebration, the good news become far larger than simply asking what God can do in our church but instead what God is already doing through our church. Celebration-minded Christians do not concern themselves with questions of survival, but instead embrace the blessing of “an expectant, hopeful attitude.”<sup>234</sup> The celebrating congregation employs a theology that “values the work of God in the everyday world.”<sup>235</sup> This means that we, as leaders, must expand the criteria by which we measure the success of our ministries.

For instance, I am convinced that all pastors, especially in a rural church, must recalibrate how we do our accounting. We typically limit our pastoral imagination about numbers to two categories: average weekly worship attendance and weekly monetary giving. While these two sets of numbers will always be monitored, and indeed they should be, we can no longer limit our efforts to minister to our church and our community simply to cater to these numbers. I invite the pastors to look at other important metrics, such as the number of families and people impacted by the local church. For example, our church’s partnership with a nearby elementary school had no visible impact on either of the metrics that churches typically look at when judging their success. Yet this ministry bore genuine fruits. We provided weekend food for the children, as well as Christmas presents and school supplies at the appropriate times.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Hanchey, *From Survival to Celebration*, 84.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>236</sup> See chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of this ministry.

While the identity of the families we helped remained anonymous, the school staff allowed us to correspond and connect with each other and build relationships. We cherished the letters and emailed that went back and forth between the church and the families. Some of the most popular celebration moments within the life of the church were when we read these family letters with stories of presents opened, food consumed, and thanksgiving shared.

### NO FUTURE WITHOUT CELEBRATION

“I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.”<sup>237</sup>

The work of leading and serving within the life of the church can often feel lonely, for the pastor as well as the laity. Given this fact, pastors of rural congregations need to focus more intentionally on connecting and bonding with members, community, and colleagues. Seeking intimacy can be hard, yet “intimacy heals; loneliness depresses.”<sup>238</sup> The simple act of celebration, as the examples this chapter has spelled out, fosters real intimacy. Celebrations infuse life with passion and purpose, bond people together, and connect us to shared values and myths. Ceremonies and rituals “create community, fusing individual souls with the corporate spirit.”<sup>239</sup> We even celebrate the unknown future yet to come, for celebration also reminds us of the hope for that which we do not see and “hope is the Christian virtue that holds together a positive vision of the future and a realistic assessment of the present.”<sup>240</sup> Celebration reframes our lens to see ourselves as leaders and refocuses God’s story in the life of the church.

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<sup>237</sup> Jeremiah 31:13 (NRSV).

<sup>238</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 329.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>240</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 14.



In the introduction to this thesis, I lamented that the topics of death and decline, though immediately relevant to most pastors in the UMC, and especially those in small rural congregations, are hardly addressed in their seminary training. It may seem surprising, then, that I have concluded by focusing on the practice of celebration. As this chapter has suggested, however, an emphasis on celebration, even within churches that are apparently dying or declining, is not incongruous at all. In fact, a congregation whose attitude is marked by mere survival has already capitulated to the forces of death and decline that threaten to put an end to its mission. But by learning to see that God has given them much to celebrate, even a congregation in the direst situation—marked by declining membership and finances, internal strife, and apparent loss of purpose—can move from an attitude of mere survival to one of actively celebrating God at work in the world.

In fact, I argue that such works of celebration and thanksgiving represent the most important and urgent theological task of most pastors in small rural churches today, especially during the early part of a pastor's ministry in a particular congregation. When this fact is recognized, it becomes clear that pastoral leadership is not ultimately the work of convincing others to believe in God, or to join the roster of the church, or to increase their financial contributions. Instead, pastoral leadership is, above all, the "wonderful ministry of identifying and celebrating God at work in the world."<sup>241</sup> This practice of communal celebration of God's work in the world, then, is the ultimate goal of effective pastoral ministry. Celebration is, I would argue, precisely what undergirds the other practices I have laid out in the previous chapters. And, at the same time, as the other

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<sup>241</sup> Hanchey, *From Survival to Celebration*, 137.

practices gain increasing vigor, a congregation's ministry of celebration will continue to grow and flourish. Indeed, celebration of what God is doing in the world, and through the church, is how we most faithfully face the future, no matter what the present might look like.

## 8. CONCLUSION

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”<sup>242</sup>

We find ourselves living in an age of unhelpful generalizations and oversimplifications. Sadly, such attitudes lead to even more fear and division between groups. But the church has taught me that we humans are not created for such shallow forms of communication. In his famous response to a particularly lazy and uninformed speculation, Mark Twain wrote, “The report of my death was an exaggeration.”<sup>243</sup> Likewise, the report of the church’s impending death may be an exaggeration of sorts. Yes, the church continues to decline in membership, financial giving, and cultural impact. And we encounter derision from critics and division within our family on just about every major “issue.” Yet I have faith that we will discover grace and mercy within the life of the church that will continue to surprise and humble us.

And despite the countless stories of problem churches full of challenging people, I have consistently found that people are not closed minded so much as they have been repeatedly worn out by various gimmicks and shallow shepherding that has burned them over and over again. In the midst of all this negative chatter, the faithful pastor, with a humble and open heart, will affirm the truth that the baptismal family of God far exceeds the limitations of our biology.

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<sup>242</sup> John 20:1–2 (NIV).

<sup>243</sup> Emily Petsko, “Reports of Mark Twain's Quote About His Own Death Are Greatly Exaggerated,” *Mental Floss*, November 2, 2018, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/562400/reports-mark-twains-quote-about-mark-twains-death-are-greatly-exaggerated>

When it came time for me to leave my previous appointment, located in rural town North Carolina, I prayed and discerned my last sermon with grief and thanksgiving.

I opened my sermon in this way:

As I prepared my last sermon with you for this day, I realized that the United Methodist Church exercises a bit of an arranged marriage. When I came to this town and our church five years ago, I did not choose you as my next church and you did not choose me as your next pastor. But God chose both of us to be together and, my goodness, God really knows God's way around as a matchmaker! In these last five years, besides being with you, I got to travel all over the country to be with all kinds of different churches and interacted with all kinds of different congregations. And I want you to know that if I had a choice to do it all over again, I would still choose you to be my church and I hope you would still choose me to be your pastor.

A story I did not share in the sermon captures the same sentiment. During the final week of a particular ministerial appointment in the Methodist church, one of the most beloved lay leaders of the church came to see me in my office to share one last conversation. Buster and I recounted our four years of ministry together, one that included many highs and lows, with laughter and tears. As we neared the end of our time together, Buster apologized to me: "When I learned that a pastor named "Ui Yeon" would become our next pastor, I got angry that the conference sent someone no one wanted. I worried that you would be bad for us and bad for me." I felt vulnerable, so I interrupted Buster, "Well, I do remember plenty of bad things I committed as a pastor, so no worries!" Undeterred, Buster continued, "I am sorry that I did not give you a fair chance four years ago. I am sorry that I did not extend you the benefit of the doubt as I did with the previous ministers before you. I am grateful that we got to know one another and that we got the opportunity to serve together. Thank you for being my pastor." This pattern has become familiar. At the conclusion of each of my appointments, several folks

in each of the churches have shared similar remarks with me. The profound grace that these people have showed me in sharing such words with me continues to move me each time I recall them.

The members of the churches I have served are my friends. Some of them are even my son and my daughter's grandparents. Both of my wife's parents passed away, and my parents live on the other side of the globe. On grandparents' day at school, my children invite the people within our church. On holidays, we dine and share with people within our church. For my family, especially in the eyes of my children, the concept of church and family co-exist together. At times, such an amalgam of relationships can create conflicts while blurring boundaries. But such is life in the rural church.

Looking back, as I connect the dots only in retrospect, I see just how much the church has formed me during my ministry. The church formed me not just as a pastor, but as a person, as a disciple, as a husband, and as a father. I like to think that I exercise forgiveness and grace with my congregations whom I led all those years. But truth be told, the people of my church, whom I supposedly led, exercised far more forgiveness and grace with me than I will ever fully realize. I often cringe as I remember the past sermons I have preached, meetings over which I've presided, and conflicts I have tried to manage. Through all the shortcomings and mistakes, the church stood by and allowed me to begin anew each week, each month, and each year.

The process of renewal and revitalization happens only with some pressure and heat. Sanctification simply cannot happen in the midst of absence of tension and pain. Growing up as the oldest son of a pastor who serve Korean immigrants, I learned the hard way that the pastor can love the church and its parishioners into higher consciences. it

can also lead the pastor and the church into higher level of consciences. While the pain and suffering of crisis can be discouraging, far more often, it moves us toward renewal, revitalization, and even transformation. Jesus displays the scars of his passion even after his resurrection and ascension. And the scars not only remind us of the crucifixion, but serve a related purpose: to affirm the grace and redemption of the resurrection. The pastor must constantly remind herself that all of God's children, especially the problematic ones, possess souls of infinite value. This recognition allows us to show dignity to others while being willing to be undignified ourselves. Indeed, what we expect of God and of ourselves must be a bit more creative.

Time and again, I find myself tempted to perceive Easter as something less than the most incredible day in the history of the world. Because of the resurrection, the world will never be the same again! Without Easter, the day of Christ's resurrection, Jesus becomes merely an overly optimistic teacher with delusions of grandeur, disciples become beggars/losers who wasted three prime years of their lives, and Good Friday becomes just another day when people got crucified at the hands of the Roman Empire. But resurrection changed everything—all that preceded it and all that follows. Jesus's rising from the dead allows us to reinterpret our past, transforms our present, and enables hope for the future.

My grandfather, the first Christian in our family's history, shared a story about a Methodist missionary from the United States who shared the Gospel with him, an encounter that transformed his life and his world. At one point during their time together, my grandfather asked the missionary why he had traveled to South Korea in the early 1950s, when it was a war-torn country with nothing much to offer to its citizens, let alone

outsiders.<sup>244</sup> My grandfather simply could not understand why anyone would make such a difficult trip just to live a difficult life away from home and friends. The missionary's response would make an indelible impact on my grandfather: "I came because I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ." My grandfather's journey, and all the lives of those who would follow him, changed course forever, and nothing was ever the same again—his oldest son became a pastor in the Methodist church and his oldest grandson would later follow.

In *Christianity's Surprise*, C. Kavin Rowe writes, "No resurrection, no Christianity.... The resurrection of Jesus catalyzes a new understanding and a new way of being precisely because of the new reality that God brought into the world—life over death, the reversal of Eden, the hope of the future, and the power in the present."<sup>245</sup> So we need not be afraid of the future, not ours or the world's, for we worship with a sure and certain hope found in an empty tomb.

While I arrived at each appointment as a stranger in a strange land, filled with uncertainty and fear, my family ended up discovering heaven on earth, each and every time. May the pastor never consider the rural church as a steppingstone to a more desirable place but, instead, serve each place as though it were the long-desired final destination. Philip Yancey writes, "I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else."<sup>246</sup> This truth about grace I conclude with a benediction to my fellow pastors. May you continue to discover and fully embrace the grace you will surely receive pastoring God's people. Make your

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<sup>244</sup> Today, South Korea ranks as one of the most desired and attractive tourist destinations in the world!

<sup>245</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, *Christianity's Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 12.

<sup>246</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 16.

heaven wherever you find yourself, and you will soon discover that God already prepared a place for you.

Thanks be to God.



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## **Biography**

Ui Yeon Kim was born in Seoul, South Korea on September 21, 1981. He earned a Bachelor of Art in Economics from Grinnell College in 2003 and a Master of Divinity from Duke Divinity School in 2006. He was ordained an elder in the United Methodist Church in 2009 and is currently a member of the Western North Carolina Conference. He was a recipient of the HANA Scholarship, Dean's Scholarship, Pittman Scholarship, and Lewis Fellowship.