

Fall 2015

# Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

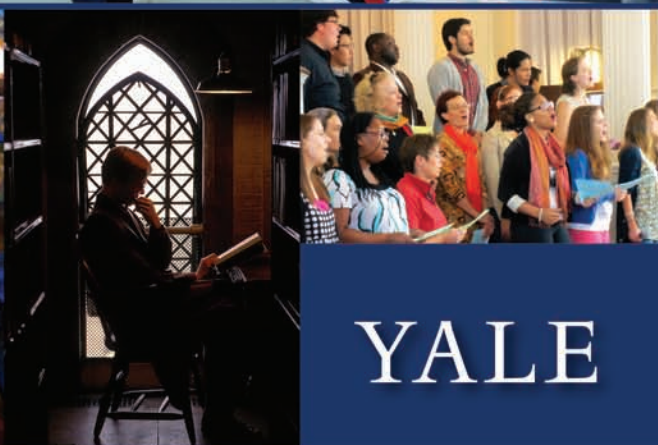
a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry

New Voyages: Church Today and Tomorrow

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# Reflections

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*a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry*

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*We welcome letters to the editor. All correspondence regarding Reflections should be addressed to editor Ray Waddle at the Divinity School's address or at [ray.waddle@yale.edu](mailto:ray.waddle@yale.edu).*

Gregory E. Sterling, Dean – Publisher  
Tom Krattenmaker – Director of Communications  
Ray Waddle – Editor-in-Chief  
Peter Johnson, YPPS – Graphic Designer  
Campbell Harmon – Online Coordinator

## COVER ART

Nalini Jayasuriya '84 M.A.R.



Ark (front cover)

God's Singing Tree (back cover)

Nalini Jayasuriya, who died last year, was a Sri Lankan Christian painter, musician, sculptor, potter, writer, broadcaster, and lecturer. Her art reflected spiritual styles of East and West, using biblical themes to convey the world's turbulence and wonder, the human search for God.

"The needs of all people are the same," she wrote in *A Time for My Singing: Witness of a Life*, (Overseas Ministries Study Center, 2004) a book about her work.

"They need protection from fear and a hope for blessing. There is a galaxy within us – an unpredictable portion of our being, beyond the constraints of the rational and the reasonable that can surprise the world with profound expressions of faith."

Her work can be seen at the art gallery page at the Overseas Ministries Study Center website, [omsc.org](http://omsc.org). She was artist-in-residence at OMSC, in New Haven, CT, from 2001-2003.

## INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY

Anne Wetzel



Early on, Anne Wetzel's photography centered on her love of gardening and landscapes. Then, in 1995, she attended Holy Week services at St. James (Episcopal) Cathedral in Chicago – and she found a new subject, the worship of God.

"I was deeply struck by the visual power of these ancient rites," she says.

"I wanted to explore and capture with the camera the interplay of darkness and light; the juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange; moments of inwardness, isolation, intimacy and communion; the vulnerable human being moving in community to encounter the mystery of God."

Her work in this *Reflections* includes images from those Holy Week services as well as photos from visits to Chartres Cathedral in France and the ancient ruins of Petra in Jordan.

Her work has been displayed in various exhibits and was featured in *Through the Window of the Ordinary: Experiences of Holy Week* (Church Publishing Incorporated, 2001). Anne Wetzel attends a small Episcopal parish near her home in Mt. Desert, Maine.

# From the Dean's Desk



Gregory E. Sterling  
The Reverend Henry L. Slack  
Dean of Yale Divinity School  
& Lillian Claus Professor  
of New Testament

We have all read the worrisome statistics about the losses of members in our churches. This decline has had a direct impact on divinity schools as well.

Nationally, applications to institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools have dropped 1.5 percent per annum since 2004. Dan Aleshire, the executive director of ATS, estimates that 20 percent of ATS-accredited schools could not survive financially if they sold all of their assets and had to live on them for a year. Seminaries and churches are both struggling.

There are, however, churches (and divinity schools) that are flourishing, including those that have experienced renewal by defying conventional wisdom about what it takes to grow and thrive. We asked some of the people who lead these growing churches to reflect on the factors that have contributed to the health of their congregations. This Fall issue of *Reflections* is a collection of their responses. I would like to add to their voices by reminding us of three basic principles – principles that surface repeatedly in the following essays.

Christianity is fundamentally not an institution but a relationship. The good news in the New Testament is not about the church; it is about what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ. One of the great challenges we face today is that many in our society – especially among those who are 18-29 – do not trust institutions. It is not hard to understand why. They have witnessed the scandals of the established church and the near-collapse of Wall Street. We need to return to our roots in the New Testament and let people know that we do not proclaim an institution but a savior. People have not lost their need or appetite for spirituality; they have lost their confidence in institutions.

Related to this is the need to take the biblical text seriously while recognizing its ancient character. A failure to take it seriously will reduce a homily to a group therapy session or a political commentary. A failure to recognize its ancient character leads to a naiveté that will erode the credibility of our explanations. We can neither replace Scripture nor reify it. We must proclaim it with the realization that it is part of the mystery of the human-divine encounter. If we remove the mystery of that encounter, we take the power out of Christianity.

Finally, many of the essays point to a fundamental truth about Christianity: We are called to serve people. We may need to learn how to connect with people via new media, but the fundamental truth is that no matter how the connections are made, people need to come first. The world does not care about our doctrines; it cares about the way we treat human beings. This is a standard comment by those who have no religious affiliation: Churches seem to care more about what to believe than about the welfare of human beings.

Ancient Christians understood this. I will never forget the first time that I read the apology of the 2nd-century Christian Aristides. Aristides opened his little treatise with a brief philosophical discussion of God and then asked who understood God. He considered and set aside the Chaldeans, the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Jews. He then came to Christians. I expected Aristides to provide a Middle Platonic or Peripatetic description of God and attribute it to Christians. Instead, Aristides said that Christians demonstrate that they understand God by the way they live: They practice love and care for others. Ultimately, I think he was correct. The value of our religion is determined by the way we treat other people. The strongest witness to Christianity is a life lived in faith and love.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gregory E. Sterling".

Gregory E. Sterling  
Dean



# A World of New Connections



By Kaji Douša 'o6 M.Div.

*I had never seen my church like this before. It was Saturday morning, and artisans and shopkeepers clustered throughout the space. Some were seated on the floor with makeshift picnics, on blankets, their children crawling about, banging things, while others stood and watched the band.*

Some of our regular folk were in the kitchen, getting things ready for Sunday. No one in the packed room was over 40. I thought: *This is church.*

Many of us talk about church as a place to seek God's inspiration, a way to connect "the world's need with our gifts." Until now, I have spent my career trying to place people in the church, connecting them to existing ministries or committees. There is holiness in this work, I believe, particularly when there is a match.

Often, there is no good match, and these manufactured connections do not stick. The energy fades or shifts elsewhere. Much of my experience has been taken up forcing a connection. This is not something I do any longer.

## **A New Calculus**

One recent Saturday, we had a room full of artisans, hipsters, mostly young women with young children, an elusive demographic. They have lots of demands on their life, and church does not always make their list.

But they wanted to be together – enterprising young women trying to make ends meet for their families, starting part-time cottage businesses, seeking local markets, sharing their passions. Working full-time would make childcare cost-prohibitive. I get this. Half of my income goes to childcare. The calculus just doesn't work for most families.

So these entrepreneurs started their small businesses in the free time after the babies were fed and put to bed. They felt solidarity. But work done in the wee hours is work done alone. When one local business offered this opportunity for them to connect, they needed a place to assemble.

Enter our church.

We had not envisioned this, but making a space for the vocation of others is very much ministry. And this group of artisans, after a few meetings, got to know the space of the church as their own. Many of them now come to regular church events – like our monthly babywearing support event that pulls in dozens of young moms, or our bi-weekly breast-

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## **We can sigh and weep and close another church. Or we can help church help people in new ways and honor that as holy.**

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feeding support group. Or they find my office, or the church's office, where a number of them seek help in a life crisis.

Recently, I started offering these families free marriage support sessions. Many face struggles but without the money for professional marriage counsel. So in exchange for up to six sessions with me, I ask them to volunteer up to six hours on Sunday mornings around worship time.

In this unpredictable, unplanned way our church has become a home for young moms and their families. And, little by little, a good number of them have been visiting us on Sunday mornings for worship.

But church membership or Sunday attendance cannot be our end game.

What I have learned is that we have to understand *each connection point* as holy. We cannot call ourselves hospitable if our goal is to get them to church on Sunday. We have to realize their gatherings invite the Spirit of God with as much authenticity as any other church meeting. Just because it is new, just because it does not carry the familiar brand, does not make it something other than church.

Many of my colleagues would hold such ministries in suspicion. But we can analyze and complain all we want as we weep and close another church. Or we can help church help people in new ways and honor that as holy. And somehow see that as church.

What makes it church? Here's what I know: Jesus improved lives. He interrupted them, he changed them, he made things better. Sometimes people disrupted the disciples' urgent time with Jesus. They showed up with needs. They did not have a proper appointment or follow protocol. But Jesus did not put them off. He did not require that they come back

during office hours or at Sunday morning worship time. He met them without qualification.

As disciples, we seek to do the same, united in a spirit of love. The shape of that abiding love is active, morphing, growing, full of impact, improving lives. That is our mission.

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*Kaji Douša 'o6 M.Div. has been senior minister at The Table (United Church of Christ of La Mesa, CA) since 2013. A former Beatitudes Fellow, she previously served churches in Minnesota, New York, and New England, and has been on various national boards of the UCC.*

## HOW WE ADDRESSED OUR EMPTY CHURCH PROBLEM

When I arrived as minister, we worshiped at 8:30 and 10 a.m. Visitors came. Many joined. Each service drew anywhere from 25-75 people in a space that could accommodate maybe four times that. We were a hearty, dedicated bunch.

But to newcomers, the empty seats signaled a broader, scarier story. The space seemed to communicate: *We built this for more, but something about us isn't right.* (It also signaled: *We loved the 1970s.*)

We needed something different. This takes time to discover, however.

We cancelled both worship services and created a brand new liturgy. We refreshed the space without spending money: The dusty curtains came off, the windows overlooking the beautiful gardens were cleaned. We took out pews, repositioning some, moving the altar so people would gather around a central table.

We started calling ourselves "The Table" partly because our town, La Mesa, means that in Spanish, but more because we wanted to communicate welcome to Christ's table, remembrance of a tomb that sits empty, hospitality in the name of the one who bids us to gather.

We instituted most of these changes – with some weeping and gnashing of teeth, granted – this past Lent. Since then, we have seen steady increases in worship attendance. Our pews are full almost every Sunday. Newcomers keep arriving – and coming back.

Addressing worship attendance is not as hard as it might seem. Here are some practical steps:

**1. Resist the temptation of mediocrity.** Make worship consistently, powerfully transcendent and transformational. We found many ways to address this. We invited a higher level of musicianship from our musical leaders and choir. They were entirely capable of this

with some shifts in their approach to singing. I needed to preach inspiring, biblically based sermons week after week. We broadened the scope of the worship planners to ensure that the liturgy coalesces around a central message inspired from the week's text, giving worshipers a multisensory experience of the theme. Worship should be at the core. Our new service draws in a greater number than our separate services ever did: Our people now feel the joy of hope that we will not just survive but can thrive.

**2. Be healthy enough to grow.** My church had gone through a lengthy interim period, so when I arrived, there were a number of non-members who had been waiting for me to come. They joined immediately once they sensed I was going to be a decent leader. Truth is, the congregation was not ready for them. The newcomers were turned off by contentiousness at meetings and gossip at coffee hour. Nearly half the earlier joiners – and we grew about 20 percent my first year – are now missing in action or attending other churches. With God's help, we are trying to resolve the unfinished business of old, festering conflicts.

**3. Improve people's lives.** That's the crux of our work. We are truly living our calling when our community knows us not just as a place for worship or emergency help, but as a place that takes its power seriously and channels it in order to transform people's lives for the better. This means finding the balance between charity and justice. It means providing meals but also improving overall access to food. It means setting aside fears of wading into political waters and taking a Christ-centered stand for the oppressed. Our congregations must earn the trust of people to convey God's love in their everyday lives and help them take the barrage of bad news they receive and translate it through the lens of Jesus' Good News.

– Kaji Douša

# Trusting This Generation



By Tim Ahrens '85 M.Div.

*During my nearly 16 years as senior minister of First Congregational Church (UCC) in downtown Columbus, Ohio, five of 11 downtown churches have closed. Of the remaining six, two are in decline, two are holding their own, and two are growing.*

Since January 2000, my congregation has doubled in size and grown younger every year – membership today is 1,119 adults and 324 children. A third of the church is now millennials. Born between 1981-2001, this rockin' rollin' middle of the congregation is exciting, joyful, energizing, and at times unnerving and exasperating. Let me explain.

Over time, our congregation has drawn up a series of three-year long-range plans to guide our future. We dream together, focus our vision, and put

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**The millennials in our congregation are exciting, joyful, energizing, and at times unnerving and exasperating. Let me explain.**

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it into action. The current committee is half millennials, half 35 and older. One co-chair is a millennial pastor, the other a 60-something creative genius.

## **Where Were They?**

At a recent planning meeting, most of our millennials were missing. At first, I was a little disturbed by their absence. I had worked hard to get them on the committee. But, in truth, they had more important places to be that night. One was leading the charge to change local ordinances to grant LGBTQ persons employment benefits and equal recognition under the law. Another was organizing a “Black Lives Matter” march. Another was leading a businesswomen’s retreat for rising stars in our city. Another was home with her young son who was sick. They were all in places of leadership, parenting, and activism where we *really* needed them that night.

At another meeting, one young millennial said, “We need to figure out how to help people give to the church. How can we be good stewards – or whatever the word is you use?” It turns out this dynamic local entrepreneurial leader doesn’t have a checkbook. But she does make her bill payments online, and she felt we could improve our congregational efforts through the latest technology. It turned out that four other millennials on the committee have never used a checkbook either. It was a jaw-dropping moment for our older leaders. The generations do life and church very differently.

Recently a young couple in their early 20s stopped me in the parking lot after worship. They love our church and worship. They considered themselves “members” even though they had only been to church twice in the last six months and I had never met them. They began to quote my sermons which they read and listen to on our website. They had tweeted, texted, and Facebooked my writings and homilies. As we stood there, they started asking pointed questions about the details of recent sermons. Although they did not attend regular worship, they were tuned in and very much in touch! Now if only we could hook them up for direct deposit weekly tithing ...

Yes, it is an exciting time to be the church.

## **Mending Body and Soul**

What makes for a flourishing congregation today? In our case, I believe it is a passion for social justice combined with a clear sense of loving and serving people – their physical and spiritual needs – right where we meet them. Love and justice, prayer and merciful ministries are woven together in our fabric

of faith. At the heart of it all in the heart of Ohio is meaningful worship, with quality music, prayers, preaching, and Christ's powerful presence.

These keep us growing in faith and action.

On June 26, hours after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on marriage equality, we opened our doors to the greater Columbus area for an evening service of celebration. We called it our "Decision Day" service. It offered poetry, scripture, hymns, and songs of joy. Hundreds of people gathered. They found us through Twitter and Facebook. Our friends at Equality Ohio counted it among the glorious celebrations of that monumental day. Those who came were of all faiths and no faith, all races and nationalities. LGBTQ and straight men, women, and children gathered to pray and praise God.

### **The Spirit of Gladden**

What Washington Gladden, a patriarch of the Social Gospel movement and our senior minister from 1882-1918, called "the Municipal Church" was alive that night. The Municipal Church serves the city on urgent issues of the day. In Gladden's words, "The Municipal Church is the church uniting to investigate and alleviate human suffering. ... It is the church recovering the sacred and vital functions which, in their division, have suffered to lapse." (*The Ohio State Journal*, October 1892)

The spirit of the Social Gospel moves within the rising generation. They are seeking to serve and alleviate human suffering. They know the planet and all its inhabitants cannot continue to spiral down. They know the church cannot continue to spiral down. What millennials bring to the task is an endearing spirit of enthusiasm and joy. They come to this project called "church" from many directions, with possibilities for both personal transformation and congregational renewal.

How do we honor that spirit from day to day? In our rapidly aging congregations, we need to trust millennial leaders and their new ways of doing things. We need to put them in charge and lead us forward. Our old ways aren't winning the new day. Let's try something different.

This can be harder than it sounds.

Last fall, I turned the stewardship campaign over to a millennial leader. I had some misgivings. He and his group of young organizers met in pubs and Paneras to plan our campaign. They challenged the congregation to "Imagine More." It was a simple, clear message that spoke to the heart. Disregarding most of our traditional communication procedures, the young leaders created excellent new materials, which they distributed themselves. The congrega-

tion responded by stepping up and into our best stewardship campaign in the church's 163-year history. Our giving grew by 15 percent – but the spirit of giving grew even more.

### **"I Got This"**

At one point I was asking all sorts of questions about the campaign. Our young leader said, "Tim, you have to trust me and let me lead. I got this." He was right. He had it. Although it looked, sounded, and

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felt different from anything we had done before, he delivered the church ahead of where we had ever been before. The less anxious I became the more successful our young leaders became. Letting God work through our youthful visionaries worked for all of us.

Every day I feel a deep sense of gratitude to be serving the church in this generation. When I read reports of an increasing number of non-affiliated people, I see possibilities, not problems. When I see the culture shifting away from traditional ways of doing church and pouring into the streets of need and the avenues of greed to address the wrongs of our times, I see hope. When I hear people say they don't like "organized religion," I invite them to join us, adding, "as Congregationalists we are rather 'disorganized' and 'not very religious,' so you might feel at home here." Most show up at some point and many find a place called home.

We need to trust our rising leaders to be the change we know we need. When we empower them to step up and lead, good things will happen.

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*The Rev. Tim Ahrens '85 M. Div. received YDS's William Sloane Coffin Award for Peace and Justice in 2008. This year he earned a D.Min. from Chicago Theological Seminary. His thesis was entitled: "Young and Growing Stronger: Creating a Model of Social Justice with a New Generation of 21st-Century Prophetic Witness Leaders."*

# Rethinking Christianity in the 21st Century



By Gregory E. Sterling

*Christianity is changing — rapidly — in a century where commerce, communications, and travel are connected globally in unprecedented ways. How do we understand these changes in the faith, and what impact will global connectedness have on the church?*

Trends have not dramatically eroded the relative number of Christians in the world. The overall percentage has been relatively stable. In 1910, approximately 35 percent of the world's total population were Christians; a century later, Christians comprised 32 percent.<sup>1</sup>

What has changed is Christianity's global geographical distribution. The basic shifts have been from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern and from the West to the East. In 1910, 66 percent of the world's Christians resided in Europe; in 2010, this percentage had fallen to 26 percent.<sup>2</sup> This is not

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## Today's global developments of the faith appear to be roughly analogous to the state of Christianity in the first three centuries C.E.

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due simply to the growth of Christianity elsewhere but to the secularization of Europe. Today churches there are being converted into other types of establishments at an alarming rate. In England there have been debates over the nature of the businesses that may take over church property — e.g., a pub is acceptable but a sex shop is not.

### World War and Bingo Nights

There are numerous reasons for the decline of Christianity in Europe. Two world wars have scarred the minds of many Europeans: People wondered where God was. Other factors are at work. One of the most interesting observations I have heard came from a Lutheran bishop in Sweden. At a dinner in Lund, I asked her how things were in her diocese. She said

people attended bingo nights during the week in far greater numbers than worship services on Sunday. I asked why. She suggested that the socialism of the Swedish government was a significant reason. The government had taken over the role that used to belong to the church. Instead of the church bringing meals to the ill or cleaning their house or providing a ride to the doctor, the government provided all of these services. The church had lost its role in society. Whatever the causes for the decline of Christianity in Europe, the reality of its decline is undeniable.

### The African Century?

By contrast, Christianity has been exploding in Africa. In 1910, only 1 percent of the world's Christians lived in sub-Saharan Africa; in 2010, this percentage had risen to 24 percent.<sup>3</sup> The growth has not only come in Pentecostal or charismatic movements but in mainline Christian traditions. In 1900, more than 80 percent of Anglicans lived in Britain; in 2008, that number had fallen to 33 percent. By 2008, the number of Anglicans in sub-Saharan Africa had reached 55 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church has grown exponentially in Africa over the last 100 years — from less than 1 percent of the world's Catholic population in 1900 to 16 percent of the global Catholic population in 2010.<sup>5</sup>

One overlooked factor is that many in Africa associate Christianity with democracy and economic prosperity. People gravitate to it as a means of upward mobility.

Christianity has increased in Latin America. Looking at Catholicism, we can see this growth: In 1910, 24 percent of the world's Catholics lived in

South America or the Caribbean; by 2010, this had risen to 39 percent.<sup>6</sup>

All these numbers tell the story of the southern migration of Christianity. In 1910, only 9 percent of the world's Christians lived in the South. In 2010, this had grown to 24 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Christianity has expanded in the East. It is estimated that in 1910, 4.5 percent of the world's Christians lived in the Asia Pacific region; in 2010, this number had blossomed to 13 percent.<sup>8</sup> The most

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### **Many in Africa associate Christianity with democracy and economic prosperity, gravitating to it as a means of upward mobility.**

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impressive Christian growth is taking place in China, although it is impossible to know exactly how fast. Since 1949 there has been an official church in communist China. Those unwilling to register have formed underground or house churches. Since the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), these have proliferated. One recent estimate places the total number of Christians in China at 67,070,000.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Pluralism Rising**

There is one other trend to take into account: When thinking about the global church, it is impossible to ignore the presence of other religions. With 32 percent of the world's population, Christianity is the largest religion today. However, Muslims comprise 23 percent, unaffiliated individuals 16 percent, Hindus 15 percent, Buddhists 7 percent, folk religionists 6 percent. All other groups are less than 1 percent.<sup>10</sup>

How should we respond to the shifting landscapes of the religious world? Let me offer four responses.

**1) A Changing Center of Gravity.** Christianity's numerical shift from North to South and from West to East will alter its character in significant ways. For those Christians who belong to a worldwide communion, the presence of Africans will become more and more evident. Among Protestants this means the African churches will soon – if they do not already – have more votes than their northern counterparts. Some tensions already exist between North and South. Christians in the Southern Hemisphere tend to be more ethically conservative. Churches like the Anglican Communion or the United Methodists will need to negotiate these differences. The election of a Latin American pope has shaken up the ethos of Catholicism. Further change is likely in store when the church one day elects a pope from

Africa. In short, we cannot consider the future of the worldwide faith without regarding the churches in the Southern Hemisphere as a rising force.

**2) Theology.** If we believe experience is a vehicle of theology, we will need to learn to respect the different experiences that shape theologies across the world. These will have a direct impact on our theological reflection. In China there are natural tensions between the official church and the underground or house churches, although these appear to be improving. In Africa, Christians struggle with the relationship between their spirituality and indigenous religions.<sup>11</sup> The spirituality of African Christians is often a blend of native and Christian expressions.

These developments appear to me to be roughly analogous to the state of Christianity in the first three centuries C.E. At one time, there was a model of thinking of the early church as a single monolithic tradition. The tradition began with Jesus Christ, was developed by the apostles, and came to full expression in the work of the bishops who succeeded the

#### **WHY I STILL GO**

By J. Barrie Shepherd '64 B.D., '65 M.A.

For all their quirks and quibbles, all their foibles,  
squabbles, even downright donnybrooks,  
I find my people there.

Recalcitrant, to be sure, concerning this issue,  
or that. As reluctant as those first followers  
to accept what fairest Jesus brought to life.  
Yet singing the same sweet songs.  
Murmuring familiar prayers.

Admitting, as I must, that another week  
has worn its way, no closer to the kingdom.  
Hungering, across years of disappointment,  
for words that ring so clear they melt  
the frozen marrow, drag you back again –  
despite – to trust, compassion, even resolution.

For all my weary, reasoned doubt,  
the continuing disillusion and despair  
of this already blood-drenched century,  
for all my anger at her blind echoing  
of the worst that hides in all of us,  
come Sunday morning, somehow,  
I still find myself in church.



apostles. Some offshoots from this tradition were heterodox, but they were exposed by the apostles and then by the heresiologists. This model of Christian origins is largely the construction of early Christian heresiologists like Irenaeus.

Twentieth-century scholarship overturned this model. Today it is recognized that Christianity emerged in different forms in various locales.<sup>12</sup> The experience of Christianity in 1st-century Jerusalem was quite different than the Christianity in Corinth. Initially there was no such thing as orthodoxy in

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**It is impossible to ignore the presence of other religions when thinking of Christianity globally. We must find ways to be loyal to our own beliefs and yet be tolerant of others.**

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the sense of a uniform and well-defined movement. Orthodoxy emerged from the coalescence of various forms or patterns of Christianity. This does not mean that there was no continuity with the earliest forms of Christianity, but that orthodoxy was a clear development. It was not enforceable until the rise of bishops and the adoption of Christianity by Constantine.

In other words, rather than thinking of enforced uniformity, we need to think of diversity within a larger unity. If this is unnerving, we should remember that it was the diversity of the early centuries that helped to give Christianity its vibrancy and allowed it to take root in multiple circumstances throughout the Roman world. I think we need to allow for the same freedom today.

**3) Community.** The digital world is the greatest innovation since the printing press, and it has altered the way we think about community. The statistical rise of the “nones” has generated a new sociological category – people who have a sense of spirituality but are allergic to religious institutions. This generation forms customized cyber-communities rather than flesh-and-blood communities. The fact that two-thirds of the nones in the U.S. are spiritual but not religious makes them different from their more secular European counterparts. Notably, the phenomenon of non-affiliation is generational: 32 percent of those age 18-29 consider themselves nones, compared to only 9 percent of those over 65.

The current generation is wary of institutional forms of Christianity for many reasons. The scandals of the institutional church, the larger distrust of

institutions, the failure of churches to proclaim the gospel clearly or authentically have all contributed. In my opinion, a crucial factor is the way younger people think about community and by extension religion. They regard religion as a matter of optional personal programming. Many create their own networks rather than join one that incorporates them. They do not join churches. Congregations are struggling to relate. As one minister memorably remarked: “We have too many eight-track churches in a MP3 world.”<sup>14</sup> We need to learn how to build communities through digital communications that address the needs of flesh-and-blood human beings. We need to show how diverse people can live together and love one another in the spirit of Christ.

**4) From Faith to Faith.** We must recognize that we are only one-third of the world’s population. How should we think of the other two-thirds? In practical ways, the issue is more pressing for some Christians than for others. In the last decade, 45 percent of new marriages in the U.S. crossed major confessional lines or were interfaith. In 1950, only 20 percent of the marriages were interdenominational or interfaith. One possible implication of this is that it will promote good relations among the communities of faith. We will need to maintain our civility as the mix of faiths changes. On the other hand, studies suggest interfaith marriages face higher rates of dissatisfaction or failure. I do not expect these marriages to become less frequent, but acknowledge that they can be a challenge.

### **Credibility at Risk**

Meanwhile, there are too many places in our world where religion is used as a pretext for violence. This should concern all people of faith. It threatens to increase the percentage of unaffiliated dramatically. It is a threat to the credibility of all faiths.

We must find ways to be loyal to our own beliefs or practices and yet be tolerant of others. As a Christian I cannot say what Mahatma Gandhi said

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**We must learn how to build communities through digital communications that address the needs of flesh-and-blood human beings.**

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when asked if he was a Hindu. Gandhi replied, “Yes I am. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, and a Jew.” As much as I admire Gandhi, I can only confess that I am a Christian. My loyalty to Christ is exclusive. This does not, however, require that I take an exclusive stance to religion. As a Christian I

have a Bible that contains the Jewish Bible. It would be incredibly foolish of me to deny that Jews understand God or deny the validity of the majority of my own Scriptures.

The world is moving in profound ways. We should not think that Christianity is disappearing. It is, however, changing.

### The Ends of the Earth

I have spent a good deal of my life studying Luke-Acts in the New Testament. In my opinion, the two works offer a self-definition of Christianity within the larger ancient Greco-Roman world. The author did not think locally but globally. The Gospel opens and closes in Jerusalem. Acts opens in Jerusalem and closes in Rome, a symbolic geographical move. The author set this up at the beginning of Acts when Jesus said to the apostles: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."<sup>15</sup> The most fascinating aspect of this declaration about "the ends of the earth" is that it is left open. Paul is taken to Rome where he awaits trial, but never comes to trial. As readers we want to know what happened to him. The author does not tell us. Why not? I do not believe it is because the author did not know Paul's fate, but that the author wanted us to understand that the story was not over. It continued. This was the author's way to challenge us to continue the story "to the ends of the earth."

We live in a world that the author of Acts never imagined but did allow for when taking the story to the ends of the earth. I will say to you what I say to the students at Yale Divinity School. Christianity is changing in our globalized world; I do not know what it will look like in 50 years, but I know that you will write its history with your lives. Write it well.

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*Gregory E. Sterling is The Reverend Henry L. Slack Dean and Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School. The author of several books, he concentrates his research in Hellenistic Judaism, the writings of Philo of Alexandria, Josephus, and Luke-Acts. His next book, for Eerdmans, is called Defining the Present through the Past.*

### Notes

- 1 Luis Lugo and Alan Cooperman, "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (Dec. 19, 2011). The estimated numbers are 611,810,000 of the world's 1,758,410,000 total population in 1910 and 2,184,060,000 of the world's 6,895,890,000 total population in 2010.

- 2 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity."
- 3 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity."
- 4 Luis Lugo, Brian J. Grim, and Elizabeth Podrebarac, "Global Anglicanism at a Crossroads," Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (June 19, 2008).
- 5 "The Global Catholic Population," Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (Feb. 13, 2013). The numbers are from less than 1 million to 171 million.
- 6 "The Global Catholic Population." The estimated numbers are 70,650,000 in 1910 and 425,400,000 in 2010.
- 7 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity."
- 8 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity."
- 9 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity." There have been several recent attempts to count Christians. For consistency I have used the Pew numbers.
- 10 "The Global Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life Project (Dec. 18, 2012). The estimated numbers are 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 1.1 billion unaffiliated, 1 billion Hindus, 500 million Buddhists, 400 million folk religionists (e.g., African tribal religions, Chinese folk religions, North American religions, or Australian aboriginal religions), and 14 million Jews.
- 11 Among the studies that address this, Lamin Sanneh's *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Hurst, 1983) and Gerrie ter Haar, *How God became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), are notable.
- 12 The classic statement of this is Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei in ältesten Christentum* (BHT 10; Tübingen: Mohr, 1934, 19642). There is an English translation, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (trans. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krobel, Fortress, 1971).
- 13 This has been reported by many, most famously in "'Nones' on the Rise," Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life Project (Oct. 9, 2012).
- 14 Otis Moss III in the Beecher Lectures, Yale Divinity School (October 2014).
- 15 Acts 1:8. See the echo in Acts 13:47.



*Last summer, Bishop Michael B. Curry '78 M.Div. and the Episcopal Church made history: Denominational delegates elected Curry as Presiding Bishop, the first African American to lead the church body.*

*His election culminates a ministry of nearly 40 years as a parish priest and, mostly recently, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina.*

*Curry is known for strengthening support for local parish ministry, organizing investment in inner-city neighborhoods, and supporting campaigns for the Millennium Development Goals.*

*In his 2013 book Crazy Christians: A Call to Follow Jesus, Curry writes of God's intentions for the world from biblical times until now, a vision of challenging injustice and cruelty. Jesus "showed us the way to live beyond what often are the nightmares of our own sin-filled human design and into the direction of God's dream." He spoke to Reflections in August.*

**REFLECTIONS:** *As Presiding Bishop, is there a particular theme you'll want to emphasize?*

**THE MOST REV. MICHAEL CURRY:** One thing I've already been talking about is: I really do believe we need to see ourselves as a movement – a Jesus movement – rather than as an institution. That's what Jesus was about. He inaugurated a movement to make God's dream happen. To see ourselves this way changes everything. It means our institutional configurations must be designed to serve the movement and not the other way around. The movement serves life. There is no life in serving the institution.

**REFLECTIONS:** *How do we go about this practically in a world of budgets, programs, and infrastructure?*

**CURRY:** I go back to what (lay theologian) William Stringfellow (1928-85) taught us. We must become radically biblical and theological. We must enter our communities deeply and intentionally, with love. If we do that, then we'll find a way to deal with our buildings and budgets. They'll find a new purpose. But it all starts with Bible study and prayer. These things lead to action. You can't read the Book of Exodus without being stirred by the theme of the liberation of people. We have to engage with the Word deeply – that's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer did, that's what Martin Luther King Jr. did. There are no institutional quick fixes or gimmicks that will turn a church around. Bible and prayer – then you deal with the institutions. Then you can transform institutions into servants of the Jesus movement.

**REFLECTIONS:** *What does success look like?*

**CURRY:** Success will always be blood-stained: It is linked to life-giving sacrifice. A congregation that lives only for itself will die by itself. A congregation that lives for God and others will live. For example, there's a historically African American congregation in North Carolina that decided to give up its historic identity and reach out to the changing neighborhood. The result was to welcome its Latino neighbors and start creating a truly multiethnic church. Confirmations have dramatically increased. They opened themselves to the world. Any community that does that is going to have life.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Thinking back to your YDS days, do particular mentors and ideas remain important to you?*

**CURRY:** YDS was and is a place of creative ferment – ecumenical, interfaith – that helped me be open to the idea that God is the source of all truth. This freed me to converse with other traditions without fear. Where truth is found, God is there. I think of Brevard Childs, who taught Old Testament. He helped me see the Bible as a whole, but also in its details it had a message for us each day. Before the word "spirituality" became popular, Henri Nouwen taught us how to pray, unhinging our prayers from our egotistical needs. Leon Watts made us see the connection between world and Word. He stressed that Jesus is as much about saving broken bodies as about saving souls.

**REFLECTIONS:** *We're accustomed to statistics about declines in church membership. Do you have advice for seminarians entering parish ministry?*

**CURRY:** I'm very familiar with the Pew Research numbers, but I don't think this era is any more challenging than what Bonhoeffer faced in Nazi Germany or what Harriet Beecher Stowe confronted before the Civil War. We are encountering new complexities in our time, but I don't think they're anything substantially different from the time of the Acts of the Apostles. The challenge always is to hear the radical call of Jesus to turn the world upside down – that is, to set it back right side up again! We'll know we're on the road toward that when real love is seen and experienced as the practical law that liberates our lives. It reveals itself in a commitment to seek the well-being of others before my own self-interest. In such a world, we won't allow children to go to bed hungry or deny them an education that would enable them to fulfill God's intentions for them. And our politics will be focused on the common good, and poverty will be a thing of the past. Then we'll know we're moving toward God's dream.

# Public Confession: From Shadows to Grace



By Molly Phinney Baskette '96 M.Div.

*Recently my friend took her 12-year-old daughter to see Taylor Swift in concert. She described the LED wristbands adorning the hands of the 60,000 tweenage girls and their moms, programmed to light up in sync with the music so that even the people in the nosebleed seats could feel like they were part of the magic.*

She described the budding-feminist coaching talk from Swift, the thrill of ego boundaries falling away into the collective tumult, the incandescent joy of a stadium full of blooming womanhood.

"It really was the most amazing, positive, secular, extremely professional and well-orchestrated-down-to-the-second church I've ever experienced," my friend said.

As she talked, I found myself getting jealous. I have a nine-year-old daughter, and I first blamed my feelings on missing a chance to win Mom points by taking her to the concert myself.

But the truth was: I was the one who wanted the transcendent moment, the priceless worship experience for the low, low cost of \$145.

I'm a pastor – the pastor of a church where 75 percent of my congregation is younger than me: under 45. They have tattoos and piercings and interesting facial hair; they are full-on church nerds and nones.

## **Neglected Statistic**

We are not a megachurch. We are not a hybrid newangelical emerging-type hipster church. We are a mainline Protestant (albeit wildly progressive) church that has had a dramatic renewal. Why do the millennials come to us? Because they're looking for something: that same experience of transcendence that 60,000 screaming girls find at a Taylor Swift concert.

The Pew Research Center, which regularly surveys the decline of Christian institutions (why thank you!) has a curiously optimistic and easily overlooked stat buried in its last oracle of doom for the

mainline church. The percentage of millennials who say a "very religious life" is important to them? Fully 30 percent. Thirty percent! That's almost 30 million young people looking for the kind of guidance, spiritual practices, authentic community, and yes, transcendence, that our churches can offer them. Take that, naysayers.

Problem is, the millennials are more sophisticated and demanding of authenticity and beauty than previous generations. The truth is, most of our churches probably don't have the resources or aesthetic chops of a Taylor Swift or even an emerging church. I know mine doesn't.

But we do have something arguably even better. We have our stories, in which God is the protagonist, if we tell them right. We have our ancient scrip-

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**The percentage of millennials who say a "very religious life" is important to them? Fully 30 percent. That's almost 30 million young people looking for the kind of community and transcendence our churches can offer. Take that, naysayers.**

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ture stories – and we have our modern personal stories, which we can see better in the light cast by those vintage stories.

And we can tell our personal stories, of failure and triumph, in a holy way, to people who know us well (or will, after we tell-all). We have a way, each week, of "putting our woundedness into the service of others," as the late, extraordinary Henri Nouwen urged us.

Last year I wrote a book about our church's rise from the (near) dead. People were always wanting to know the "one thing" we did to turn things around. I got tired of telling them it wasn't one thing, it was 200 things, so I wrote them all down.

But in our short-attention-span, anxious, busy modern life, people still wanted to know the *one* thing, so I told them it was this: our longtime practice of weekly lay-led testimony, a confession of our sins and deepest vulnerabilities, offered in our sanctuary during Sunday morning worship.

### **Knees Knocking**

Fifty-two weeks a year, someone in our congregation climbs the steps to the chancel, with their knees knocking and their mouth going dry. They step up to the microphone, clear their throat, and say, "Now is the time when we bring our own stories before God."

Then they tell of a time when they broke down, broke bad, or made Jesus want to cry. They confess their sins and their vulnerabilities.

*"I've been bulimic since I was 13 ..."*

*"He used to come into my room at night ..."*

*"The first time I tried crystal meth ..."*

*"And that's when I threw the toy truck across the room and screamed at him ..."*

*"I thought I was one of the good white people – the ones who 'got it' ..."*

Jacques Derrida said that anything we fall silent before has become our god. When there are topics that are verboten in church, we've allowed them to eclipse the God who made us (*every* part of us, even the shady bits). And any power that worship has to help us heal and integrate is rendered useless.

That's why, in my congregation, we make it a point to talk about everything: drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll, addiction, racism, every strain of mental health crisis, nose-diving marriages, pride, ego and ambition, as well as the biggest taboo in church,

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**By confessing, we haul everything into the light of day, where we can get a good look at what was living in the shadow so it doesn't get the best of us.**

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money. We talk about them not as abstract concepts but as real sins – wrongs done to us and wrongs done by us. There is nothing our people must leave outside the doors of our church – not one piece or part of ourselves that is not welcome, no matter how ugly, shameful, or stigmatized.

Confessing our sin returns us to God's great democracy. It puts everybody on the same level, the homeless drunk and the Wall Street tycoon. It also breaks down the fourth wall when we do this, destroying the fiction that the people up here on the chancel are different or better or have it more together than the people down there in the pews.

### **Shadowland**

And confessing helps us deal with the shadow side that Jung (thank you!) warned is in every one of us. By confessing, we haul everything into the light of day, where we can get a good look at what was living in the shadow so it doesn't get the best of us.

We can see ourselves and show ourselves as we really are, and still be loved.

I've attended or served New England Congregational churches my whole life. I've met wonderful people in all of them: good-hearted, well-meaning, God-loving people. I've also encountered, in many of those churches, an unbelievable number of skeletons in the closet: sexual abuse, family violence, undiagnosed mental illness that led to grave trauma, all because church was a place where folks felt the need to present well. But if you're already naked, you've got nothing to hide. Confessing our little sins helps us identify and name the big ones before they destroy us, our lives and families.

The Gospel of Thomas says: "if you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." Or as the late, great Maya Angelou put it millennia later, "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story."

### **The Great Physician**

It is worth remembering that the Greek word for Christ's wounds, *stigmata*, is the plural for stigma. Our wounds need light and air to heal. When folks offer testimony, we get to see the Great Physician's activity in a kind of divine montage sequence. And we believe. We believe not just for the testifier, but for ourselves: "*If God did that for X, God could do it for me ...*"

We often weep as we tell our stories. Tears are a sign that the Holy Spirit is present. And those sitting in the pews, many of whom have taken their turn already on a Sunday previous, hold those who are speaking – with our eyes, with our callbacks, and sometimes with our arms – so they can hold it together until they get to the end and get to talk about grace.

Because we always end with grace. Nouwen said we are to share wounds that are already well on their way to healing – this is the way to minister to each other. There comes a moment, toward the end of each confession, when the tone changes. It's usually a version of, *"And that's when the light went on."* And we tell each other how God entered the story, and wrote a different ending, and held up the mirror so we could see ourselves: beautiful and beloved, just as we are, and as we are becoming.

### God in Disguise

But a regular practice of confession is more than reclaiming the ancient, biblical power of testimony in sweet, halting words that declare the power of God to transform our lives.

It's also pastoral care, when, preparing for the next Sunday liturgy, I ask probing and pruning questions that move each testimony from first draft to final.

It's communion and community-building, as people mentor each other into health, strength, and recovery from addiction or trauma.

It's theological reflection, as layfolk (who would blush to hear "theological reflection" used to describe what they are doing) discern God's movement in their lives, and ferret out the application of scriptural wisdom to their experience.

And this practice has expanded our view of the One who made us and is still exponentially active in our lives. We get to see God wearing a lot of different disguises in these stories of grace: rock-bottom, best friend or spouse, final confrontation, peace that passeth all understanding, Higher Power, deathbed conversion, chance encounter, college counseling center, pastor, fellow pew-sitter, dark night of the soul, Savior, midnight conversation, wake-up call, letter in the mail, Co-Creator and Co-Conspirator in redemption.

Every one of those knock-kneed people, age 9 to 92, and every one of those stories, becomes a finger pointing to God. It's real good church. It's the best church. And it's free.

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*Molly Phinney Baskette '96 M.Div. is minister of First Church Somerville MA UCC. Her new book is Standing Naked Before God: The Art of Public Confession (Pilgrim Press). This essay is adapted from the book with permission from the publisher. She is also author of Real Good Church: How Our Church Came Back from the Dead and Yours Can Too (Pilgrim Press, 2014).*

### COMING BACK DOWN

By Donovan McAbee

The power of suggestion,  
a need for release,  
or what was it landed me

flat on my back against  
the cold concrete floor  
of that little storefront church?

The preacher uttering sounds  
disconnected from language  
over my laid-out body

as that high and lonesome gospel  
lifted me elsewhere, beyond  
the trials of my teenage self.

Mama helped me stagger to the car,  
weak-kneed and Spirit-drunk  
when the worship service ended.

I'd never been to a church like that.  
I don't know what it was  
made the preacher single me out.

Maybe I looked an easy target,  
or maybe he read on my face the signs  
of someone in need of a good dose of wonder.

Whatever it was, that afternoon,  
as we drove through the mountains,  
I couldn't stop crying for the beauty of it all.



# A Gospel of Justice *and* Obedience



By Bruce Gordon

*Having grown up in liberal mainline churches as a young person in Canada and Scotland, I have watched communities that I cared deeply about shrink and almost vanish. By the time we left Scotland my daughter found herself almost alone in Sunday school in our local parish. My wife's grandmother, at age 90 and a lifelong stalwart of the Church of Scotland, witnessed the closure of her church and its amalgamation with another congregation.*

The stories of decline and disappearance are all too familiar and can be told by anyone involved in churches on either side of the Atlantic. The problems for the mainline churches brought on by such evident decline are numerous, including the loss of financial stability and the inability to attract men and women of prophetic stature to lead from the pulpit. Denominations are further damaged by the departure of usually large and wealthy congregations for more conservative associations.

## **In Search of Guidance**

How do we explain the church's loss of position in our society? Facing social, economic, and security problems on a bewildering scale in an age of extreme turbulence, people are not turning to the mainline churches for guidance. Why should they? What do the churches have to offer that cannot be provided by organizations in the wider secular world?

These questions demand attention. One answer is indicated in John Calvin's commentary on Isaiah 56:7: "*Yet it must here be observed that we are called into the Church, in order that we may call on God; for in vain do they boast who neglect prayer and true calling upon God, and yet hold a place in the Church. In whatever place we are, therefore, let us not neglect this exercise of faith; for we learn from the words of Isaiah, as it is also said, (Ps 50:14) that this is the highest and most excellent sacrifice which God demands; so that the holiness of the temple consists in prayers being there offered continually.*"

Our churches need to be houses of prayer and prophetic preaching. As Nora Tisdale has declared: "prophetic preaching will always be done by a remnant, by people who find the courage and audacity to speak to the status quo."<sup>1</sup> She further argues that "today's political climate makes prophetic preaching harder to pull off. ... A national partisan mood makes people in the pews wary of sermons that smack of a polemical agenda."<sup>2</sup> The more difficult the climate, the more we need those prophetic voices.

## **Beyond the Comfort Zone**

I would argue that one element of that prophetic voice is a more expansive theology that takes the mainline churches into areas outside their comfort

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**It is time for us to be bold in declaring our convictions and generous in our conversations with those with whom we do not agree. That is progress.**

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zone. Whereas issue-driven preaching is common enough, the churches have too little to say about the redemptive nature of Christ and salvation. Such parts of the theological spectrum have been too readily abandoned to "evangelicals" (however that term is defined) or "conservatives." Inclusivity and diversity are essential parts of our contemporary communities, but we must give further thought to how they relate to a vigorous theology of proclama-

tion, salvation, and the mission of the church. When we stop seeing traditional theological aspects of the faith as inimical to social justice, then powerful voices will more clearly be heard, the holiness of our temples will be seen, and a prophetic distance from the values of the world will be evident.

It's brutally tough, and risks criticism and hostility, but it is our mission. The mainline churches should offer social outreach in the world, seeking to transform creation according to a saving faith. Rooted in the whole gospel message, our churches should give people a reason to believe that God loves and forgives but also demands obedience and commitment. We must declare a theology that leads us to pray and worship and go forth to see the face of Christ in all.

### **A Hard Conversation**

Essential to renewal is a willingness to sit down with groups and individuals with whom there is considerable disagreement on a range of hot-button issues. At YDS in May, we attempted such a gathering. Many of the 25 participants – faculty, students, visitors from across the country – were skeptical that such conversations were even possible. No one group won over the others, but there was a prevail-

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### **In liberal and conservative churches there is considerable infatuation with secular models of development and progress.**

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ing civility, a spirit of generous listening. On pastoral issues, for example, there was remarkable common ground. On issues of ordination and sexual equality, there was less so. Nevertheless, for two and a half days we talked.

Above all we discussed church growth and the problems facing congregations across the spectrum. In liberal and conservative churches there is considerable infatuation with secular models of development and progress. Many within the evangelical movement believe the more people in seats the better, and business methods are employed to maximize numbers. Further, the forms of worship and community are developed to maximize attendance, leading to the abandonment of more serious biblical studies, lectures, or youth group activities as not “fun enough.” At our meeting several spoke of the risks inherent in the culture of church planting, and the question of how deep run the conversions of those brought in the door.

For both mainline and evangelical participants, a dominant theme was the megachurch in American religious culture. Many asked whether such churches were the inevitable result of the logic of the desire for growth. Examples were discussed, and it soon became evident that although these churches employed methods drawn from the world of marketing they clearly filled a need that many of our churches are failing to meet. The relationship between the church and the secular world is deeply complicated by our desire to understand human behavior and our unwillingness to sell the gospel as a commodity. This dilemma is at the heart of the hard conversation awaiting us.

### **Tension and Truth**

The Reformation taught us about the complex relationship between the sacred and the secular, and the tension between the two is evident in our discussion of church growth. To what extent should we draw upon the wisdom of the world to serve the gospel? At what point is there compromise of the message? Yet to live in naïve isolation risks a slow and painful demise. The Great Commission sends us forth and the Word of God must be proclaimed loudly, and God's justice is demanded in the world. Yet the Commission is not about numbers. That is to put the cart before the horse. It's about faithfulness.

It is easy to be dispirited about the state of the church and its seemingly endless divisions. We always need to remind ourselves that when we look to our brothers and sisters in the Majority World that we face a very Western problem. Nevertheless, it is time for us to be bold in declaring our convictions and generous in our conversations with those with whom we do not agree. That is growth. That is progress. As Paul says, “Now is the day of salvation.”

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*Bruce Gordon is Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical History at YDS. From 1994-2008, he taught at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, where he earned a Ph.D. In 2012 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Zurich. His books include Calvin (Yale, 2009) and The Swiss Reformation (Manchester, 2002). A new book, on Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, will appear with Princeton University Press in 2016.*

### **Notes**

- 1 See more at <http://notesfromthequad.yale.edu/notes/2012-09-28-000000/nora-tisdale-prophetic-preaching-hope-grace-and-forgiveness#sthash.dECF1Gjn.dpuf>.
- 2 Ibid.

# Learning from Megachurches: Interview with Scott Thumma



*Scott Thumma is professor of sociology of religion at Hartford Seminary, where he is also director of the doctor of ministry program and the director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Thumma is widely cited for his studies of megachurches, nondenominational churches, and a range of American congregational trends. He is co-author of *The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants* (Jossey-Bass, 2011) and *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (Jossey-Bass, 2007). Thumma has an M.Div. and Ph.D. from Emory University. As for his own spiritual background, he grew up independent Baptist and has had involvement with Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, and Southern Baptist congregations, as well as nondenominational megachurches and small independent charismatic fellowships. He doesn't presently belong to any congregation. "I think of myself not as someone affiliated with a denomination but as a spiritual person who occasionally affiliates with particular congregations."*

**REFLECTIONS: Do you worry about the future of mainline churches?**

**SCOTT THUMMA:** All the time! The world is changing, and much of the old mainline model is based on the 1950s. And it was successful, so it's difficult to let that go. The inclination is to keep the same model and say, "Let's just try harder." But the world isn't

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**"Why am I here at this church?" A person who is excited about being there can answer that question in 12 words or less.**

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there anymore. You see this in commerce and business. IBM was dominant for so long, then it slipped – it didn't change fast enough. After World War II, a particular church style got concretized. It became

a spiritual model that looked authentic but in fact was simply relevant to a particular time in U.S. history, reflecting the organizational values of the day. Mainline churches at the time were reflecting the times. Megachurches are reflecting the times today.

**REFLECTIONS: In America, "success" usually means "big." Does the culture of the moment usually dictate the ways churches organize themselves?**

**THUMMA:** I don't think culture drives theology, but it does shape our organizations and institutions. So, if contemporary life is characterized by screens and big-scale presentation and choices and customization of those choices, and then for one hour a week you go into a church that has no screen, no choices, I don't think the prospects are good for that church.

**REFLECTIONS: Shouldn't churches question the culture around them?**

**THUMMA:** Yes. At the healthy congregations I see, the message is countercultural – values of humility, serving others, high levels of giving.

**REFLECTIONS:** *What about dissent – questioning values of national life that glorify consumerism or tolerate economic inequality and give blessing to war? The complaint against megachurches is they customarily avoid that kind of outspoken witness.*

**THUMMA:** They are not alone. When I speak at liberal congregations, I tell them frankly that I don't very often hear a forceful public prophetic message from them that condemns economic injustice or corporate abuses and military power. I don't hear it from prominent clergy. In the 1960s and 70s they had impact. Then the influence of religion in society started to decline – clergy sex scandals and televangelists in the 1980s and 90s contributed to that. Today, many church leaders don't use their platform for taking political risks. They fear that a few more congregations will leave. But I think the message has to be countercultural – standing up to politicians and Congress and cultural trends. Churches should be addressing this every week, declaring how their faith relates to issues of race and justice in practical, actionable ways.

**REFLECTIONS:** *We've seen the word Christian itself get rebranded in the last 40 years.*

**THUMMA:** The political conservative agenda has been allowed to define what it means to be religious and Christian. When a vast majority of young people hear the word religion, they think of only one model – extreme or intolerant – and that's not what they want. The only way they will end up in a church is to be invited by friends who say their church offers passion and joy, not extremism or intolerance, and they're there because they're growing spiritually.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Does a particular model work?*

**THUMMA:** Our research shows that having contemporary services does correlate with growth, but it's not nearly as important as a spirit of innovation, the willingness to change. That doesn't mean there's only one model for the growth or health of a congregation. There isn't one model. I recently visited 15 big churches in Atlanta. Almost all of them were on the evangelical side, but none of them had the same feel. There were slight differences in style and theology. What they do have in common is a willingness to change and experiment with technology and reach out to new people.

**REFLECTIONS:** *You've written that a mark of a healthy church is the excitement you notice there.*

**THUMMA:** I look for the 40 percent. If you can find 40 percent in a congregation who are passionately involved and who think exciting things are happening there, then that congregation is more likely to grow.

I can walk into a church, and it feels exciting – or it feels dead. The exciting place is where people come up to you and say, there's a cool event happening here next week and I'd like you to come. They don't even have to say, "Would you like to know Jesus?" But they're letting you know that they are getting something at church that they can't get anywhere else – spiritual growth. This might mean they are learning to teach a Sunday school class, or they are handing out sandwiches at the soup kitchen. Each of those things is experienced as spiritual growth.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Has "megachurch" undergone redefinition over the years?*

**THUMMA:** In the 1980s, the definition focused on congregations with attendance of 2,000 or more, and it probably also included screens and charismatic pastors and small groups on weeknights. Over time, those characteristics were copied by smaller churches. The definition today still focuses on 2,000 weekly attendance. But such churches now likely use

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**When a vast majority of young people hear the word religion, they think of only one model – extreme or intolerant – and that's not what they want.**

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a multi-site model – and they are seriously engaged in social outreach. This social outreach dimension represents a maturing within megachurches. In the 80s and 90s they were growing overnight and didn't know necessarily how to do church organization, so they turned inward to learn how to do education and nurture and management. And now they're figuring out how to do missions.

**REFLECTIONS:** *What are three things mainline churches can learn from megachurches?*

**THUMMA:** The first theme is hospitality. In my experience, bigger churches engage the visitor. They are good at the care and feeding of new people. They follow up. They are also better at racial and intergenerational diversity. Second, they are lay-led. Even when the church is large, it doesn't have enough money to afford all the staff it needs. It depends on laypeople. They are doing the main work. Third, there's a sense of purpose and vision. The question is, Why am I here? A person who is excited about being there can answer that question in 12 words or less. They believe God is doing something through them in the community. Or perhaps they believe the church is there to give people hope. Now, here's the point about these three themes: All three of them can be done at a smaller church. It doesn't require a megachurch to be good at hospitality, lay involvement, and purpose. You can have those things at any size.

The leader sings it, and all rise. Sings of the hush, irrevocable. Sings of tumult, the song like a storm roaring between past and present. All join in. The song entering each singer as an anthem of faith re-emerging as dirge. Each singer an island, an orphaned silence filled. The nine named over and over. The books lying open. The whispers. Dust bits hanging in a slant of sun. Now the song as memory of the vanished. As a way of counting them one by one. What is lost, replenished by grace. Each mouth full of words incinerated, carrying on. For none of the extinguished will go voiceless. Mouths full of prayer will hear them – listening forever creased by heartbreak. A thousand songs. Faces and candles from here to the horizon, and more. The hymn multiplies into a living continent of song. All sing it. All rise.

# High-Stakes Christianity



By Nancy S. Taylor '81 M.Div.

*What makes for a Christ-witnessing, mercy-making, soul-impacting, life-saving, disciples-forming, justice-insisting, enemy-loving, peace-pursuing, boundary-crossing, joy-abounding church today? I can't speak for others, but I can speak to what animates the Christian witness of one church: Old South Church in Boston.*

Over the past 10 years Old South Church has grown and flourished in measurable ways – membership, attendance, additional worship services, Christian formation, financial stewardship, outreach, lay leadership, social media, baptism (including adult baptisms) and, not least, in the production of babies!

Less easy to measure, but palpable in our life together: We have grown more evangelical, inspired, bolder in our ministries and deeper in discipleship.

How? Why? Is there a formula for realizing an inspired church? I think there may be.

First and foremost, our Christian life is animated by a shared conviction that what we do matters – urgently, desperately matters – because the stakes are so terribly high.

## **The World at Our Door**

You see, every single day Old South Church's open door gives welcome to homeless persons and drug addicts; to individuals diagnosed with terrifying illnesses who have come to Boston desperate for a cure; to European tourists who assumed, until they entered our sanctuary, that buildings like ours were antiquated caverns with neither life to them nor meaningful purpose; to fresh-faced college students away from home and in peril of losing their way in an enticing new city; to those who tarry in our sanctuary and write out their most deeply felt prayers, slip them into our Prayer Box, and entrust them to our keeping; to LGBTQ folk who weep to learn that they are welcomed, as is, and cherished by a Christian church that is learning about gender non-conformity; to individuals whose grief over a loved one's death is so new and raw that it is life-threatening; to those who, hungry and thirsty for Christ, experience

a generous invitation to the Lord's Table whether they are more sinner than saint, whether confessed, baptized, or rattled and riddled by doubt; to Muslims in Boston on business who rush in at the hour of prayer and ask if there might be a space where they could pray ... who are shown to a quiet room and pointed in the direction of Mecca.

## **Biblical Proportions**

To put it differently, seven days a week, the stories and drama of scripture reverberate in Old South Church as we encounter the likes of blind Bartimaeus, curious Zacchaeus, the Syrophenician woman, the Geresene demoniac, the rich young man, both the wounded traveler in the ditch and his Good Samaritan, the prodigal son along with his brother and father, the bleeding woman who has expended everything and Jairus whose daughter is

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**Because the stakes are so high for so very many people – as high today as they were in 1st-century Palestine – we aim to be as porous to the city around us as we can be.**

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nigh unto death, the boy convulsed with an unclean spirit and his anguished father, and the woman with too many husbands.

The walking wounded are everywhere around us. Yet the chance to capture their attentions and fire their religious imaginations is always fleeting. The occasion to intrigue them with the possibilities of Christian community, to touch them with prayer or awaken their spirits with deep ritual or meet

their loneliness with companionship, is momentary. Should they feel rebuked or judged, belittled or patronized, they will vanish like smoke. They will remember what they have read and heard of Christians (that we are judgmental, outdated, boring) and they will move on.

And we will have failed them. And we will have failed Jesus. We will have failed at Jesus' kindness, at his ministrations to the stranger, the other – forsaken the mindfulness and the soulfulness he brought to each new encounter.

### **Souls at Risk**

Because the stakes are so high for so very many people – as high today as they were in 1st-century Palestine – and because we can't tell by looking at a person what it is that terrifies them or whose soul is at risk at any given moment, we aim to be as porous to the city around us as we can be. We aim to be a thin place – a sanctuary in this city. We aim to be a place and a people whose witness bespeaks mercy,

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### **We have entered an historical epoch in which communal tragedy and catastrophe – mass killings, terrorism, and environmental upheavals – are the new norm.**

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justice, and beauty and where, by the grace of God, a seeker might find solace, welcome, healing, mercy, sympathy, courage, companionship, or joy.

We know we have entered an historical epoch in which communal tragedy and catastrophe – mass killings, terrorism, and environmental upheavals due to climate change – are the new norm. Our hearts break over each new horror, yet we are not surprised by evil and its long reach. Indeed, it is the vocation of the church to train and rehearse for the arrival of evil.

As stewards of large sacred spaces, often centrally located, churches are uniquely positioned to gather communities in times of crisis or trauma, and to pour out upon them the healing balm of Gilead. As inheritors and benefactors of sacred words and meaningful ritual, we are empowered by Christ himself to minister to a world in pain.

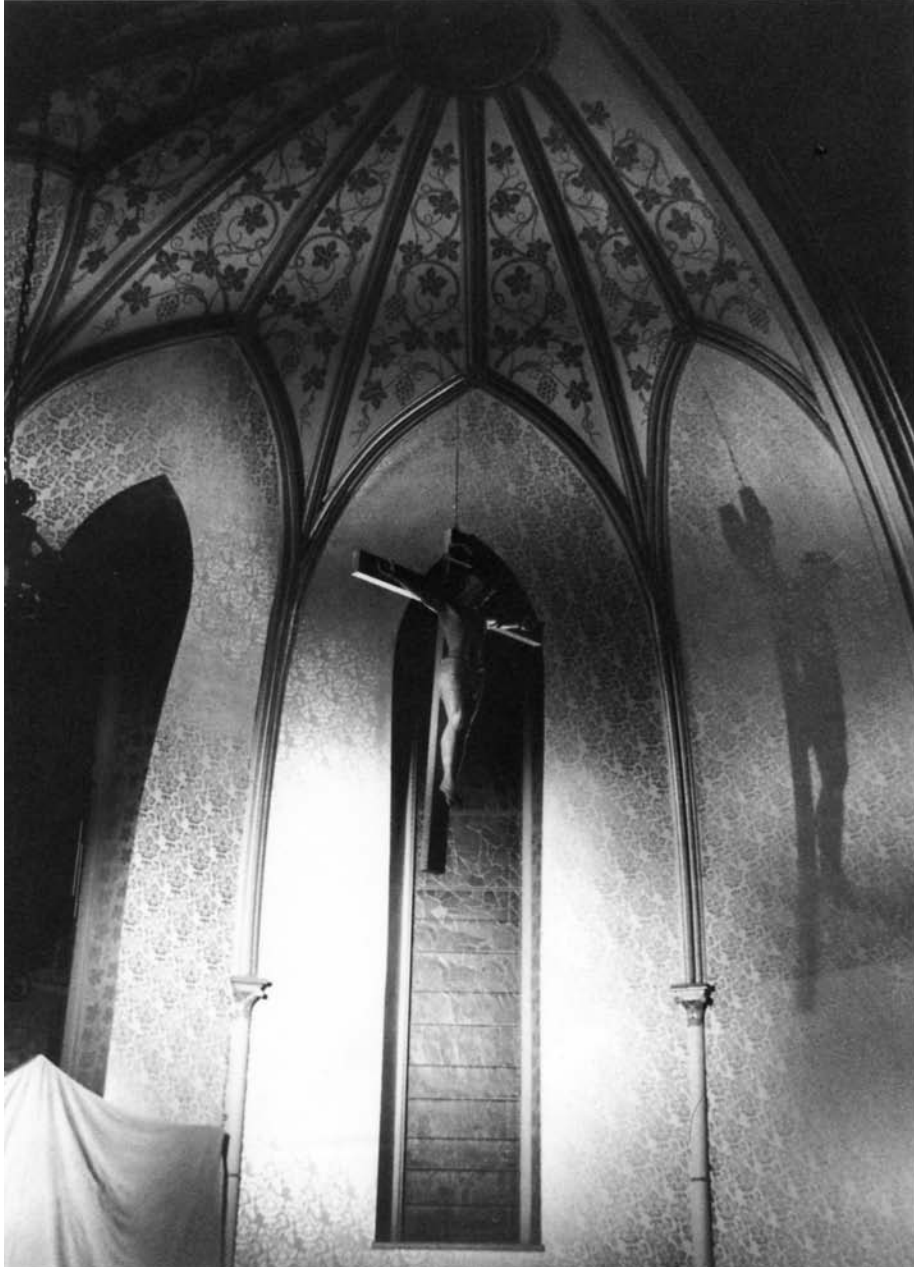
In Christ's name and for Christ's sake, this is our vocation. It is this that authorizes and informs both the urgency and boldness of our witness.

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*The Rev. Nancy Taylor '81 M.Div. has been senior minister and CEO of Old South Church in Boston since 2005. She is a member of the YDS Dean's Advisory Council.*

- *I believe* that every Sunday – Sunday after Sunday after Sunday – it is the responsibility of worship leaders to bring people to faith, anticipating either that they lost their faith sometime during the previous week ... or never had it at all.
- *I believe* that the majority of those who visit our sanctuary for worship know only the barest minimum about the Christian faith – its traditions, texts, histories, current manifestations. We are here to invite them to overcome their fear of entertaining the claim of God on their lives.
- *I believe* worship is not a benign activity but is intended to radicalize us and form us into followers of Jesus. It will promote the Christian life as urgent, charged, and consequential.
- *I believe* worship is a rehearsal for heaven – that we are practicing the singing, eating, fellowship, joy, and praying that we will be doing in eternity. And so, our liturgical efforts had better be good.
- *I believe* worship should be thrillingly different than our oft-times prosaic lives – that the opening of worship, including Words of Welcome, signal that we have crossed over into time that is deep, beautiful, dangerous, and sacred.
- *I believe* Jesus was exciting and that to follow him – to be near him, to hear him, watch him, experience him – was to feel the excitement of living in the presence of God. And it can still be.
- *I believe* that worship should engage our whole beings – body, soul, and intellect – and that sights, colors, sounds, tastes, smells, and movement help us embody the experience of praising God.
- *I believe* the spoken word (calls, prayers, scripture, sermon) should be as wonderfully wrought as the musical selections – thus planned, practiced, and rehearsed with care.
- *I believe* in liturgical choreography that is meaningful, elegant, and liminal.
- *I believe* scripture readers can deepen their own faith – even discover it – in the act of preparing to present biblical passages on Sunday morning.
- *I believe* once upon a time when our Bible stories circulated in oral tradition they were so pungent, so alive and compelling that to tell them was to bring people to faith. Therefore, the presentation of scripture texts should be a highlight of any service of worship that carries us into the presence of God.
- *I believe* that if J.K. Rowling, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Walter Brueggemann have to submit their written works to editors, then preachers should too.
- *I believe* it is given to us to handle the mysteries of life and death, time and eternity, spirit and flesh, good and evil. Therefore, a sanctuary filled with worshippers should be profoundly engaging and riveting.

– Nancy S. Taylor



# Let's Dance: Mourning, Renewal, and *Footloose*



By Kristin Foster '77 M.Div.

“Only grief begets newness.” – Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*

*I slid into the last seat in the community college auditorium, a spot near the wall. With my husband out of town, and no meetings for a change, I decided on impulse after a long day to show up for the Thursday evening performance of Footloose, produced by the local Mesabi Musical Theater. I got the last ticket.*

After nearly three decades as pastor on the Mesabi Iron Range of northeastern Minnesota, I cannot go anywhere unrecognized. I knew the adults selling tickets in the lobby when they were in high school. The woman in one of the lead roles had served with me on the board of a summer youth project. Et cetera.

The performance started. *Footloose* takes place in a mythical small Midwestern town in a 50s sort of decade. Ethel McCormack and her son Ren have arrived from Chicago to live with relatives. Angry and searching, the fatherless Ren discovers that every adult in town thinks he's trouble. Ren is not the only

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**In my 34 years of parish ministry, I have waded rivers of grief and broken hopes. How often I have wanted to leave at intermission! I am glad I stayed, though.**

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angry, searching teenager. The minister's daughter, Ariel, wants to prove she does not conform to the straight lace of righteousness. She sneaks out at night, tells lies, back talks.

## Theatrical Caricatures

Musical theater's coinage is caricature, so I should have been prepared for the Sunday morning church scene in Act 1. The whole town goes to church. The Rev. Moore's sermon, at first, extolls the power of music but soon devolves into a denunciation of sex, drugs, and dancing. His youthful parishioners wilt. I slouched in my seat.

Like the unfunny joke at one's expense, I could suddenly no longer enjoy this ministerial caricature. Darkly noting the number of local young people performing in the musical, I wondered how many of them believed this depiction of preacher as morality police. Did a blinking neon arrow mark me, after all these years, as *one of his kind*?

Then came a stab of envy. Every teenager in his fictional town shows up for worship every Sunday. Such is not the case in my world. So I was jealous of a caricature?

Maybe I could leave unnoticed at intermission. A woman from the orchestra pit spotted me and came over. Recently emigrated from South Korea to marry a local hospital physician, she has been playing flute for my congregation's Sunday worship for a year. She thanked me for coming. Now I was stuck.

In Act 2 the confrontation builds between the high school student body, who want to overturn the town's prohibition against dancing, and the town council, of which the Rev. Moore is a member. The students make their case at the council meeting, with Ren as spokesperson. He gives a stirring speech, laced with scriptural affirmations of dancing provided by the Rev. Moore's own daughter. I straightened a bit in my seat.

The town council votes down the students' request. There would be no dancing in their town – because dancing leads to drinking, which had led, they are reminded, to the tragic death of a group of boys five years ago, including the minister's own son. The decision leaves the students crushed.

The next scene blew me away. Ren shows up at Moore's house late that night. And lobs a gum wad of truth between his eyes. He tells the minister: *You and me, we are both alone. I ask myself over and over what I did to cause my father to leave my mother and me. You ask yourself how you could have saved your son and his friends from dying that night. You think you are the only one who is grieving in this town? You're wrong. Your daughter and wife are grieving. Other families are grieving. The whole town is grieving.*

I sat up in my seat. The caricature clergyman had become a real-life character. The boy was right. He was grieving. So, I realized, was I.

Christendom is vanishing, despite vestiges in large urban edifices and thriving program-driven suburban churches. Clergy of all denominations face burnout that drives them from parish ministry. In the mines-and-pines outpost of northeastern Minnesota where I have spent the bulk of my vo-

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### **As the culture continues to consumerize, diversify, and polarize, the church will become more necessary and vibrant.**

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cational life, most congregations are downsizing. Meanwhile, the once-proud union leadership for miners here returned recently from Pittsburgh with a new contract dictated rather than negotiated. The generational mantra "*There's nothing for you here*" roars in the background. People cling to dubious proposals of new jobs nearby, involving nonferrous precious metals mining in a fragile ecosystem.

As a member of the phalanx of aging baby boomers who remember when the church used its cultural status to be a central prophetic voice, I can wring my hands. I can rant. I can cheerlead the faithful remnant. I can wonder what will become of my beloved congregation when I finally retire. Who can love them like I do? "I alone am left," moaned Elijah (1 Kings 19).

#### **Rivers of Grief and Grace**

The minister in *Footloose* is grieving the death of his son. Ministers I know, myself included, are grieving the dissolution of mainstream Christianity, made real by the painful details of their own situations.

On stage, the minister feels sorrow, but he has forgotten that people around him do too. It took a 17-year-old punk from Chi-Town to name it. Looking up from our seats, we could see, not our grief alone, but the grief of our community – indeed, a grieving planet.

It will come as no surprise to any good pastoral psychologist that the good minister's anguish

about his son was parading around in the guise of condemnation and control. Grief without grief work alienates the bereaved from God, others, and herself. Yet that same grief and its work can be at the crux of our vocation now as parish pastors.

In the show that night, one aloneness touches another, and something begins to change. The Rev. Moore confesses the next morning in his sermon: He had ignored the grief of others by getting lost in his own. And because musicals will have happy endings, he not only persuades the town elders to let the students have their dance. He and his wife dance with them.

The audience rose to its feet at the end. The actors beamed. I was glad I stayed.

In my 34 years of parish ministry, I have waded rivers of grief, not only in deaths, but in broken relationships and broken hopes. How often I have wanted to leave at intermission! I am glad I stayed, though – here in this cluster of towns huddled on the edge of open-pit taconite mines and wild back-country. After 26 years in one place, I find God's newness keeps on breaking in.

Two teenagers return from a weekend retreat inspired to start a handbell choir. Another wants to organize a blood drive. A retired pharmacist redesigns the beams of his boat garage as a church greenhouse. A single mom volunteers for our new Sunday school team, admitting she has not been in Sunday school since she was eight years old. Two men start a book study at a nearby bar. Our former youth minister helps organize our area's first LG-BTQ youth group.

The church will never be culturally important in the way it was 50 years ago. Nevertheless, as the prevailing culture continues to consumerize, diversify, and polarize, the church in a hundred local forms will become more necessary and vibrant – as a place of community-making and meaning-making, and as a redemptive voice for the sake of the whole earth. Many congregations now are exhibiting a resilience that is fertilized by grief, not entombed in it. What they thought they had is gone – but new forms appear, new voices call. Such churches are declaring with Psalm 30, *You have turned our mourning into dancing.*

Let's dance.

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*The Rev. Kristin Foster '77 M.Div. is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pastor who has served Messiah Lutheran Church in Mountain Iron, MN, for nearly 27 years. She is president of the YDS Alumni Board. She and husband Frank Davis '77 M.Div. have two young adult daughters and a granddaughter.*



My native Australia was described by one 19th-century observer as “the most godless place under heaven.” Up to a point, the description fits. Like Europe, Australia is a very secularized society, with low levels of active religious affiliation. And like the USA, we have little tolerance for establishment religion in civic life. We antipodeans have, perhaps, the worst of both (Old and New) worlds.

When I first came to the USA over 20 years ago, the contrast was unmistakable. For all the insistence on church-state separation in the U.S., the sheer level of religiosity was one of the most striking things about life here. Prayer pops up in all sorts of places, even when excluded from strictly civic spheres. Sports players cross themselves, kneel, and glance at the sky when they succeed. Community leaders talk about God quite a bit. And lots of people go to church (and synagogue, temple, and mosque). Heaps of people.

Yet, over the last two decades, the change in the USA itself has been palpable. There are still heaps of people in church, but they are getting older and often not being replaced. Many churches are unable to maintain full-time ministry, and others are closing. Exactly why, or why now, remains a bit mysterious – perhaps a nation partly founded on dissenting religious observance just took longer to have the end of Christendom appear unmistakably in cultural as well as constitutional terms.

This “bad news” story has to be faced before we can get to the good part. The pre-eminence that religion and its institutions have had in the USA is just not going to continue.

Once we realize this, it becomes tempting to prognosticate about the future. But most of the prescriptions I have seen so far are, frankly, self-serving and not very convincing. Dressing up one’s own likes and dislikes about the institutional church and its accoutrements – buildings, rituals, clergy, seminaries – in the garb of “prophecy” does not make prejudices more profound.

Though we don’t know the future, we actually have a better idea than that. Let me tell you about it – I’ve seen the future.

That is, the forms that religious life takes in the already secularized parts of the West deserve serious attention by U.S. churches. Places like Australia might help congregations here think about what comes next, and what has to be done. What can or should we imagine?

First, there is no single story. Trends are not rules; different denominational networks and local congregations will fare differently. There are

success stories, as well as downward movements. Some successful groups, older or newer, will be small, but larger churches or networks do have an advantage. When duty or custom are not enough to draw congregants, those churches will flourish which can offer the things questers find most significant – well-planned and executed worship, robust social outreach programs, a sense of community.

A second observation may at first give *Reflections* readers pause. The strongest recent predictor of sustained growth in Australian churches generally has been theological conservatism. Yet many conservative congregations are also dwindling. So there is a correlation, but not a causal relationship. In fact the Australian National Church Life Survey suggests that clearly articulated vision and confident capable leadership are the real causes of numerical success where it occurs.

Many may be tempted to confuse the single-mindedness of fundamentalism with the actual content of that movement’s doctrine. One challenge faced by Christians of mainstream, traditional, liberal, or progressive mind is, then, to articulate a vision of their own existence which is authentic and bold enough to catalyze their worshipping communities. Being vague enough to focus on those who believe little and don’t expect much asked of them ethically is not likely to work; the difference between “inclusion” and “mission” remains to be discerned further.

A third thing to note is that the existing institutions, even the buildings, however much in question, are not redundant or irrelevant. They are enormously important for ensuring a vibrant future. Phoenixes need ashes to rise from, after all. What (other) community enterprise, school, or political campaign would not envy the churches their visibility, their facilities and, yes, their endowments? Treating these with contempt isn’t prophetic, it’s short-sighted and selfish. How to use them freshly and wisely to address new possibilities is the challenge.

Last but not least, the past is worth considering as well as the future. The churches have been in retreat before. Those who led, taught, and prayed at such times kept the faith and bequeathed to their successors not success but hope. Some trends will continue downward, given the reality of secularization. Hope, however – that theological virtue – is not subject to empirical trends but persists, and does not fail us (Rom 5:5).

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*The Rev. Andrew McGowan, an Anglican priest, is dean of Berkeley Divinity School and McFaddin Professor of Anglican Studies and Pastoral Theology at YDS. He is the author of Ancient Christian Worship (Baker, 2014) and other books. Before coming to Yale in 2014, he was warden of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne and a canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral, Melbourne.*



# Readying for Radical Change



By Stephen P. Bauman '79 M.Div.

*The church as we currently know it in the U.S. is going away. I would extend this notion to non-Christian religious institutions as well, based on numerous conversations with persons representing a wide variety of traditions.*

All religious institutions are facing disruption in the cultural whirlwind because the forces in flux are ubiquitous. They press in on every arena of human social engagement.

When I state the church is going away, I do not mean the Jesus tradition will depart from our land. I mean the familiar structures fashioned from the threads of that tradition will no longer exist in their current form over the next several decades. Surely those in the trenches of local church experience can sense the tectonic shifts under their feet. The timing of the approaching shock waves will vary according to region and geography, but the resulting cultural tsunami will destabilize every variety of formal Christianity. We must clearly articulate and embrace this prospect so that strategies can be focused for greatest effect, and lay and clergy can be prepared for the inevitable challenges in a season of radical change.

## **Faster, Faster**

Human behaviors are shifting in subtle but profound ways in the rush of technology to redefine how we organize time, how we work, how we date, how we construct friendships and execute communal commitments, how we parent, learn, and teach, not to mention how we shop. Social arrangements and technological habits are now evolving at faster rates, in shorter time cycles. Routinely people say, Well, five years ago we did it this way, but *now* ...

This pace of change is disorienting for those who have been shaped by ancient traditions that have prevailed for millennia. I am not complaining about this, simply stating the truth of it. I am no troglodyte when it comes to the newest technology and all its benefits and complexities. (In my house I'm often accused of just the opposite – an eager adoption of

the latest breakthrough.)

The change looks primarily structural, tactical, and material. The foundations of our humanity, on the other hand, remain intact: Each individual still must contend with what it means to be born and to die. All of us attempt to make sense of the days of our lives, confronting questions of purpose and identity. Those questions are not going away any time soon.

## **Resilient Witness**

For this reason I am bullish on Christianity over the long haul. I am less bullish in the shorter run. The “organized church” is in for a wild ride because much of its business falls within the realms of the structural, tactical, and material – precisely the arenas experiencing the greatest changes. In this sense, what is at risk is not faith as such but the institutional structures that arose over the centuries for the purpose of teaching and advancing faith.

Jesus' enduring power and presence will not end if a denomination or two or three go under water. If we look to his own time, the very center of Jewish faith and Jesus' own faith – the temple of Jerusalem

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**I am bullish on Christianity over the long haul. I am less bullish in the shorter run. The organized church is in for a wild ride.**

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– was overwhelmed and torn down shortly after he died, with the remnants on view today 2,000 years later. But his legacy took root nevertheless in peoples' lives, continuing to the present moment.

Given our circumstances, I have adopted a humble posture about “best practices” in my pastoral

leadership role in a local congregation. There is no technique, method, or model that will fit most situations or last longer than a heartbeat. There is only the action of Christian agents and congregations deepening their love of God and neighbor in fresh ways – a commitment informed by the tradition and in conversation with sisters and brothers who share The Way that Jesus blazed.

### **A Purifying Effect**

As the clichéd deck chairs of denominational structures continue their perpetual rearranging, the hard but rewarding work of advancing the cause of the gospel in real-time locations remains the patient focus. There is no clear road map, no clear set of prescriptions for all serious Christians in every scenario. But this has a purifying effect. Less important matters fall away as more essential matters rise to the surface.

I serve an 85-year-old church that derived from older congregations in an evolving city landscape. A magnificent structure of marble and glittering mosaics was built on a site in Manhattan we arrogantly assert as “the heart of the city, in the heart

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**This cohort of Christians will not exist two or three decades from now unless it meaningfully recommits itself to the city – and loves the city’s inhabitants more than itself.**

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of the world.” It was meant to make a permanent statement in a very different era, when the city’s most prominent newspapers devoted a front-page column each Monday morning to the previous day’s sermon of one of the big-steeple preachers – a time of mainline Protestant cultural hegemony.

For the first five of my now 28 years of service, I was routinely contacted by real estate developers who asked the same question: Did I realize Christ Church sat on one of the five most valuable undeveloped sites in Manhattan? Eventually that circumstance led to the sale of our air rights, netting us millions of dollars in what is now known as “Billionaires’ Row,” the newly abounding high-rise condominiums that bisect the city along the 57th Street corridor.

By the time I arrived in 1987, though, the congregation had fallen into near collapse, with just 40 or so persons in attendance. Our glittering jewel box of a church was locked up all week except for three hours on Sunday mornings. In these last decades

we have experienced a vital rebirth with a youthful, diverse membership through a dedication to Christian hospitality and a resilient commitment to excellence, as Paul wrote of it to his friends in Philippi (see Philippians 4:8). And we embraced a simple mission that every member knows by heart: We seek to love God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves.

### **Less Hierarchy, More Partnering**

Still, the proverbial writing is on the sparkling walls: This local cohort of Christians will not exist two or three decades from now unless it meaningfully re-commits itself to the city – and loves the city and its inhabitants more than itself. It cannot exist as a shrine to past glories, or even in celebration of modest present-day successes. Who will relate to such an organization when the whole world lies digitally at everyone’s fingertips and every social-media moment stands available for spontaneous response? The change around us is too rapid to settle into theological and organizational routines. I feel this deeply. And I am bestirred.

Congregational ministry has never been more challenging, or compelling. Risk-averse candidates need not apply. Better to state this up front before more caretakers seek the ordained path. As for Christ Church, we are fashioning a new ministry under the rubric of “breaking the back of poverty in a zip code,” partnering with the community of Washington Heights just north of Harlem. Our immediate goal there is to resolve the future of a large, deteriorating property that will allow a new work to proceed, beginning with an initiative to address the material and spiritual needs of mothers with children up to three years of age.

As others have noted, the burden of the contemporary religious project shifts the focus from orthodoxy to orthopraxy – embodied faith modeled on Jesus. Less hierarchy, more partnering; less clergy focus, more people focus; less institution building, more hands and feet engaged in embodied love.

In the meantime our values remain. Worship is the core of our life. We practice dynamic hospitality. We welcome and affirm diversity. We strive for excellence in all we do. How these intersect with the culture’s emergent energies remains uncertain. Perhaps our practices will need modification. Then again, constant modification – personal and corporate – seems the one necessity for walking in solidarity with Jesus and living an authentic Christian life.

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*The Rev. Stephen P. Bauman '79 M.Div. is senior minister of Christ Church United Methodist in New York City. He earned a Ph.D. in leadership and change at Antioch University, and is a member of the YDS Dean’s Advisory Council.*



***"How do I live free in this black body?"***—Ta-Nehisi Coates, from *Between the World and Me*

Many pundits hailed the election of Barack Obama as the end of all things constructed and construed by race. Over and over I heard men and women who live in gated and cul-de-sac communities trumpet a tale I failed to see. "Post-racial" was the term that carried on the airwaves and in Twitter-verse: America had finally realized her noble creed of equality under the law and under God.

Yet there I was, listening and shaking my head bewildered, wondering, What universe do they occupy? I listened to these words from the South Side of Chicago, where hope and tragedy dance daily for all children who are kissed by nature's sun. The promise of America has not cast her shadow or gazed upon the children who still hold the scars

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**America is in need of anti-racism activists, preachers, and thinkers who are not people of color.**

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of forced exile and importation to this nation. I do not deny the triumphs, moments of celebration and progress in our imperfect yet sturdy democracy. But this socially constructed ideology called race remains the original sin of our nation. Our institutions carry the residue and scent of race.

To Ta-Nehisi Coates, impassioned chronicler of this open secret that America struggles to acknowledge, racialized thought and imagined supremacy are the myth and doctrine undergirding our democracy.

As he argues in his new book *Between the World and Me*, the nation takes race as a defined and unchangeable reality, like a "feature of the natural world," and therefore feels absolved from doing much about it. He writes: "Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them – inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men."

In this climate, our common explanations for the persistent disparities that are found in education, criminal justice, housing, and wealth fall into two camps. One argument looks at racial disparities

through the lens of poverty, economic policy, and wealth creation and comes to the conclusion that these factors doom the poor, especially poor people of color. The other argument is made through the lens of cultural deficiency, claiming that people of color need to be injected with the wider Protestant work ethic and values of responsibility to close the sociological and material gap.

Both camps sadly fail to confront the unspoken American belief that Coates names: Being black and human is considered an oxymoron in much of society. Blackness is viewed as a deficiency to be expelled from one's psyche or reformed in order to be palatable to the majority culture. W.E.B. Du Bois, more than a century ago, spoke of this duality of the African soul that must try to heal in the face of a forced sociological schizophrenia, that "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

Racism is not expunged by the elimination of blackness. Racism is not exorcised from the American lexicon through a doctrine of moral deficiency. It is eradicated only when humanity rejects these myths and comes to grips with the beauty of one's Africanity and dares to live out a new Christianity that is not beholden to European views. We fight these myths by admitting they exist. We fight them by facing the biblical mandate about what the Lord requires: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk with deep humility before God.

America is in need of anti-racism activists, preachers, and thinkers who are not people of color. America desires voices with a moral center that dare speak truth to power and walk humbly with our God. These yet-to-be United States wait patiently for your voice, song, poem, essay, sermon, and action to join the cadre of women and men who seek to dismantle and repent from this original sin called racism.

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*The Rev. Otis Moss III '95 M.Div. is senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, IL. He is a writer, poet, and preacher whose latest book, Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair (Westminster John Knox), will be released in November. He is dually aligned as an ordained minister in both the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the United Church of Christ. This essay is adapted from the foreword of an upcoming book, Race in a Post-Obama America: The Church Responds, edited by David Maxwell '87 M.Div. and published by Westminster John Knox. It will be released next year.*



# Reading Wars: What Christian Debates Are Really About



By Michal Beth Dinkler

*The Christian church – as one body, in all its variegated American iterations – is utterly schizophrenic when it comes to gun violence, police brutality, abortion, the Confederate flag, gay marriage, gendered identities, homeland security, immigration, education, poverty, medical care, religious freedom (the list goes on). There is no united, identifiable “Christian” view on any of the most controversial issues of our time.*

What we often miss is that in the church, these are not simply “Culture Wars.” They are Reading Wars. So often, the incendiary rhetoric preached from the pulpit, posted online, and perpetuated in Christian media outlets is animated by fundamentally different views of how to read the biblical texts as Christians. Many of these lines drawn in the sand concern how we read the lines of Scripture.

## **Eternal Word, Endless Debate**

I recognize that current cultural controversies are complex, and that we do not yet have the historical distance necessary for fully informed analysis. I also recognize that many Americans – including some Christians – find the Bible completely irrelevant to contemporary debates. Nonetheless, for many Christians, events playing out in the public square represent assaults on their most cherished and deeply held beliefs – convictions derived from particular readings of the Bible as the eternal Word of God. Within the church, as well, Christians lob grenades at one another across political, theological, economic, and ideological divides. Church foundations fracture and denominations split over questions of Scriptural interpretation. (My own denomination, the PCUSA, is one recent example.) A lot is at stake in how we read.

Disagreement itself is not the problem. The New Testament books consistently attest to – even arose out of – early Christian conflicts over a whole host of issues. If the earliest Christians had agreed on

everything, we most likely would not have a New Testament. Not only that, but a great many Christian reform movements throughout history arose to pursue justice, mercy, and positive change precisely because Christians disagreed with one another. The problem is not difference.

Rather, the problem is that the intra-Christian Reading Wars go largely unacknowledged as such. Nuanced theoretical debates over hermeneutics

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**Recently, one of my students insisted that he doesn’t *interpret* the Bible; he *reads* it. But this is a misunderstanding of what reading is and does.**

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continue in pockets of academia and corners of church life, but such discussions going on behind the lines need to work their way to the front, where the actual fighting is going on. The laypeople in the trenches are often shooting from the hip, fighting for their convictions, unaware that these convictions can shape the way we read Scripture, rather than the other way around. We think of our own readings as unbiased, but our readings themselves are influenced by the battles we fight and the manner in which we fight them. For the health of the global church – and of individual local churches – we need more serious and self-reflective dialogue about how we read and understand the Bible.

Here, I'm not referring to the kinds of questions addressed in "How to Read the Bible" handbooks, which teach important skills for faithful biblical interpretation: skills like identifying biblical genres, understanding biblical authors' and audiences' historical contexts, and avoiding the tendency to conform the text to our expectations. Many Christian communities do discuss these kinds of methodological issues. Still, though there are exceptions, too few "How to Read" books also consider the views of those whose reading strategies and hermeneutical agendas differ from their own.

My point is this: We *also* need to be thinking critically, carefully, and consistently together about how and why we approach Scripture in the ways that we do, including talking with Christians who

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### **We need to identify and interrogate our assumptions about the Bible, many of which are not conscious but habitual.**

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offer competing interpretations. We cannot really read the Bible for all its worth unless we commit to rigorous genuine dialogue not only about "How to Read the Bible," but also about the question, "How do We Read the Bible?":

- Why do we read this passage in this way? Why do others read it differently?
- Is this how we want to read the Bible? If so, why? If not, what needs to change, and why?

In other words, we need to identify and interrogate our assumptions about the Bible, many of which are not conscious but habitual.

How we read seems natural to us, but the ability to understand and follow a text's generic, linguistic, and conventional cues is always a matter of socialization and habituation. Reading is taught and learned, explicitly or through modeling, within certain social structures. Accordingly, reading becomes second nature to us – and normative hermeneutical strategies remain both unspoken and unquestioned.

Recently, one of my students insisted that he doesn't *interpret* the Bible; he *reads* it. But this is a misunderstanding of what reading is and does. Textual meaning is often far from self-evident, and reading as a form of meaning-making is far from simple.

As readers, we interact with texts in complicated and convoluted ways, drawing on a wide range of presuppositions, contextual concerns, and unexamined assumptions. Reading is interpretation.

We also interpret others' reading strategies. One of the major – again, largely unacknowledged – strategies by which Christians stake their interpret-

tive claims is denigrating the reading posture of others. We need to think carefully and intentionally about our own reading, but we also need to scrutinize the rhetoric we use when we talk about how others read. Have you heard that evangelicals read the Bible uncritically, regarding it as inerrant and applicable in all times and places? Have you heard that ecumenical communities have a "low" view of Scripture, or that they perform "eisegesis" (literally, "reading into") instead of "exegesis" (literally, "reading out")? What about the claim that scholars complicate the Bible unnecessarily, or that a reader needs only the guidance of God's Spirit to understand the text? Have you heard that postcolonial or feminist readings are merely "ideological," just "a form of identity politics"? That postmodernists abandon Truth? Or that fundamentalists idolize the text, worshipping the Bible instead of God? I have heard all of these depictions of others' reading strategies at various points in Christian circles.

Each of these declarations about others' reading postures otherizes a given branch of the church. But rarely would those who self-identify with those groups embrace such descriptions of themselves. The best way to engage an argument is first to state the other person's position in terms she or he would accept, and then to proceed in dialogue from those shared premises. Facile caricatures of others' reading practices too often lead us to dismiss other Christians, whose different reading postures – even those we vehemently reject – can challenge us to grapple with difficult but crucial questions about how we read Scripture as Christians.

If God's people are to thrive and grow as we face an uncertain future, we all ought to take a step back and examine our personal and communal reading habits. Toward that end, let me suggest some ter-

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### **As many traditional ecclesial structures crumble, community borders increasingly are policed by individuals – with or without theological training.**

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minology that might be helpful: The following three postures toward the Bible are commonly found in Christian communities (though remember that readers often move fluidly between them without realizing it):

#### **Posture 1: Reading "Under"**

These readers elevate the biblical text above themselves, approaching the canon as holy, authoritative, and inerrant or infallible. Reading "under" entails receiving the biblical text as God's revelation of ultimate truth, and seeking to submit to those instruc-

tions in all ways and always. Denominations that do not ordain women could be described as reading “under” First Timothy 2:12 (which advocates the silence of women in church). We might call this a hermeneutic of submission.

#### **Posture 2: Reading “Over”**

Reading “over” means reading from a position above the text, critically judging whether a given passage is ethical and true to the reader’s personal experience. Reading “over” means viewing the Bible as an historical document written from and for a different world than our own. Reading “over” a passage like Psalm 137:9 (which extols dashing one’s enemies’ infants against rocks) would mean: first, noting that the rhetoric is aimed at a specific historical group (Babylon), and second, rejecting as unethical the effects of acting on this passage today. This posture has been described as a hermeneutic of suspicion.

#### **Posture 3: Reading “With”**

A reading “with” posture toward reading Scripture means coming alongside the biblical text to interact with it as one would with another person. It means respecting the Bible as an historically shaped document through which God continues to communi-

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### **As the Reading Wars rage on in an ever-changing church, we need to live the questions together with patience and generosity.**

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cate with God’s people. Reading “with” requires recognizing the reader’s responsibility for her or his interpretative choices, but also being open to the possibility that God enacts transformation through the text. We might call this a hermeneutic of humble hospitality.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive – for example, reading “with” can include submitting to the text, and reading “over” does not preclude belief that the Bible is God’s Word. Remember, too, that Christians read *with* the church, both historical and contemporary. We are all active participants whose voices need to be heard and taken seriously within an ongoing conversation. The vital task is to identify the posture we typically assume vis-à-vis the Bible, in order to evaluate the merits and weaknesses of the interpretive strategies we have learned. We might consider questions like these:

- Why do we approach the text this way?
- What theological assumptions, beliefs, and values underlie our reading practices?
- What are we assuming about the conditions in which this text arose?

- How involved were the human authors? The divine author?

Our capacity to ask how we receive, reject, or respect the biblical text demonstrates that we have agency as readers. Our readings are partial and fallible, and we are responsible for their implications. We can and should make adjustments. Thus, we might ask:

- Does this reading make us more like Jesus, deepen our love for God and neighbor, further the cause of justice in the world, and make the world a more loving place?
- Where might this understanding of Scripture be wrong, and by what criteria would we make such a judgment?
- How does this illuminate who God is, how God works, and what God expects of us?

#### **Compassionate Curiosity**

Christian Reading Wars are not going away any time soon. In the past, trained clergy or scholars, authorities within institutionalized hierarchies, defined insiders and outsiders, good and evil, sacred and profane. Now, however, as many traditional ecclesial structures crumble and non-denominationalism rises, and as more Christians fail to identify with formal religion, community borders increasingly are policed by individual Christians – with or without theological training. As the digital revolution democratizes access to online platforms of proclamation, anyone can claim interpretive authority and proclaim her or his view on any digital street corner. Seldom now are major battles waged on conventional battlefields; the church’s Reading Wars are fought by guerrilla warfare.

Christians have long loved certainty. We are adept at the search for answers. We are not so strong when it comes to “living the questions” (to use Rainer Maria Rilke’s phrase). As the Reading Wars rage on in an ever-changing church, we need to live the questions together with patience and generosity. Let us become compassionately curious about our own postures toward the Bible, and about how we talk about other Christians’ ways of reading Scripture. Only then will the church’s Reading Wars turn from battle into dialogue. Only then can peace characterize the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

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*Michal Beth Dinkler joined the YDS faculty last year as assistant professor of New Testament, after completing her doctorate at Harvard University. She is the author of Silent Statements: Narrative Representations of Speech and Silence in the Gospel of Luke (de Gruyter, 2013) and multiple journal articles. She is a candidate for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA).*



# A Season of Gratitude, Not Anxiety



By Wesley Avram

*I had just met with the YDS Dean's Advisory Council, tending to statistics, initiatives, projections, and the school's institutional strength. It felt like a good meeting. I hurried to my rented car to drive down to my 30th reunion at Princeton Theological Seminary. The timing of the YDS meeting allowed me to include the reunion in my plans.*

Nice coincidence. I wouldn't have gone otherwise. Too busy. Too programmed. Too distracted by ministry. So the scheduling allowed four days to celebrate theological education and its impact on pastoral ministry. I connected with old friends, heard lectures, remembered days when a sense of calling into parish ministry felt both clear and innocent. We compared notes. It was good.

## **An Unexpected Critique**

Then came the final Princeton convocation. Eugene Peterson was the preacher. The seminary chapel was packed. It was to be a worshipful affirmation of our vocation and service. Eugene's lecture, though, was anything but a celebration of our accomplishments. It felt more like a deep and heartfelt critique.

He spoke of his own ambition as a young pastor decades ago, and how an innocent desire to serve the gospel by serving the church quickly morphed into a predictable desire to run good programs,

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**Let's allow ourselves to be less ambitious, more hopeful; less anxious, more grateful.**

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please his congregants, fill the pews, be relevant, meet every expectation, and stay busy. As he put it, he became a caricature of himself: "If there was a *deformation* to which I as a pastor was subject, it was becoming a shopkeeper in religious goods and services."<sup>1</sup>

He laid bare his fetish for activity, achievement, and institutional measurement. He spoke of a

chasm between his personal faith and an experience of ministry that brought less joy and blessing than ordination had promised. His diagnosis was loving but severe.

## **Time, Story, Place**

He described how literature became his corrective. James Joyce's *Ulysses* taught the value of the ordinary, of *time* as the place of God's unfolding. Wallace Stegner reminded him of the power of *story* to texture the meeting of meaning and sense in human life. And Wendell Berry took him back to *place*, so he could see his congregation as a locale, even a world, in which rich complexity arises from limitation and connection grows from patient dwelling.

The chapel was silent as his lecture advanced like waves on a beach. Most of the working pastors around me seemed to be working hard to avoid looking at each other.

Eugene finished with words of Peter Forsyth: "You have but a corner of the vineyard, and cannot appeal to all men; humility is a better equipment than ambition, even the ambition of doing much good." Then he sat. And the room burst into applause, loud and sustained, with everyone soon standing.

I stood too, but I didn't want to. I found the ovation ironic. We had been exposed for all the ways we have acquiesced to deformations of the best of our vocation. We had been challenged to recover the work to which we'd all been promised in some way. Applause felt like an indecorous response to that call. I thought we should have just inhaled to

recover our breath and then sat in silence, like at the end of a Maundy Thursday service: quiet because we know the import of the moment, expectant because we know it's part of Easter's story. Instead, we applauded, stood in line to shake hands, and went off to dinner.

### **An Industry of Diagnosis**

There is by now a whole industry of diagnosis and treatment for what is ailing congregational ministry. We read statistics of the palpable decline in the mainline denominations. Traditional evangelical churches seem to be declining too, if at a slower pace. The drop looks especially dramatic among the young.<sup>2</sup> So we speak of a new reformation, of programmatic and ecclesial innovation, of getting technologically and culturally up to date, of celebrating entrepreneurialism in ministry, of missional or emergent or sticky churches, of trimming institutions, embracing virtual communities, and restructuring ourselves so we can get nimble – fast.

It's become a commonplace in our theological schools to proclaim the imminent end to congregations as we've known them and the need for new voices to save us. Those who still serve traditionally structured congregations look quaint. The result of this, I think, is not more conversation about the church but less. We strategize the future, but with little agreement as to why.

So my thought is this: Let's continue assessing our ills. And let's continue experimenting with new ideas. Why not? That's what it's always meant to be the church. But let's allow ourselves to be chastened, even a bit humbled, as we do that – less ambitious, more hopeful; less anxious, more

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### **Neither liberal nor conservative approaches have all the answers for every setting.**

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grateful. For the church goes on, and congregations grow and decline, and folks find faith, and fields are tended, stories are told, and lives are lived for Christ all over the world.

We need to work hard for change, for sure, but we shouldn't be so glib as to think that all the loving and back-breaking effort that's gone into the institutional church, with all its flaws, is suddenly irrelevant. We need to treat our ills without so deforming Christian community that it ends up looking like a religious marketplace. And we need to treat those ills without so deforming Christian leadership that it looks less like pastoral vocation than it does non-profit management or a glorified TED Talk.

Remembering that summons to tend time, story, and place, we might do well to let our answers be as varied as the settings in which congregations arise. Some say the answer is to become more multicultural. They're correct. But that means something rather different depending on where a congregation is. Some say the answer is to give up our buildings and loosen our institutional structures. They are

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### **We should strive for success. Yet our identity should be defined primarily by memory of the One in whose name we do the work.**

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surely correct also. But we'll always need cathedral places, where resources constellate and communities are inspired for mission. Many of our places are important and worth preserving for the Spirit's use.

Some say the answer is to become more liberal – or more conservative. Well, yes to those thoughts too. Neither liberal nor conservative approaches have all the answers for every setting. I'd even suggest that for some congregations, like my own, the answer might be in doing both – being conservative in some measures, liberal in others, for the sake of becoming who we're given to be in God's grace. We need to learn to navigate those tense, in-between places every day.

### **Gethsemane and Games Galore**

One of those in-between places of tension is the terrain of cultural accommodation. Are we to adopt currently popular standards and techniques to reach new generations, or are we to be countercultural oases of hope and radically alternative piety? How do we witness to a consumer culture without becoming that "shopkeeper in religious goods and services"?

A church start-up in my neighborhood with megachurch ambition sent a mailing to thousands advertising their Easter program. They advertised an Easter fair with booths from local merchants, a velcro wall, snow trucked in for the kids, and games galore. One corporate sponsor was to give away an air conditioner, and another lucky worshipper would win a free five-star resort weekend. Nowhere was Jesus, resurrection, or Easter hope mentioned. That mailing was surely a signal of our deformation. Yet their zeal to reach people on their own terms challenged my mainline "you're welcome if you already know you want to come" approach. Where do we catch the zeal while avoiding capitulation? Where do we find that place of faithful creativity, beyond mere "balance"?

A challenge implied by all this is the need for a more complex conversation about leadership. First, we must never separate thinking about leadership from the church's belief that it begins not in skills or disposition but in identity – a baptismal identity in Christ that grows into a pastoral identity in the church. It is important that pastors be informed by entrepreneurial techniques. We should strive for success. Yet our identity should be defined primarily by memory of the One in whose name we do the work. We need to talk more about ways to hold that tension creatively. For leadership arises in God's time, is crafted by Christ's story, and cooperates with the Spirit in ways that fit very specific places. Measurement tools must take into account the unique qualities of pastoral identity.

### Learning to Trust Again

With this, we must also broaden our view of who we train for leadership. We've focused almost exclusively on pastoral leaders. This is insufficient. The finest leader cannot lead people who are too anxious, protective, or competitive to be led. If she tries, she may hurt them, and she'll certainly be hurt by them. That kind of hurt occurs too often, and it is contributing to our deformation. Because of this, I believe it's time for our thinkers and our schools to pivot their efforts toward congregations, helping them work more faithfully with their pastors. We must see leadership more symbiotically. Pastors make their congregations, but congregations also make their pastors.

I propose that we supplement our teaching of clergy professionalism, therapeutic distance, and boundary-keeping with reminders to love, listen, and sacrifice. We should help lay leaders understand better their role in committing to ministry, sharing authority, and being led. In a culture in which confidence is eroding at every level, we need to learn again, in healthy and daring ways, how to trust.

If we're to believe reports on the deformation of professional ministry, this broadened view of leadership is more important now than it's been in generations. We must help all leaders – lay and professional – better become who they are called to be in Christ. Let's stop building walls of demand and expectation as we argue about the future, and start giving grace and sharing hope – with God's help. The church of the 21st century needs that from us.

As another coincidence had it, I was invited to work on this article while on sabbatical in the Holy Land. I mulled the topic while sitting in a cafe right outside the Church of the Nativity. The cafe had modern shade structures, an espresso machine, Wi-

Fi, and flamenco guitar music through the speakers. It was a contemporary space in an ancient place, just yards from the cave where people first gathered around Jesus.

Isn't that our condition in focus? We serve a long memory that has always included a hope-filled future. The core of our work will always be to gather around Jesus in whatever ways our time, story, and place allow. We go into the future from there.

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*Wesley Avram is senior pastor at Pinnacle Presbyterian Church in North Scottsdale, AZ, and formerly assistant professor of communication at YDS, where he serves on the Dean's Advisory Council. He is the author of Where the Light Shines Through (Brazos, 2005) and Anxious About Empire (Brazos, 2004).*

### Notes

- 1 This lecture, entitled "Lillies that Fester," will be included in a collection of essays by several writers called *Ambition*, published in January 2016 by Cascade Books.
- 2 The 2015 Pew study, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," is the most recent of many accounts of this decline. See [www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org).

### GOOD GOD By Mark Jarman

Instead of casting them out of Paradise,  
Instead of making them labor in pain and sweat,  
Instead of instilling tristesse after coitus,  
Instead of giving them fire to burn their house down,

And light their way into the outer world,

He could have split them, each with a memory of the other,  
And put them each into a separate world.



*David Santiago '11 M.Div. has been the lead pastor of Triumphant Church in New Britain, CT, since 1998. The church has evolved denominationally over the decades. It began in 1964 as an Assemblies of God congregation, then became independent for several years. It recently joined the American Baptist Churches USA. Santiago was born in the Bronx to parents from Puerto Rico. He has a B.A. from Evangel University in Missouri, and has earned four units of clinical pastoral education at Hartford Hospital. He is also a chaplain for the Connecticut Department of Correction.*

**REFLECTIONS:** *You describe your 400-member congregation as multicultural. What does it take to create meaningful diversity?*

**DAVID SANTIAGO:** It's the hardest thing I've ever committed to. I was born to challenge the notion that God is okay with the fact that 11 a.m. on Sundays is still the most segregated hour of the week. With about 50 percent of our congregation Latino, 30 percent Black, and about 20 percent Caucasian, we still have a lot of work ahead of us, but we're giving it our best effort. I've reinvented the way I preach. I can't be that fiery preacher anymore. I had to tone it down, scale it back, in order to connect with everyone at once. Our music has become gloriously complicated. Fellowship events that involve food are especially challenging, since we strive to be representative. Going multicultural/multiethnic is hard work. But its reward – love building all of us together – is worth it. My personal motto has become “not I, but Christ through me.”

**REFLECTIONS:** *You've been at one church nearly 20 years. Did you plan it that way?*

**SANTIAGO:** Before entering the ministry, I asked God for one thing: that I would be permitted to invest the rest of my life in one place. Reaching your full potential requires staying in one place long enough for God to teach you how to walk worthy of the call. Harvest happens in due season. For pastors, it comes down to a choice. Either you become a congregation's chaplain who specializes in baptisms, nuptials, and funerals, or you become a congregation's visionary leader. For most, the latter will require a lifetime of service.

**REFLECTIONS:** *How do you deal with setbacks or moments of discouragement?*

**SANTIAGO:** Years ago, we purchased 12 school buses in order to reach the youngsters living in our city's six public housing developments. We bussed over 500 children to our location on Sunday mornings for a program called “Super Church.” The 75-minute

program included a praise-and-play session with loud and upbeat music, an illustrated sermon, and lots of sweets. It was so successful that within 10 months we maxed out the capacity of two gyms. Because of fire codes, we had to suspend the program temporarily while searching for a larger venue. During that period, unfortunately, the 12 idle buses were all vandalized and damaged beyond our ability to repair them. So we gave them away, shipping them off to a ministry in Guatemala. That was very heartbreaking, but you can't get stuck. You must move on and dream again.

**REFLECTIONS:** *How did your vocation come about?*

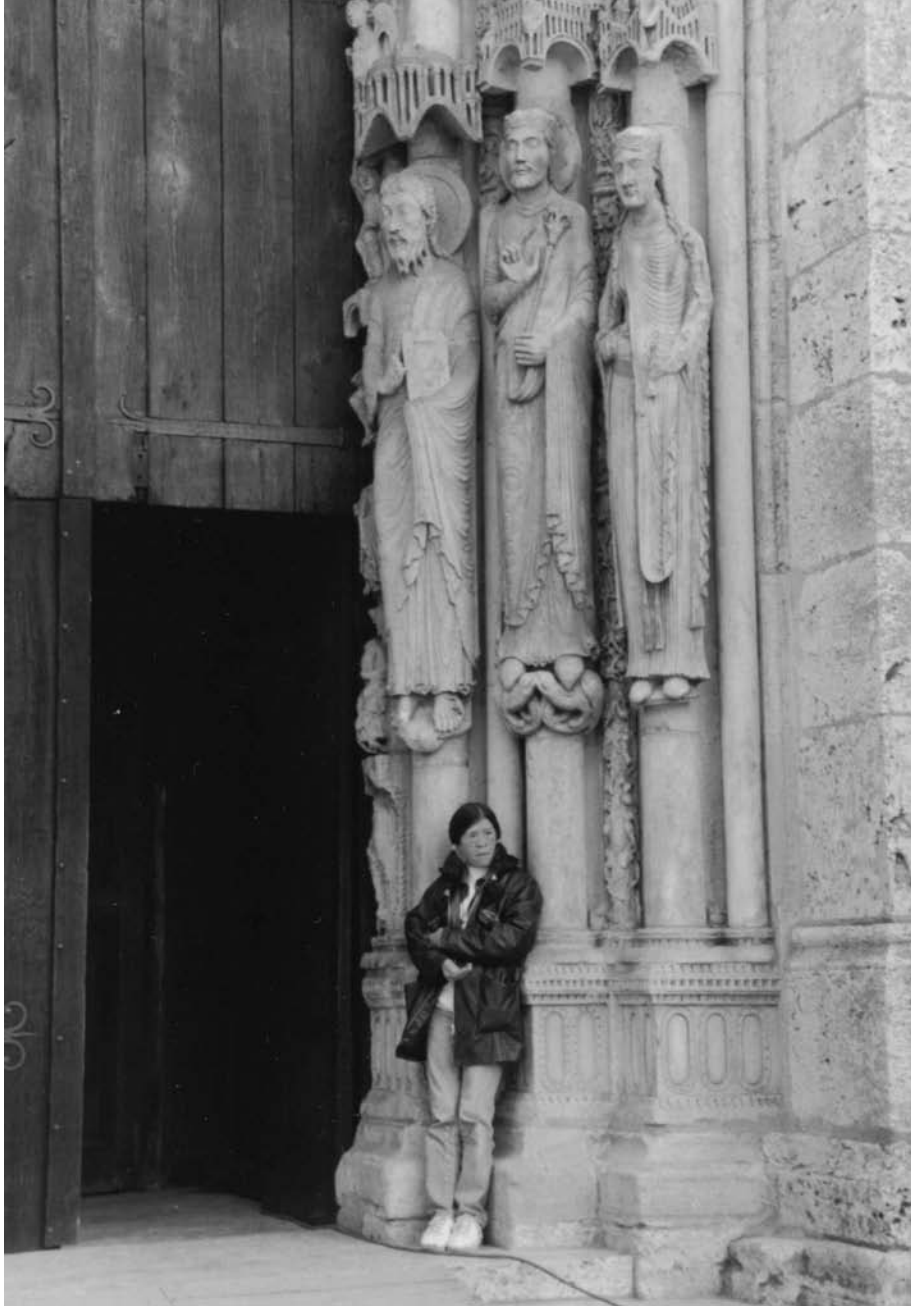
**SANTIAGO:** After responding to what I perceived was God's calling upon my life, I went up the proverbial mountain in search of a grounding and sustaining vision. Once I got it, I wrote it down. I've been reading that piece of paper for almost 20 years. The more I look at it, the more I realize that I will grow old pursuing it. God gives vision to one person, one leader, one steward, not a committee or a congregation at large. Personal ownership is required, if the vision is going to survive the test of time. Then it's the visionary's responsibility to enlist others to see it come to pass, a task that will squeeze both the best and worst out of you.

**REFLECTIONS:** *How would you describe your church's theology today?*

**SANTIAGO:** The chief goal of every believer should be to become more and more like Jesus. At Triumphant Church we believe this goal is best achieved through small steps of commitment. Nothing significant and long-lasting occurs instantaneously, so at Triumphant we take special care to provide plenty of opportunities for spiritual growth while encouraging people to move at their own pace. For people who are serious about God, a commitment to faithfully attend one of the weekend services is a good start. Going deeper in the faith would include a commitment to participate in a small group. Other levels of commitment include water baptism and church membership, spiritual study, participating in a ministry, and sharing with others outside the spiritual family.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Is there advice you'd offer a young minister-in-training?*

**SANTIAGO:** Yes, three things. First, ask God to give you a vision that is bigger than you. Second, understand that just because God gave you a vision, that doesn't mean it will be accepted readily by everyone. Don't force it. Move only when favored to do so. Lastly, learn to love through presence. Take your sandals off; if God called you, you'll be there a while.



# A Glimpse of Church, Using 2020 Vision



By Sharon E. Watkins '84 M.Div.

*Some 15 years ago, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) made a bold commitment: Start 1,000 new congregations and spark renewal at 1,000 established churches, all by the year 2020. We called this initiative 2020 Vision, which was begun under the leadership of then General Minister and President the Rev. Dr. Richard Hamm.*

By now, with more than 850 new church starts or affiliations underway, we are on track to make the first goal. We may be on track with the second, although renewal is harder to measure. In any case, what has become clear from our experience is that flourishing congregations, whether newly formed or undergoing transformation, have some characteristics in common.

Mainline churches in general are “well positioned to meet the challenges of this new era – but it would require us giving attention towards our own

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**Flourishing congregations have a specific sense of where God is calling them, and they keep their focus there.**

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transformation,” says Rick Morse, vice president for Hope Partnership for Missional Transformation, the ministry that oversees the 2020 Vision initiative.<sup>1</sup>

## **Four Kinds of Attention**

What kind of attention is he talking about? We’ve identified four major areas: attention to a clear sense of congregational purpose or call, spiritual attention, community attention, and a willingness to be changed. Flourishing congregations have a specific sense of where God is calling them, and they keep their focus there.

Shawnee (KS) Community Christian Church, through a Hope Partnership assessment called New Beginnings, realized they were spending 60 percent of their budget on mortgage and building – and not

making ends meet at that. Only three percent of giving went to mission outreach.

Shawnee resolved to do something drastic but decisive and far-reaching. According to their pastor, the Rev. Johnny Lewis, “Through our New Beginnings process we agreed, reluctantly, and unanimously, that the best answer for us was to sell our property, relocate to a rented space that was less expensive, invest more of ourselves in real mission, and start over as a new church, doing ministry in new ways that might continue our witness in the neighborhood.”<sup>2</sup>

That was four years ago. He now reports, “In 2015 we are tithing as a church for the first time in years, we will provide 500 boxes of food for area families, and we recently collected \$8,000 in one month for the Global Mission initiative for clean water in the Congo – ironically this is the same monthly mortgage payment we could never meet. Yesterday we celebrated baby dedications, baptisms, and new members of the growing new congregation that is emerging from the faithful legacy and sacrifice of Shawnee Park.”

Thriving congregations pay spiritual attention. Liberation Christian Church in St. Louis, MO, always knew their calling was to witness for social justice. In late summer 2014, as protests mounted in nearby Ferguson, founding pastor Rev. Dr. Dietra Wise Baker could see that God was calling her congregation into the streets. Her people just kept showing up there.

“The same spirit that was calling us to worship was calling us into the streets, so that ‘we could

become,” she says. “The movement helped us remember why God called our church into being in the first place. Come out into the streets. I promise you’ll meet Jesus there.”<sup>3</sup>

The spiritual focus of a transforming congregation is less on what they themselves are doing and more on what God is doing through them.

In her new book, *Thrive*, the Rev. Dr. Ruth Fletcher, Regional Minister of the Christian Church in Montana, underscores the need to cultivate spiritual habits that connect directly to Jesus’ teachings. “Those spiritual habits are learned behaviors that connect those churches with the way of life practiced by Jesus, with the sacred Spirit, and with the needs and gifts of their neighbors,” she writes.<sup>4</sup>

Such congregations also focus on community attention. Rick Morse of Hope Partnership puts it this way: “They look at their community as their ministry, not the group gathered before them. While church

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### Despite the uncertainties facing church life today, our 2020 Vision adventure defies the narrative of “mainline decline.”

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participants care deeply about each other, it is not the ultimate focus of the mission of the church. Instead, participants gain joy from working side by side in mission as they practice discipleship.”

In 2009, Chestnut Ridge Christian Church in Marietta, GA, saw itself as surviving but not thriving. Wanting to change its path, church members entered a period of spiritual discernment about their future. They decided their goal had to be more than “best church IN the community.”

“Rather, God was calling them to be the best church FOR the community,” according to a Hope Partnership report.

Months later, the church started a modest community garden to fight neighborhood hunger and also reduced its governance in order to give more flexibility to ministry teams. Within three years, the church had changed dramatically. Hope Partnership reports: “They expanded their community garden to provide hundreds of pounds of produce to local food pantries and partnered with local master gardeners, developed a summer lunch program, embraced a shift in the preaching style and added simple use of technology in worship, launched a new website, partnered with a local hunger initiative, reorganized their Disciples men’s, women’s and youth groups, placed greater focus on children’s ministry, collaborated with another Disciples church on a shared worship experience, got involved in a local housing initiative, and more.”<sup>5</sup>

Pastor Byron Wells says now their church has “more visitors and more engaged members exhibiting vibrancy, energy, passion – people who love being together, but who are taking it to a higher plane and turning the focus outward instead of inward.”

It becomes obvious that transformation depends on another key characteristic: a willingness to change.

“First and foremost a congregation in transformation understands that it must transition from doing ministry in a 20th-century context to doing mission and ministry according to a 21st-century context,” says Reginald W. Calhoun Sr., Disciples Executive for Evangelism and Congregational Transformation.<sup>6</sup>

### The Dance of Transformation

Jean Vandergrift, a Disciples scholar with many years’ experience as a parish minister, sees the church dynamics of change as a kind of dance. A church’s transformation into a witness-bearing place, she says, “occurs as the congregation practices or ‘dances’ the reign of God, a dance that corporately and continually turns toward the lead of God ...”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the uncertainties facing church life today, our 2020 Vision adventure defies the familiar narrative of “mainline decline.” Decline is not the only story. It’s also about metamorphosis and what church will look like at the other end of these times. In the transformation dance, paying attention to call, Spirit, community, and change, we learn what we take with us, what we leave behind, and what we invent new for a new time.

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*The Rev. Sharon E. Watkins ’84 M.Div. serves as General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. She is the author of Whole: A Call for Unity in Our Fragmented World (Chalice Press, 2014).*

### Notes

- 1 Email exchange, July 15, 2015.
- 2 Email exchange, April 13, 2014.
- 3 Meditation presented at the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at Columbus, OH, July 20, 2015.
- 4 Ruth Fletcher, *Thrive: Spiritual Habits of Transforming Congregations* (Energion Publications, 2015), p. vi.
- 5 <http://www.hopepmt.org/2015/06/18/patience-and-intention-key-to-transformation/>
- 6 Email exchange, Aug. 25, 2015.
- 7 Jean Vandergrift, *The Dance of a Changing Church: A Practical Theology of Congregational Transformation*, doctoral dissertation, Boston University School of Theology, 2015.

# The Kingdom of God: Fantastic Voyage



By Nicholas Lewis '13 M.Div.

*In 1980, the band Lakeside released an album titled Fantastic Voyage. The title song would eventually top the R&B chart, and it is now widely regarded as a classic in the canon of '70s funk. With a driving 2-4 beat, the hybrid slap bass fortified with synthetic sub-tones, and sonorous vocal inflections interspersed with spoken lyric, the iconic refrain rung out as a call to action: "Come along and ride on a fantastic voyage!"*

The resilient song continues to be a source of inspiration for creative revision and reuse. Rapper Coolio released a Grammy-nominated remix in 1993, and other artists have incorporated sound samples from it in the decades since.

Readers might wonder what bearing a funk masterpiece could have on the education of young ministers-in-training for the future of the church. But the song was a sign of the times, capturing a cultural moment of hope and exuberance. Its spirit confronts us with a question: In what ways does our own moment carry hope for human possibility?

## **New Civil Priorities**

"Fantastic Voyage" remains a joyous emblem of the ethos of 1970s communal action and social progress. The decade was poised to see new-found freedoms in civil society, after the landmark legislations of the 1960s ended various forms of segregation and disenfranchisement. Thus came the first meaningful efforts of school desegregation and the formation of communities of diversity in the public sphere. They weren't perfect, but they implied a new civic priority, the intent to embrace a more integrated existence.

Regrettably, the social will that once mobilized historic action has steadily declined. We are stubbornly divided not only racially but ideologically. The divides extend to socioeconomic class and gender identity even as we strive to expand the definition of community and parse out our places in it. Nowhere are these chasms more predictably apparent than in our churches on Sunday morning.

Such homogeneous congregations can be seen as the product of self-selection along lines of deeply held dogmas and political ideology. Given the troubled racial histories of virtually every mainline denomination, perhaps ecclesial self-segregation is simply a matter of existential self-preservation.

No matter where one finds oneself in this spiritual economy, a fundamental question is still begged: How do we envision the Kingdom of God?

Judging from church history, we might painfully conclude that the Kingdom of God will always be a mere reflection of the everyday values of congregational or social systems – the Body of Christ made in our own complacent image.

But surely we know such characterizations only attest to our limited vision, falling far short of the creativity of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God. Even in this era of rising religious non-affiliation, examples abound of church communities

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**We run the risk of obscuring or undervaluing insights that other traditions might offer about revitalizing our own congregations.**

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experiencing profound growth. One conspicuous example in recent decades is the non-denominational megachurch.

For many in the mainline of denominationalism, the megachurch phenomena is a conversation non-starter. What usually dominates mainline debate

about megachurches are the stereotypical assumptions – worship as spectacle, the prevalence of a prosperity gospel, the charisma of pastors who are long on deliver and short on substance.

But we should exercise caution about such critiques, since they could easily apply to some of our own churches. We run the risk of obscuring or undervaluing insights that other traditions might offer about revitalizing our own congregations. Megachurches, for instance, often attract a remarkable diversity of people across socioeconomic, ethnic, and geographic lines. Such congregations appear to harness the creative capacities of their laypeople in a pluralistic setting.

I believe our faith communities must transcend the arbitrary definitions or distortions of others that leave us mired in congregational navel-gazing and self-aggrandizement. Churches should bear witness to the riches of difference that exist in societies. Churches could provide a regional point of confluence across divisions of city and neighborhood. Churches could become hubs organized around music, dance, and visual arts that reach beyond

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**Like no other 21st-century institution,  
the church is in a position to promote  
ecosystems of human thriving.**

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race or class or politics – and redouble efforts at cross-cultural programming, gathering dissimilar people for shared emotional experiences and building cornerstones for greater social equity.

Nourishing a more pluralistic community of faith, we might discover a great gift of grace – new interpretations of scripture that invite an ever-expanding ethic of inclusivity, seeking to do justice to the truly high call of bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth, rich with the full diversity of our human perspectives and identities that God has graciously created through love.

**Confronting Global Culture**

As followers of Christ, we must be willing to confront conflict and despair in our global culture – the real and perceived lines of difference regarding race, class, sex, gender, ability – and be peacemakers in search of greater equity in society. We should claim an indomitable faith, cultivate intellect, and hone practical skills that will serve us as we attempt to stand in the gap.

In its endearing way, a hit song from 1980 captured the spirit of exploration into uncharted areas of solidarity. Surely that spirit isn't dead and gone. Like no other 21st-century institution, the church is

in a position to promote ecosystems of human flourishing – social spaces in which the myriad threads of humanity can gather and reflect the breadth of God's creation.

It's up to us to reimagine our notions of Christian community and worship, opening our spirits to the ever-expanding possibility found in God. We can model what it means to live into an ethic of inclusivity founded upon a profound sense of social and restorative justice in our global culture.

And, God willing, one day we will live more fully into the kingdom, the faithful community which is to come. This is our mandate, a truly fantastic voyage to embark upon again and again.

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*Nicholas Lewis '13 M.Div. was recently appointed Associate Dean of Student Affairs at Yale Divinity School after serving at Bard College as assistant dean of the college and community life chaplain. He has been a professional clarinetist with the Richmond (VA) Symphony Orchestra and taught at Howard University.*

LAY OF THE LAND

By J. Barrie Shepherd

Evil and good endure;  
the rest is history,  
its endless ebb and flow,  
the daily onset of events  
and circumstances.  
We arrive and pass away  
and, in-between –  
that curt, fragmented meantime –  
taste cruelty – experienced,  
or passed along – the slow  
and angry bitterness of absence,  
injury and loss,  
with every now and then  
a momentary exaltation,  
generosity perhaps,  
uniting's glimpse of ecstasy  
and the fidelity of longing.  
In the end it all begins  
again and whichever wins or loses  
never is announced.  
Kindness, however, does appear  
to wear exceeding well. While laughter  
shapes a bright, persistent music.



# God at Work Everywhere

*The future of the church – how it breaks from the past, how it stays true to its roots, how it responds to a world in pain – is much on the minds of those who will shape it, today's seminarians. "The question is how to do creative things in ministry while maintaining the integrity of the tradition," says Lucinda Huffaker, Director of Supervised Ministries at Yale Divinity School. She places some 60 YDS students a year in field education work, mostly in local church settings.*

*This year, 188 YDS students are M.Div. candidates, out of a total YDS enrollment of 395.*

*The world they are preparing for is frantic, wary of commitment, also pragmatic and willing to make spiritual connections, Huffaker suggests.*

*"There is hope in the denominations," she says. "Students are preparing themselves to be agile, open-minded, collaborative in parish ministry. The idea is not 'Christ versus culture' – it's very much Christ in the world, Christ in the marketplace. It's God at work everywhere. Everyone has to face imagining the church of the future."*

*Reflections invited several M.Div. students to remark on their future ministries. Here is a sample.*

## The Ground Under Our Feet

By Alissa Kretzmann



The church has been changing since the beginning. After Jesus' death, his earliest followers were forced to grieve and respond in the profoundest of ways – their ground was literally shaking. In our time, societal shifts, violence, and inequality – the shaking earth we stand on – demand that we too respond in faith and creativity.

Crucial to congregational ministry is staying alert to what is happening on the ground around us. In a church in Milwaukee, where I worked before entering Yale Divinity School, this meant hearing our neighborhood's need for food and using the church's enormous space to host communal meals for those who were hungry for nutrition or friendship.

At St. Lydia's in New York City, where I served as an intern last year, attention to the ground meant listening to the desire in the congregation and community to engage children. Now congregants at St. Lydia's are adapting their normal worship time and structure to welcome more of God's youngest people to the table.

These examples remind me that the places where we live, work, and minister are too beautifully diverse to be forced into a one-size-fits-all solution. But as I prepare for ministry I continually have to remind myself that the church is not a problem to be solved by religious professionals. In my best moments, I have great hope in a creative God who tends to show up in unexpected ways and sticks around even when the ground we stand on is shaking.

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*Alissa Kretzmann is a third-year M.Div. student, graduating in May 2016. She is a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*

## Loving and Protecting Our Neighbors

By Pauline Samuel



To hear that nine innocent members of a church community were senselessly killed in a sacred place rocked me to my core. As the funerals were held for each victim after that heinous act at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, my heart ached. My heart ached for the families now left with a void that cannot be filled. I saw the pictures of the daughters of former Senator Clementa Pinkney at his funeral – pain, sadness, and confusion etched across their faces – and I wept for their loss.

When unspeakable tragedy occurs the question always arises, "Where was God?" What is the church called to do when violence enters its holy spaces? How does Jesus want us to respond? The church is called to mourn and share in the loss of those who grieve, to comfort and pray for them and

with them. The church is also called to take a stance and to protect not only its members but the community. We are called to love our neighbors. Protecting our neighbors is part of loving them. As the body of Christ, it is our responsibility to speak out against gun violence locally and nationally. We must be visible and vocal in the fight for effective gun control. Ordained and lay alike should be involved in conversations and actions with those elected to serve in government. The church has a voice to speak not only the word of God but a word of hope and shed its light in the face of dark and hateful acts.

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*Pauline Samuel is a second-year M.Div. student from Brooklyn, NY, and a postulant in the Diocese of Long Island. After graduation in 2017, she hopes to be ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church.*

## Extraordinary People

*By Kevin Farrar*



I do not consider myself much of a crier or a dance aficionado, but at least one tear welled up when I saw pain splash across the en pointe dancer's face – his arms outstretched, his wrists wrapped in red cloth – during this year's Palm/Passion Sunday service.

Watching the crucified Jesus' desperate gaze to heaven, then his lifeless head fall to his chest, sent a chill down my spine. In just a few minutes of dancing, a congregant somehow summarized the entire message of the service. I could not wait to show the video to friends who like dance and bring them to church so they could experience it themselves.

I regularly hear conversations about how churches are shrinking. Nevertheless, I never cease to be amazed by the number of interesting people I meet there. Professional chefs, saxophonists, entrepreneurs, accomplished academics – many of the most exceptional people I know are friends from church.

Every church I have attended is home to such people. Even so, not every church takes advantage of the special gifts in their midst. In my experience, the healthiest and most dynamic churches weave the talents of laypeople into a lively mosaic of passion and skill offered in worship, community, and service. Many churches already have people within – like this liturgical dancer – who could be empowered to bring a new faith witness to the congregation.

I hope more churches will have eyes to see spaces for such individuals. This is all it took for me to get excited about returning to church the next week.

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*M.Div. candidate Kevin Farrar plans to graduate in 2016. He is pursuing ordination in the ELCA.*

## Preparing for Rebirth

*By Jessie Gutsell*



I am hopeful for the ministry ahead of me. I am hopeful because I have faith in Jesus Christ and His presence and role in our church and world. We are not alone on this journey, and we have the compelling and life-giving story of Jesus to guide us. We can't forget that our faith in Christ should shape all that we do.

I'm hopeful for a second reason: the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds me at Yale Divinity School. The faith and creativity of my classmates and teachers at YDS fill me with the assurance that the church is not dead but is preparing for a beautiful rebirth in the world. I'm filled with hope to imagine my classmates entering ministry, sharing their gifts, and inviting others around them to share theirs. Over the past two years I've watched my classmates share their faith through music, food, liturgy, governance, and more. Through their witness, I've grown to imagine a church of the future, where more and more people seek to build relationships with each other, their community, and the divine.

There are few limits when we commit ourselves fully to serving Christ with all that we are. Together, with faith in Christ and our own creative passion, we can embark on the world of ministry with abundant hope.

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*M.Div. candidate Jessie Gutsell plans to graduate in 2016. She is pursuing ordination in the Episcopal Church.*

## More Than a Social Club

*By J. Michael Cobb*



I know of a congregation where members have said that seeing their friends is the primary reason they attend. I'm certain they aren't alone in this. But a congregation that isn't looking beyond its walls to the broader community is at risk of becoming so insular that it ceases to matter to the larger world. Service to people who are not members – and who may never join a church – is one of the best gauges of a congregation's mission.

Congregations that downplay or forget that mission are no longer healthy. A church – even one with a great music program, busy youth groups, and popular community activities – becomes nothing more than a glorified social club if it neglects its mandate of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All of a congregation's activities should feed into that fundamental reason for being.

This approach influences the core of my own call to ministry – reaching those who have been harmed by the church, or who have left the church because they were unable to reconcile a loving God with their experiences. I have met gay men who have been kicked out of their church (and out of their families) for being queer, and women who have left their church over barriers to women in leadership or over the use of scripture to control women's bodies and freedom.

I know there are many people who have rejected the church, just as the church has rejected them. They are best served by a congregation that reaches out to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ above legalistic moralizing or ideology. My prayer is that my own ministry will help these very people to see a church that serves them and others, a church that embodies the healing love and acceptance that permeated everything that Jesus did.

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*M.Div. candidate J. Michael Cobb plans to graduate in 2017 and pursue ordination in the United Methodist Church.*

## Liturgy for an Unfolding Cosmos

*By Andrew Doss*



We need liturgy that better reflects a modern cosmology. As many of us see it, the church's first 1,850 years regarded salvation as redemption from a static state of exile from the Garden. After 150 years of Darwin and further advances on the frontiers of astrophysics and metaphysics, that old framework feels obsolete.

Today we experience ourselves as members of a participatory, dynamic, and evolving universe in the process of formation, not managers of a fixed earthly plane who seek spiritual deliverance to a prior state of perfection.

Our liturgical choices ought to explore these new conditions. This is not a call to "start over" or run from our liturgical history. We should examine that history thoroughly and discover how we can give ourselves to its evolving story.

As a founder of the Worship Society of Saint Polycarp in New Orleans, a Council member of the Associated Parishes of Liturgy and Mission, and a student in the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, I've been surveying these liturgical questions. I've seen people who had previously stopped going to churches ("all we do is just read aloud the same old dead words") become deeply moved by dynamic and vulnerable participation in paperless a cappella singing that allows space for improvisation. Young people are discovering new energies in extended, shared silence (up to 20 minutes) during worship. Across the country, old and newcomers are responding to the Eucharist re-centralized as a community meal.

These are only starting points. In the face of shrinking parish membership, let's draw on our ever-expanding historical experience and listen to the hunger of those outside the church. It might inform the way our liturgy can speak more deeply to our own hunger to participate in God's evolving creation.

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*M.Div. candidate Andrew Doss plans to graduate in 2017 and pursue ordination in the Episcopal Church..*



Worship time has arrived. People enter the church and take their places. And now, just as the liturgical celebration is about to begin, a member of the community stands and faces all in attendance, declaring:

*"If you are a young adult, separated or divorced, newly married, unemployed, a child, a new parent, gay, struggling with faith, experiencing profound gratitude, lesbian, remarried, single, a long-time member of this faith community, a visitor, lonely, experiencing health challenges, mourning, in the prime of your life, transgender, religious, widowed, ordained, materially poor, celebrating a milestone, in the company of people you love, undocumented, anxious, regretful, seeking meaning, seeking forgiveness, seeking mercy or seeking transcendence: Welcome. Welcome home. We are so glad you are here."*

A palpable atmosphere of hospitality is sacrosanct for a vibrant faith community. People want to belong. Yet in their search for meaning, reconciliation, nobility of purpose, healing and inspiration, they often arrive at our churches tentative and vulnerable.

We know a thriving parish when we see one: We experience a welcoming environment.

Fourteen years ago, the Catholic Church in the U.S. was reeling from unimaginable heartache wrought from the unfolding awareness of the sexual abuse crisis. Trust was fractured, and morale was at an all-time low. Yet deep within the Christian consciousness lies the paschal mystery, which gives rise, in the very midst of profound suffering and dying, to hope in new life.

If any grace emerged from those painful days it was that of Catholic laity roused out of our lethargy. Many prominent Catholics joined clergy and religious to support efforts of healing and reconciliation for victims and for the church writ large. Geoff Boisi, founder of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, along with Fr. Robert Beloin, chaplain at Saint Thomas More Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale, resolved to be part of the solution. Thought leaders from diverse perspectives were convened. Out of their collective love for the church, they committed to address the underlying conditions that contributed to the sex abuse scandal, focusing particularly on church management, leaving doctrinal matters to the Magisterium.

In the ensuing years, a new awareness of the importance of managerial excellence, ethics, accountability, and lay expertise in the church has

deepened. Laity today are less passive and more pro-active in exercising our baptismal responsibility. We are stepping in to aid pastors as they manage people and finances and solve other complex church challenges. As a result of this greater engagement of talented laity, a constellation of practices is in place to strengthen the temporal affairs of the church.

There is an elegant byproduct when church leaders avail themselves of the intellectual, problem-solving capability of laity: evangelization. One is far more likely to immerse and invest in the very life of the church if one is recognized for what she or he does best and is invited to lend that to the church in a meaningful way.

As a Catholic profoundly grateful for the gift of faith, and as executive director of the Leadership Roundtable, I travel frequently and attend Mass in many parishes across the country. What I have observed is a spectrum of vitality. The most important, and underappreciated, contribution to congregational vitality is active lay engagement. Pastors of stagnant, lackluster parishes rarely look to laity for anything more than financial contributions to maintain rather than to advance mission. Conducting a Zagat-like survey over a period of nine months, I found that the most flourishing parishes are those where parishioners are welcoming and take ownership to ensure their church is in fact their church. These parishes have systems of accountability. They make sure that mediocrity – whether in music, homiletics, stewardship, social action, faith formation, or parish management – is simply not tolerated.

Today there is new life for the Catholic Church in the U.S. A national movement is underway, fueled by the Leadership Roundtable network of ordained, religious, and lay Catholic leaders who are committed to nurturing a culture of accountability, openness, hospitality, and greater deployment of lay competencies in service to the church. The election of Pope Francis, who wants to make managerial reform in the church a signature of his pontificate, has been a further blessing.

So to all parishioners, and in particular to all who bring their considerable talents to strengthen and invigorate our faith communities: Thank you. We are so glad you are here.

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*Kerry Alys Robinson '94 M.A.R. is executive director of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management and author of Imagining Abundance: Fundraising, Philanthropy and a Spiritual Call to Service (Liturgical Press, 2014). For ten years she served as director of development at Saint Thomas More Catholic Chapel & Center at Yale.*

# Digital Turns and Liquid Scriptures



By Jeffrey S. Siker '81 M.Div.

*Over the last 20 years or so we have witnessed what has come to be called the digital turn, a fundamental shift in human interaction spurred on by the digital revolution. Evangelical churches in particular have dived into all things digital as the wave of the future. Most mainline churches have warily put their toes in the streaming water, unsure of what role digital futures can or should play in revitalizing faith communities.*

Given the central role of the Bible in all Protestant denominations, free-church traditions, and increasingly the Roman Catholic Church, I have been most interested in how the digital turn relates to scripture. What difference does it make to read, study, proclaim, and pray the Bible in digital form on screens rather than using the traditional book with physical pages? What impact will this shift have on the place of the Bible within churches?

As a professor of biblical studies (a Protestant teaching for over 25 years at a Catholic university) and as a Presbyterian minister, I routinely see students and parishioners pull out smartphones, tablets, and laptops to read the Bible rather than any physically bound version with “real pages.” Reflecting on this digital transition, I offer the following cautions about the use of what I would term “liquid scriptures,” also noting potential benefits.

## **Collective Shrug**

When I ask developers of Bible apps about the shift to digital Bibles, I am met with a collective shrug. More and more people are using digital Bibles, and that’s all that seems to matter. There appears to be little thought given to whether the use of such Bibles is substantively different than the use of print Bibles, what those differences might be, or why they might be important.

If anything, the promotion of digital Bibles is presumed to be a good thing. The most widely used Bible app, YouVersion (produced by Life.Church)

has been downloaded nearly 200 million times. Life.Church’s high view of scripture is the source of their goal to make the Word of God present everywhere, always ready at hand. (As its website states, the Bible “is the supreme source of truth for Christian beliefs about living. Because it is inspired by God, it is truth without error.”) What better way to pursue this goal than by offering a free smartphone

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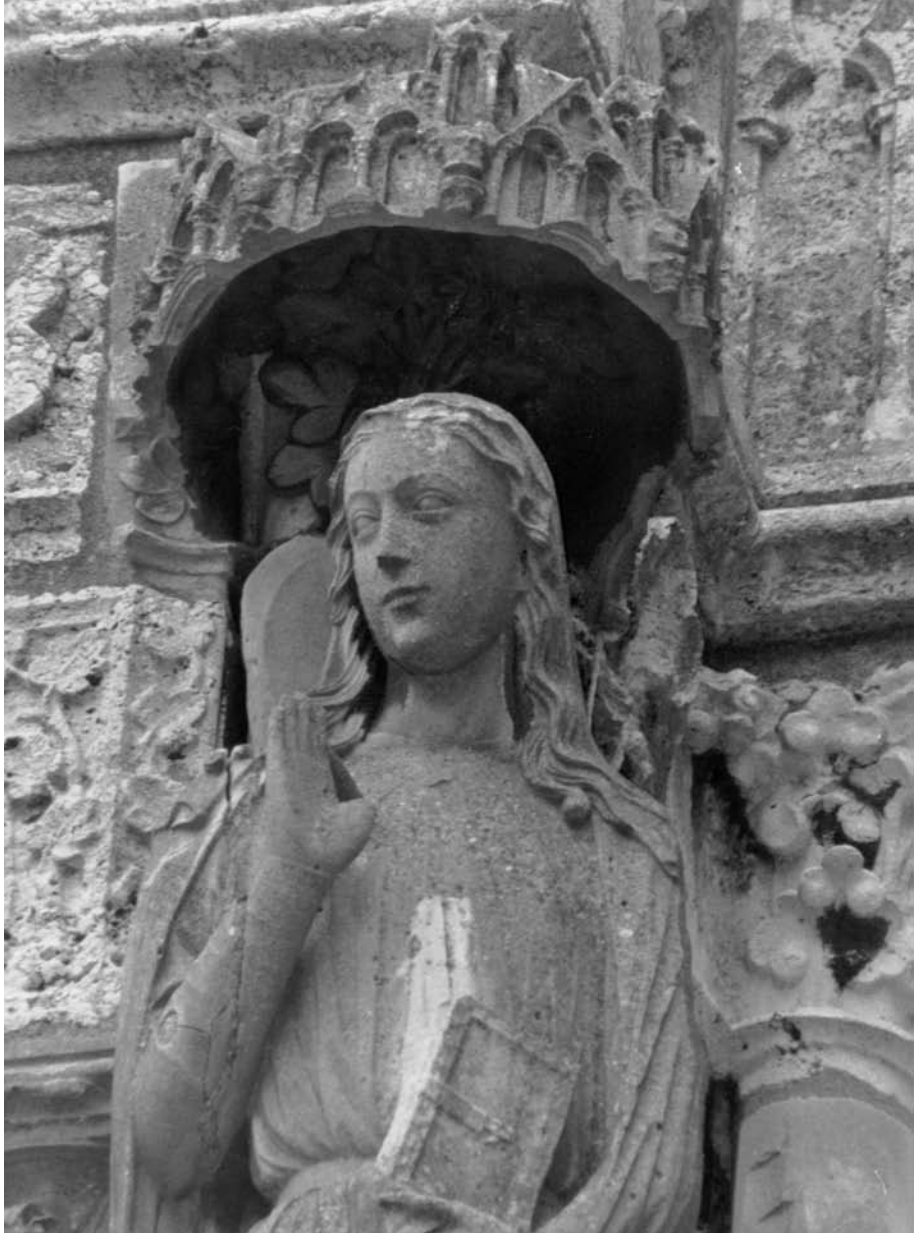
**The digital realm will continue to empower new biblical interpretations and form faith communities through social media rather than church pronouncements.**

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download that gives access to 1,115 versions in 799 languages? The YouVersion site proclaims: “Now the Bible is an app. God is near, and so is His Word. As you wake up. While you wait. When you meet a friend. Before you go to sleep. When the Bible is always with you, it becomes a part of your daily life.”

## **Bible on the Go**

On one level this claim is hard to dispute. Handy access to a Bible on your phone is less cumbersome than carrying around a thick study edition. But on another level, and here comes the first caution, this Bible is implicitly a “Bible on the go.” It is a Bible for in-between moments, for quick reference, perhaps for today’s inspiring Bible tweet (one option



in YouVersion). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this, it does tend to atomize and oversimplify the biblical narrative, or reduce the texts to little more than slogans ripped out of context. Bible sloganizing is nothing new, but it gains incredible speed and scale in the digital age.

This becomes more acute with smaller screen formats like smartphones, where only a fraction of a passage is viewable at a time. Scrolling rather than turning pages, students get easily lost in the digital text. There is little sense of the Bible as a whole. All one ever sees is one page of text, an endless page. There is no heft to the text, no physical sense of beginning and end, no awareness of one book of the Bible bumping up against another. There is only search and scroll.

### Canon Fodder

This leads to a second caution: The digital Bible is a book without covers. Whereas printed versions come with a clear shape and a linear, canonical ordering of books, the digital Bible experience is relatively shapeless, coverless, even sterile. It gives no impression of the organization of Torah, Prophets, Writings, of Gospels, Paul, and the latter writings of the New Testament. The canonical boundaries of the physical Bible vanish in digital form. The print Bible has more contours than the digital versions can convey, with the result that digital Bibles can lose the historic function of a canon that has served for the last 16 centuries.

A third caution involves the seemingly endless number of easily downloadable versions and translations of digital Bibles. It is not uncommon for students to download a free King James Version as the path of least resistance, unaware of the difficulties of reading such aging translations. This is fairly routine

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## There is no longer anything *Standard* about the New Revised Standard Version, nothing *International* about the New International Version.

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in the digital era, though most mainline Protestant churches left the KJV behind long ago. The tendency to download the KJV as the default version speaks to the irony of having an antiquated translation on the latest technological gadget.

The KJV, of course, is not the only digital choice. For a truly head-spinning experience see the more than 35,000 different Bibles available at The Bible Store on Amazon.com. In any case, the babel of Bibles in the digital realm makes it difficult to talk

about a communal text within the life of the church. There is no longer anything *Standard* about the New Revised Standard Version, nothing *International* about the New International Version. Each implicitly claims a consensus and authority, yet each is subject to the consumer whims of our fingertips in the digital domain.

A fourth caution has to do with hypertexts, which take one out of the biblical text at the click of a mouse into a commentary, a map, a concordance, a Bible dictionary, a lexicon, and more. Wonderful as they are, the thousands of hypertext resources available in such Bible programs as Accordance and Logos provide far more information than anyone can reasonably handle, with few guidelines for discriminating between resources. There is the danger of mistaking the sheer volume of information for knowledge. As Claire Clivaz has noted, the Bible is fast becoming a book that for all its girth is increasingly a *biblaridion* (a very little book; cf. Rev. 10:2,9-10) lost in the World Wide Web.<sup>1</sup>

A fifth caution concerns the science of the reading brain. The most recent science concludes that reading comprehension is notably higher when reading physical pages than when reading text on screens. Printed words on a page have a greater tangibility for the brain than do the slippery pixels on a screen. Studies show that we tend to skim texts on screens, whereas we read printed texts more deeply.

### Constant Interruption

A sixth caution revolves around the problem of multitasking and distraction. The technology of books is simple. They do one thing – present printed text on pages, all bound in a volume. Digital screens allow us to do many things – text, surf, tweet, email, make phone calls, read an e-book. The problem is that our attention is constantly interrupted. It is difficult to engage a book like the Bible with so many distractions. As studies reveal, we are not as good at multitasking as we think we are. It compromises our ability to concentrate and understand.

Despite these cautions, as a culture and as a church we are clearly moving headlong into all things digital. Physical Bibles will persist, but scripture will be increasingly digital in form and function.

In practical terms, digital Bibles are low cost and easily disseminated. Further, the great accessibility of diverse translations reminds us that prior to print culture there was no one monolithic version of the Bible. Before Gutenberg, relatively few people read. They heard the Bible proclaimed in church or saw biblical stories dramatized in stained glass. The digital world allows a more holistic approach to

the Bible through images, videos, and audio files. In short, the digital turn is opening up a vast array of interpretive lenses that can potentially erode the dominance of written text through the addition of sight and sound.

The radical democratization of the digital realm, where all voices can appear equal, will likely continue to empower new interpretations of the Bible and lead to the formation of faith communities and subgroups around common values identified through social media rather than through church pronouncements.

Even as we remain aware of the cautions, perhaps the digital turn will provide Christians of all stripes opportunities to discover the Bible as an ever more fluid source of inspiration and conversation, of proclamation and prayerful reflection.

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Jeffrey S. Siker '81 M.Div. is professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University. His books include *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Westminster John Knox, 1991), *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (Oxford, 1996), and *Jesus, Sin, and Perfection in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, 2015). He is completing a book called *Liquid Scriptures: The Bible in a Digital World*, forthcoming from Fortress.

## Notes

- 1 Claire Clivaz, "New Testament in a Digital Culture: A Biblaridion (Little Book) Lost in the Web?" in *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 3:3 (2014), pp. 20-38. <http://jrmdccom>.
- 2 See Naomi Baron, *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Ferris Jabr, "Why the Brain Prefers Paper," *Scientific American* 309:5 (November 2013), pp. 48-53; Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (Stanford University Press, 2010). MaryAnne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (HarperCollins, 2007).

## DID YOU GO TO CHURCH LAST WEEK?

Gallup has been asking Americans some version of that question regularly for decades. A 2015 Gallup report shows results state by state. Utah scored highest: 51 percent of Utahns said they attend worship services every week.

Southerners reported high percentages of weekly worship too – Mississippi (47 percent), North Carolina (40 percent), and Georgia (39 percent), for instance.

Attendance was notably lower on the two coasts. Vermont was lowest at 17 percent, followed by New Hampshire and Maine (20 percent), and Massachusetts (22 percent). Washington and Oregon were at 24 percent.

These numbers are always self-reported – how accurate are they? This is a matter of debate year after year.

Gallup says self-reports are estimates, not necessarily precise, but they provide insight into how Americans view their underlying religiosity.

Reporting on research in 2012, NPR said Americans overstate their worship habits by about 50 percent, and we do it more than people in other countries. Thus, the often-reported national worship-attendance rate of 40-plus percent is probably closer to 30 percent.

The self-reporting bias isn't a devious deception, researchers argue. Many people, when asked how often they go to church, interpret the question to mean, "Are you the sort of person who attends," according to sociologist Philip Brenner, who has examined data for this and other countries. Americans have been overreporting worship attendance since the 1970s, he told NPR.

The exaggerated numbers suggest that many Americans see themselves as more religious than a survey question about actual worship attendance can convey.

Meanwhile, people who don't go to religious services give different reasons for that – they're too busy, or they have work conflicts, health problems, or no transportation, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center study. Others cite conflict with religion itself as the reason – either they disagree with the beliefs of church leaders or they don't feel it is crucial to attend. In that survey, 9 percent gave no particular reason for their lack of attendance.

— Ray Waddle

Today is fresh, and yesterday is stale.  
Today is fast, and yesterday is slow.  
Today is yes, and yesterday is no.  
Today is news, and yesterday's a tale.  
The grave is empty. Last night it was full.  
The glorious means of death was once a shame.  
Someone is God who had a common name  
That you might give a child or animal.  
It happens overnight. The world is changed.  
The bottles in the cellar all decant.  
The stars sign the new cosmos at a slant.  
And everybody's plans are rearranged.  
Today we meet our maker, in a flash  
That turns the ash of yesterday to flesh.



# The Future is Counting on Us



By Maria LaSala

*I recently traveled in France, where I had the chance to see several of the world's most beautiful churches. My visits included three cathedrals dedicated to Mary the mother of Jesus – Notre Dame de la Garde in Marseille (built in 1864), the magnificent Cathedral of the Our Lady of Chartres (finished in 1250) outside Paris, and, perhaps the most famous of all, Notre Dame de Paris (completed in 1345), a Gothic wonder of flying buttresses, gargoyles, and sky-touching towers inviting the faithful to give glory to God.*

Gazing at these cathedrals, I was struck that generations of wealthy leaders employed their most skilled crafts people and artists to build up the church of Jesus Christ in their day.

How curious that these monuments of profound faith are largely tourist sites today, drawing more interest in their history and art than in the good news

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**We are not naïve about the difficult places. But our hope is more powerful than the failures we have known.**

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that is still proclaimed from their pulpits. Signs are posted inviting people to regular worship services, yet their pews are no longer full, their program offerings unable to spark much energy. Standing in each sanctuary, I wondered why the church has lost its influence over so many people's lives ... not just in the medieval cathedrals of France, but in American houses of worship as well.

## **A Puzzling Indifference**

I thought about the priorities of American society these days – how money, power, and creative genius are invested, how our very brightest young people are drawn to shaping new technologies, most of which have little to do with engaging the God of all creation.

Science has transformed our relation to creation in dramatic and wonderful ways, yet this does not explain why a people who once put their faith in God now seem to have little interest in those ancient sources of wisdom and grace.

Where flying buttresses once commanded awe, and space was designed to be filled with mystery, where now do the senses go to be awakened? How is faith being lived out?

We know this to be true: The church is the community in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, the wonder of faith is shared, and the power of grace transforms lives. Communities of trust, depth, and faithful living are built around the Eucharist and the biblical story. These are priceless gifts in an age where technology can separate us from an intimacy essential to healthy existence.

## **Defying the Tumult**

In my 30 years as a parish pastor, I've seen what happens when people come together to care for each other in this war-weary world. The results don't depend much on technology. A new baby is born and meals are delivered. A beloved spouse dies and friends come by and stay awhile. A child struggles with math and a church member spends hours each week helping with homework. Such kindnesses do not require church or even a life of faith. But being part of a church prompts people to think again about the purpose of their lives.

This has always been the case: No matter how tumultuous or uncertain the era, church community at its best is a model of hospitality, a space for new relationship with God and neighbor, where people come longing to hear words of forgiveness, to sing a new song in their life and work.

Early in my ministry, I met a man whose work at a chemical company involved leaded gas production. He was struggling with his new awareness that this leaded fuel, pumped into automobiles for the decades of his working life, had done great environmental harm. After retirement, he continued to

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### **The church has forever been about providing glimpses of the realm of God on earth. Let us reclaim that good work.**

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grieve that the well-intended labors of his life had been misspent. In worship, he heard the assurance of God's grace in Jesus Christ and the comforting promise that the wounded could be made whole again. Jesus' power to heal touched my parishioner's heart and moved him into a retirement vocation filled with ecological activism.

In my last congregation, I heard passionate cries to improve the lives of homeless women and men living in New Haven. A wheelbarrow at church was set up for food pantry contributions. It was filled to overflowing each week. Working with other congregations, we converted our gathering space into housing for 12 homeless men for a week each winter, providing safety and warmth on the coldest nights.

Such simple acts of compassion are starting places for church vitality in this generation. Jesus said, "whenever you sheltered one of mine or fed one of mine, you sheltered and fed me" – and by such a witness, lives are changed and hope is restored.

#### **Curiously Relevant**

This year has seen a resurgence of the strength of the church to make a difference in the way our society lives together. The 2014 killing of Michael Brown sparked a broad movement among faithful people. The church has come alive again as pastors and religious leaders take to the streets in clergy collars, weighing in on Confederate flag debates and the moral imperatives of racial justice. Faith conversation is curiously relevant once more.

In periods of crisis, we find our voices anew, and we are not shy to proclaim the church is alive and living out Christ's gospel promises. We are not naïve about the difficult places. But our hope is more powerful than the challenges and failures we have known.

In June, I said goodbye to a congregation I have served for 18 years in order to join a new effort at YDS to understand what church revitalization will look like. I will be listening to church leaders as they share ideas about making congregations places of vision and hospitality.

In my experience, vital churches can be any size, as long as those with the power in the congregation are willing to share it. Leadership ought to be representative, include the voices of the young and the otherwise disenfranchised. Education programs are theologically and biblically strong, inspiring us to wrestle with who God is and who we are. A vital congregation is where mercy is experienced and offered, where strangers become friends and work together. A vibrant church is filled with people who want to be part of what is going on in the building and outside it.

#### **Much Has Changed – For the Better**

Yet even as I list these strengths, I worry they may be the marks of a once-vital church, not the future thriving church. The work before us now is to discern which of those old priorities matter still, and what new things are life-giving to the future. We might recall that Jesus didn't wait for people to come to him. His ministry met people where they were and walked with them to where they needed to be.

It is time for us who love the church and wish to see it grow – not just in numbers but in spirit – to stop feeling embattled simply because we are, yet again, in a time of crisis or marginalization. The church has a unique story to tell: The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ changes societies and renews lives.

No, things aren't the way they were in 12th-century France, or in 1950s USA, or even in the 80s when my call to ministry took shape. Much has changed in recent decades – most of it for the good. Opening church leadership beyond patriarchal structures has improved the lives of so many. Society has gained by the presence of women and others who for too long have been on the sidelines of career advancement. The church has much to contribute to the spread of justice – speaking out against police brutality, demanding changes in gun laws, advocating a living wage. The gospel is made real with each just act, with each extension of human touch.

The church has forever been about providing glimpses of the realm of God on earth. Let us reclaim that good work. The beloved community of the present and the future is counting on us.

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*Maria LaSala is Director of Congregational Ministry at YDS. For 18 years, she was co-pastor, with husband Bill Goettler, of First Presbyterian Church of New Haven.*

## Reflections Fall 2015

### CREDITS

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### POETRY

Poet **Mark Jarman** is Centennial Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. He has published eight poetry volumes, a book-length poem, and two collections of essays on poetry. Honors for his work include the Lenore Marshall Prize from the Academy of American Poets and *The Nation* magazine.

"Good God" and "Epilogue" from *Bone Fires: New and Selected Poems*. © Copyright 2011 by Mark Jarman. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Sarabande Books, [www.sarabandebooks.org](http://www.sarabandebooks.org).

The work of poet **Maya Khosla** has appeared in *World Literature Today*, *Prairie Schooner*, and other publications. She is featured in *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* (HarperCollins India, 2012). She divides her time between California and India.

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**Donovan McAbee** is a teacher and poet in Nashville, where he is assistant professor of religion and the arts at Belmont University. His work has appeared in *The Poetry Review* (UK), *Ruminate*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Friends Journal*, and other publications.

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**J. Barrie Shepherd** '64 B.D., '65 M.A. retired in 2000 as minister of First Presbyterian in New York City. His books include his 2003 Beecher Lectures *Whatever Happened to Delight? Preaching the Gospel in Poetry and Parables* (Westminster John Knox, 2006) and a new release, *Destination Bethlehem: Daily Meditations, Prayers and Poems to Light the Way to the Manger* (Wipf and Stock, 2015).

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# Expanding Access to Yale Divinity

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— Gregory E. Sterling, the Reverend Henry L. Slack Dean and the Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament

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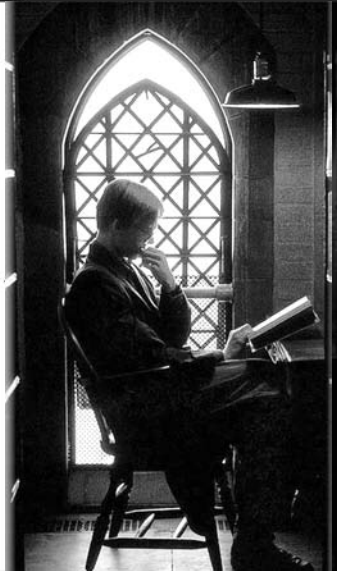
"Financial aid gives me the freedom to think about new ideas, listen to and engage with my classmates, be a member of this community, and to connect with God. Without financial support, I would not be able to explore the work that God is calling me to do."

— Miriam Samuelson '15 M.Div.



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- 90.1% | Receiving Financial Aid
- \$42,787 | Cost of Attendance
- \$18,500 | Average Individual Scholarship
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203.432.5363  
[james.hackney@yale.edu](mailto:james.hackney@yale.edu)  
[divinity.yale.edu](http://divinity.yale.edu)

# From the Editor: Sunday Best

By Ray Waddle



I once knew a minister who sent a memo to his flock of 1,000 imploring them to dress better for Sunday worship. Please, no flip-flops or tank tops, he declared. You're in church, for heaven's sake – let's make a special effort for God.

The memo was an unusual decree, and it made page-one news. He wasn't mean about it. He just thought society was changing in unthinking ways, getting too lax about important practices. Standards were at stake. This was the late 1990s, when democratizing trends of informality, evident in American society since the 1960s, would soon be irreversible.

I think the pastor was trying to make a point about the distinctiveness of the Christian faith: Church should be different from the rest of the week. Alas, his strategy looked self-defeating and inhospitable. He had also underestimated a force barreling through the culture for decades if not centuries – the individual's power of choice, the choice to show up as we are, the choice to show up not at all.

As much as anything since World War II, this has changed the dynamics of churchgoing in America.

Before the modern period, religion was a taken-for-granted fact of life. One's tradition of belief was mostly an accident of birth, part of one's identity in an unalterable social fabric. Not so long ago, churchgoing was a social expectation. People dressed for it. But the grinding forces of modern history undermined that architecture of stable assumptions. Hierarchies fell, social consensus weakened, the economy turned punishing. And individual choice awakened. The individual was liberated, free to craft a personal destiny, a personal path to truth in an internet-inflected cosmos. Trust in traditional gatekeepers of knowledge declined.

According to certain academic orthodoxies, religion itself was supposed to evaporate under such secularizing stresses. Yes, traditional belief by now shows measurable diminishment. But religion and spirituality do not. In his 2011 memoir *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist*, Peter Berger amended the secularization theory to say: "Modernity does not necessarily secularize; it necessarily pluralizes." Pluralism erodes religion's taken-for-granted status, but it doesn't destroy religion. It creates more spiritual choices, a cacophony of gods.

This has inaugurated a long season of soul-searching for congregations. If churchgoing is now a matter of choice, not fate, then it's plausible to expect fewer people will attend, at least at first. Those who choose to attend don't have to be there – they arrive and they stay for their own good reasons, perhaps more purposefully than many did before.

In such conditions, religious institutions are endeavoring anew to make the case for belief. They can no longer depend on brand loyalty or a captive audience. They are reaching for fresh vocabularies to retell the story and renew the gospel adventure.

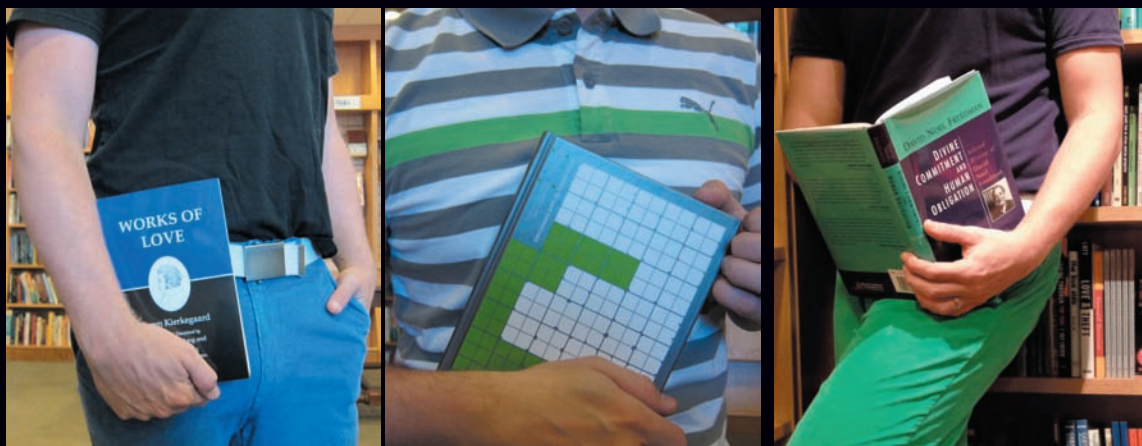
In all sorts of ways, the writers in this Fall 2015 *Reflections* are declaring the urgency of church today – witnessing to the power of public confession, the courage to make new neighborhood connections, the wisdom of the long view.

Despite the dazzle and disasters of the 21st-century, human nature hasn't changed. Old-fashioned brokenness and devastation haven't moved off center. A church is the place where the soul is acknowledged, where a person can hear oneself think, connect to vast currents of holiness, or find common cause with a stranger. Congregations are also partners in democracy: People learn to work with others, put aside despair over our political, class, or racial divides – or learn to break through them.

Congregations are the last places in America, I think the very last, where time is set aside for values and motives that resist the oceanic self-promotion of culture, the laws of raw self-interest, or the sleepless digital fear of missing out.

G.K. Chesterton once said a person should always be in opposition to the strongest thing in one's time, "for the strongest thing of the time is always too strong." The church of the present and future will be a spiritual, political presence that can stand up to the inhuman powers of every moment – the violent solutions, national myths, ruthless materialistic advantage, and lack of skepticism about these things.

The reign of God is always near, very near. The writers in this issue all speak to the distinctiveness of that calling – which includes prayer, reverence, mirth, vulnerable emotion, beauty, and thankless acts of mercy. A Sunday morning dress code isn't on the list.



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