Ecclesial Vision and the Realities of Congregational Life
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Helen E. Casey-Rutland
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Reading to Feed the Imagination
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Roundtable Discussion on Clergy Morale

The Language of Public Prayer
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Introduction

Despite the fact that I am an innumerate—a mathematical illiterate, and not proud of it—I would like to declare a small celebration in honor of the number twelve. What a splendid number it is! Consider that there are twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles, twelve days of Christmas, twelve gates in the New Jerusalem (Revelation), twelve baskets of leftovers after Jesus fed the five thousand (John), and twelve Great Feasts (in the Eastern Church). The Sumerians bequeathed to us a base-twelve system of measurement, which we use to organize hours, eggs, and months. Modern music is sometimes twelve-tone, and mathematicians know all about the dodecahedron, a thing (what kind of thing, they'll have to tell you) with twelve sides.

And with this issue, Quarterly Review enters its twelfth year of publication. Volume 12 has a new, updated look. We put the QR logo on a diet and trimmed the color back to the left-hand margin so the titles would be easier to read. The left margin color won't change seasonally, but with each volume. We began with a conservative khaki color, but look out—some wacky colors may emerge in the future.

The subtitle of the journal has also changed. Our full, formal name is now Quarterly Review: A Journal of Theological Resources for Ministry. That enigmatic word, scholarly, has been omitted. Back in 1981, QR called itself (not incorrectly) a scholarly journal; then, a journal of scholarly reflection. The quality we seek is summed up nicely in an explanatory sentence under the entry scholarly in Webster's Third International Unabridged Dictionary: 'Never academic—still less pedantic—but always scholarly; with the effect of 'profound learning' ever so lightly worn.' The substitution of the word theological allows us to modify 'profound learning' with Christian commitment, something that has always been central to this enterprise.

A word about this issue's contents. Thomas Frank and his staff at the Rollins Center for Church Ministries at the Candler School of Theology have given us the background on the writing of the Foundation Document for the United Methodist bishops' initiative called Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church. Their work holds a mirror up to us in our congregations. It also suggests that the
variety we often experience as a deficit may be turned into our greatest strength as a church.

Jack Keller, Jr., a United Methodist Publishing House editor, is known to his colleagues as an inveterate reader. As such he is a very effective advocate for the idea that a broad range of reading keeps the mind alive and stimulates theological reasoning. His choice of modern works of fiction and non-fiction shows both depth and humor and may lead you to the local bookstore or challenge you to come up with your own list of favorites.

The Quarterly Review Roundtable Discussion this year addressed the issue of clergy morale. The panelists, who were selected from a number of annual conferences, were not acquainted with each other. But as they sat around a large conference table and shared their experiences of joy and frustration in ministry, they quickly formed an ad hoc covenant group. These ten panelists shared their stories with each other unselfishly, and I am grateful to each of them for their wisdom and candor.

The opening story of Gaylord Noyce's article is a prize! Beyond the introduction lies a deceptively simple set of guidelines to public prayer. The current emphasis in religious circles on spirituality and inner work is balanced by our ability to speak formally with authenticity about the hopes, fears and dreams of our people. This little piece is a great help.

James White's bibliographical essay covers the new and noteworthy books on liturgy. White, the author of Introduction to Christian Worship, Revised Edition (1990) has educated a generation of liturgical scholars. His own work is of major importance in the study of Christian liturgy today.

Finally, we are escorted through the Lent lections this spring by James Howell. Howell ranges far and wide for the memorable detail in some classic stories told in Luke's Gospel. You'll go to Israel, become reacquainted with classic literature, religious movies and art, and discover new resources for thinking about good and evil. Howell's treatment of these lections is chock-full of observations and new insights.

Occasionally a writer will object to the editing of his or her work for publication; unfortunately, that happened in our winter 1991 issue. Dr. Abraham Smith wishes readers to know that the article as printed did not reflect his scholarly judgment on all points. And as editor, I take responsibility for any such errors that occurred as a result of the editing process. The unedited version of Dr. Smith's paper is available from him at Boston University School of Theology, 745 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215.

Have a wonderful, hope-filled spring and a blessed Easter!
We the people of God called United Methodist, have come to a critical turning point in our history. The world in which our heritage of faith seemed secure is passing away...we must be more intentional about being the church God calls us to be.¹

With these words of their 1990 pastoral letter, the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church has issued a ringing call for transformation of the life of the church. Rapid social changes on all continents challenge the church’s mission as never before. The bishops have therefore declared a moratorium on life as usual. They have invited congregations throughout the connection to join in an intentional, focused plan that seeks God’s vision for vital congregational life and faithful discipleship in each place.²

The bishops’ call for congregational vitality has been matched by the renewed vitality of the role of the bishops. Over the course of this century, institutional forces have increasingly confined the episcopacy to managerial and bureaucratic tasks. In recent years the bishops’ initiatives have sought to recover the historic teaching and liturgical offices to which bishops are consecrated. This has included two efforts at extended pastoral statements addressed to the whole church. Following their pastoral letter and document on the nuclear arms race, titled In Defense of Creation (1986), they have now invited the church into study of the nature and purpose of the church itself.

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A clarion call of this nature requires a plan that is innovative, yet grounded in the ecclesial traditions of episcopacy. The bishops considered the literature currently available on the local church, with typical emphases on evangelism and growth, organizational development, or management skills. None of these approaches seemed appropriate for the bishops to speak in their own uniquely episcopal voice, as shepherds and overseers (episkopoi) of the whole church.

Instead, the bishops chose to lead the church into a liturgy, using the church's historic practice of discernment. The Foundation Document, Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church, is organized as an order of worship; instead of having a table of contents with chapters, the book follows a pattern of worship. As the text moves from gathering to praise to confession to pardon, and so on, it is accompanied by songs, prayers, stories, images and quotations from congregations across the church. In short, the book uses the language of faith, not the lingo of institutional management so often imported into church life.

The distinctive purpose of the vital congregations initiative is contained in the bishops' assertion that "a new imagination for tomorrow's church will arise by God's grace from the creativity and vitality of congregations who find their life in Christ." Rejecting proposals for a denominational program or master plan containing a universal formula for congregational vitality, the bishops affirm their faith in local church congregations to be and become the church in each place, as God calls and gifts them to do.

Congregations are being urged to undertake theological reflection on their own practices as communities of faith. The bishops enjoin them to learn their stories, to examine their often self-imposed limitations, to investigate the needs of their surrounding communities, and to discover the untapped gifts and resources for ministry that God has in store for them.

The Response Process

To prepare for their pastoral letter and Foundation Document, the bishops asked the Rollins Center for Church Ministries at the Candler School of Theology to design and carry out a response process with congregations. In order to evoke the multiple, particular realities of actual congregations, we designed the response process to be as fully participatory as possible.

United Methodism is an effervescent pool of diversity. No "mainstream" or "oldline" Protestant denomination has more eth-
nicipities more broadly represented; and with 37,000 congregations scattered from the Bronx to North Dakota, from Burundi to Portland and the Philippines, it is not difficult to find distinctions of setting and therefore of ministry. The real question is what to do with all the richness one discovers even from a small sampling.

Working in covenant with the Committee on Episcopal Initiatives of the Council of Bishops, we constructed a process in which congregations could speak in their own authentic voice. First, we asked each bishop to select a pastor and layperson from several congregations in his or her episcopal area. These persons formed an Area Advisory Committee that met with their bishop to review the research process and to evaluate draft material for the Foundation Document.

In May, 1989, we asked the pastor-lay teams to conduct “A Gathering for Celebration and Discovery” in their congregations and return a written response to us. These local church events, we hoped, would call forth congregational self-understanding. The open-ended questions were grouped in a broadly liturgical movement, from celebration to confession, to Word and story, to offering a response. Some congregations adapted the format to their regular Sunday worship service. Some held special sessions of the Administrative Council or other group to complete the form, while others used the questions to structure their church planning retreat. Some chose not to respond, or to let the pastor or a layperson simply complete the form.

The Fabric of Congregational Life

One cannot read the marvelous range of responses from such a diverse mix of congregations without being moved by the richness of their shared life. Each congregation is a unique human reality composed of individuals living out their ministry and mission in a particular place. Every congregation represents a dense tapestry of stories woven together over time, both individual journeys and corporate acts of ministry. Stories of the United Methodist heritage, Christian tradition, and indeed the gospel itself are woven in and through the fabric, giving unity and purpose to the whole.

These local church gatherings yielded dozens of memories, prayers, and images of congregational life. We included much of this material in the Foundation Document, because it helped to ground the bishops’ pastoral statement about the church in the realities of actual congregations. Thus the Foundation Document appears in a double-column format, with the bishops’ text closest to the binding.
on each page and the vignettes of congregational life in an outer column, along with hymn verses, quotations, and other material. Many of these stories and images are unforgettable. In the United Methodist Church of Corrigan, Texas, for example:

One Sunday morning the pastor called for the ushers to come forward to receive the offering of the people. On this particular morning, no men stood up to take the offering. After a short time, a mentally retarded woman in her mid-twenties stood up and came forward to take the offering. The next Sunday she assumed the role herself and was joined by another retarded woman in the congregation. These two women are now the greeters and ushers, taking up the morning offering in worship. God does move congregations to change.  

A story from First United Methodist Church in Bluefield, Virginia shows the deep roots of memory that create loyalty to congregations:

The collections plates used to be entirely metal and change (which was the main contribution in the early days) "clanged" as the plate was passed. Often the plate stopped as some members made change before passing the plate on down the pew. The children watched certain people whom they knew were likely to make change.  

Some congregations used only a few words to show the relationship between their corporate story and their Christian faith. First Korean United Methodist Church of Chicago wrote:

We have purchased a Jewish synagogue and are using it as our church building. The beautiful sanctuary stained-glass windows are decorated with Jewish symbols. A few years ago, we decorated the remaining windows in the sanctuary with Jesus' image as the good shepherd in stained glass. The sanctuary seems to be the most wondrous place to worship God. It is also a very meaningful place to signify our journey from the Hebrew tradition and the Protestant tradition, finally to that of the Korean-American.

Other congregations shared the biblical roots and theological vision of their ministries. Istrouma United Methodist Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, wrote:

If there was any doubt as to whether the kitchen wall should have a door leading into the coffee room, it's too late now. Nothing seems to stop our people from doing what needs doing—not even a five-inch think concrete block wall! As I saw that sledgehammer crash through that wall, I saw an image in my mind—an image of the church in the business of "breaking barriers and opening doors." Isn't this what the Food Pantry, the Clothing Closet, the Thrift Shop, the Each Elder Ministry, and the After-School Program are all about? And isn't this
what Church school and Sunday morning worship are all about? "For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility..." (Eph. 2:14).

From these congregational responses we identified trends that became thematic in the bishop's statement. For example, many congregations wrote of the centrality of worship in their life; the bishops defined worship as the focal point of the Christian life, and in fact organized the entire text around the movement of liturgy. Congregations named their fears of change, their sense of being overwhelmed by social problems such as substance abuse, their need for spiritual discipline. All of these themes found their way into the book.

What we could not do in the Foundation Document was to analyze the congregational responses systematically. Even so, there is much to be learned from surveying this sample. A thorough look at the responses makes clear that the bishops' initiative will have to contend with persistent realities of actual congregations in particular places. While the survey evidences many signs of hope, it also shows that congregations face many obstacles to practical theological reflection of this kind.

Issues for Transformation

To reduce all the congregational responses into seven points or five conclusions about United Methodism would, of course, contradict the whole process that produced the responses in the first place. We wanted congregations to speak in their own voice, and we continue to honor that particularity in this assessment. But while the survey offers a taste of the richness and diversity of congregational life, it also brings to the surface issues with which many congregations seem to be contending. Thus the survey provides one window into the broader picture of contemporary United Methodist congregations.

A Chance to Tell Their Stories. For many congregations the main contact with the connectional church comes through the superintendency, primarily at charge conference or appointment time, when much emphasis is placed on statistics such as membership, salary, and apportionments. Unlike those occasions, the "gathering" survey instrument offered a completely different approach. Participants described the event as "invigorating and useful," giving them an opportunity to look at themselves, "blemishes and all."

Some congregations wrote back to us in surprise; they said,
"Thank you for including the laypeople, for turning the process the other way around." They were excited that the bishops especially were interested in their stories.

The process invited participants to convey what it is like to be a member of their congregation, and how they perceive their own identity and omission. One question asked them to reflect on symbols in their church building and tell the stories associated with them. Another question asked them to write down a story that would capture something essential about their congregation's unique character. This approach, focusing on self-definition, led to enthusiastic congregational responses, such as, "Thanks for helping us rediscover who we are."

We received many anecdotes and images for use in the book, told in the freshness of local accents and styles, all with the ring of authenticity as expressions of faith and ministry in particular places. One congregation described the character of the church as "the warm, curing feeling you get when you walk in the front door of someone's home and you can smell the invitation from the kitchen." We sensed a longing to tell the stories, for they reach to the deepest level of people's loyalty and commitment to discipleship in and through a given congregation.

Yet many congregations appeared not to know their own story. We are convinced that many local church members do not know either the corporate story of their congregation or each other's stories of how they came to be part of their congregation. Thus the congregation's life and mission is robbed of the richness and depth that would result from a fully shared sense of identity and purpose.

The seeming poverty of story indicates a larger problem. Many congregations appeared to view themselves as normative, and their way of being the church as simply "the way it is." One congregation described its participants as "simple in faith, simple in their demands and accepting of others," saying they "just want to go to church." Another congregation, when asked how it differed from other churches, responded with doubt that it was indeed much different, saying, "We are all trying to serve Christ in our community as best we can." When a group of people remains together over time, from generation to generation, such a self-contained image is natural. But it has many consequences.

Many who were unable to say much about how their congregation is different from others in the community were clear, however, about distinguishing themselves from fundamentalist churches. They claimed and even celebrated United Methodism's place in the
"middle of the road," where extremist advocates of either orthodoxy or change would not feel welcome.

But what it means to be United Methodist beyond the broad tolerance of the middle is vague to many congregations. One congregation lamented that being part of the denomination is no more than a weekly routine, saying, "Every Sunday morning we meet at our appointed church, at our appointed time because that is our custom. I honestly believe we do not know what Methodism is and if we did, we might be a stronger church." When asked what made them distinctly United Methodist, respondents named the cross and flame logo, the hymnal, church school literature, apportionments, and the appointive system for pastors. Some pointed to the practice of open communion. Virtually none made mention of any doctrine of salvation, or the discipline of holiness now called discipleship.

Congregations need to tell their stories continually both for a healthy self-image and identity and for the integration of new participants into the community of faith. One congregation voiced concern as to whether its traditions would be perpetuated by following generations, asking, "Will we speak to posterity from these walls? What will our message be? Will others be compelled to follow?"

What and Where Is Ministry? Church survival and maintenance emerged as most congregations' main emphasis. Although they identified numerous social issues for Christian response, rarely did they list those issues as specific challenges to the congregation's mission. More frequently, they cited membership growth, finance, and upkeep of the physical plant as areas of primary need.

Most of our responding congregations exhibited a deep passivity about other institutions in their communities and the social issues that affect them all. Many described their settings, such as a location next to a college campus, in some detail. Many wrote of rapid changes in their communities, such as a declining farm economy, or racial and ethnic population movements, or increases in drug traffic, teen pregnancy, and other signs of social dislocation. But few described any efforts to develop responses jointly with schools, government, or businesses. Few mentioned programs to train their own lay leadership for any kind of community action.

The congregations that are teaming with other institutions in response to social issues are striking exceptions. One wrote of working with another local congregation in initiating a Head Start program, while another noted its involvement with the local school system and low-income housing developments.
Many congregations seemed to look to the pastor as central to their corporate identity. Responses to our question about the most important tasks of the pastor were limited to work that the pastor individually performs, such as preaching, visitation, or counseling. Few of the responses highlighted the role of the pastor as empowering and equipping laity for ministry. One congregation went so far as to describe the pastor as "the one determining factor for the vitality and character" of the church.

Congregations and Social Assumptions. The congregations' lack of self-awareness and intentionality plays out also in unspoken social assumptions. Virtually all the churches described themselves as friendly; many claimed to be open and diverse. Yet when asked "what kind of person might not feel comfortable in your congregation," many described people of a lower socio-economic class or of another race. It was not uncommon to have a congregation describe itself as "a loving, caring and understanding congregation where people are supported," only later in the survey to find: "Some people do not respond well to blacks, etc., to the point where these would not be welcome."

People tend to label their congregation as friendly when they have friends there; it does not follow that strangers are welcome. A few congregations recognized the irony in this response. One noted, "As we look at the list of persons who might not feel comfortable in our church, it seems apparent that we are not communicating this sort of acceptance." We were struck, though, by how many did not seem to see the contrast between their self-image as a caring community and their self-defined profile for selecting those appropriate for inclusion.

Spiritual Poverty and Hunger. The response form asked congregations to name a biblical story or image that would best describe them; here again, social assumptions came to the fore. The self-image of most congregations was that "we" have the resources, and the burden of initiative to serve rests on "us." These congregations typically identified with the Good Samaritan, or with the disciples handing out the bread and fish on the hillside, saying, "We do reach out to those in need in our community." The predominant view seemed to be that "we" are supposed to help "them," the ones who have less than "we" do. Some congregations did recognize that they might represent different roles in the Samaritan story, saying, "Sometimes we're the good person, sometimes the bad and some-
times we just pass by." But none identified with the victim, beaten, robbed and left to die by the roadside.

Few congregations reflected a profound sense of need or of having received anything from beyond themselves and their own resources. Few were vulnerable enough to admit to poverty. At the material level, one could argue that, of course, predominantly middle-class churches do often have plentiful resources. But congregations that do not know their own poverty, of spirit and imagination if not material things, and therefore their need for grace, something that must be received, are not going to be able to be in ministry with other people. As long as they see themselves as "a family with open arms to welcome back those who are lost and need to come home to God," they will only be able to minister to, to share out of their abundance, and thus to act out the social assumptions of their economic class.

This spiritual malnutrition appears to permeate the life of many congregations. The responses listed multitudes of groups and programs. Many United Methodist local churches are bustling with activities; the calendar is crowded, the staff and laity very busy. Productivity, buildings, visible results get the praise. We wonder, though, how congregations value moments that do not "produce" anything tangible; are worship experiences, times of prayer and meditation, or personal acts of ministry as important as organizational events?

In fact, the responses showed a deep split between spiritual life and the business/busy-ness of the church. When asked, "At what points in your congregation's life do you feel most distant from God?" many people replied, "In committee meetings when there is an obvious conflict" or, "Anytime financial decisions must be made." The life of the spirit does not seem to carry over from the sanctuary to the meeting room. Activities and the decisions to carry them out are not undergirded with the praise of God. Scripture, prayer, and spiritual discernment are in another world from "running the church."

Responses to our questions about language also mirrored the split. Many congregations lamented the lack of biblical or theological knowledge among their people. One congregation noted that it "is not prone to search through the scriptures to find God's instructions for our lives." Another congregation wrote that they tend to avoid words like "saved" or "salvation" because they have been "snatched" by more fundamental or evangelical churches. They reported, 'Because of the connotation and association these terms
have come to represent, we have 'disowned' them and consider ourselves 'too sophisticated' to use them."

A more common response was that church members "don't use Bible language, but they try their best to live their lives as Christians." The consequence is that United Methodists are left to do their church business without much concrete reference to a vision of what God intends for them. One congregation, upon recognizing its lack of biblical language use, responded, "This question forces us to ask: If scripture is forgotten, in what sense is God forgotten? What vital connection is there between God and God's word that we may be lacking?"

Tolerant—But Private—Congregations. In the congregations' search for spiritual vitality, the "middle of the road" status of the United Methodist heritage, at least in North America, comes to the forefront again. In mainstream society religion is considered a private matter; it is not generally a subject for open discussion. Each individual is free to pursue his or her own religious journey; it is no one else's business. One congregation reported, "Members are entitled to their own personal beliefs and are not poured into a certain theological mold."

The language of "discipleship" replaces the language of "holiness." The latter implies a community to which one is accountable, and ultimately one's obedience to the Holy One. The former stresses the individual decision to follow, with one's choices along the way being one's personal responsibility.

This attitude of "tolerance" is pervasive in United Methodist congregations. People are intensely afraid of conflict, since their deepest convictions would be exposed. Congregations have difficulty resolving internal differences, since arguing or being assertive in one's opinions is considered impolite. One congregation spoke of how the "traditionalist" and the "modernist" are able to "share faith together without major conflict." Another congregation noted, "Our congregation is caring and sharing, but they shy away from things that are controversial instead of speaking out and standing up for what they believe."

Thus many congregations continue to be paralyzed by a passivity deriving from their reluctance to really talk with each other. This is another facet of the passivity that pulls them back from engagement with other community institutions and social issues that impact everyone. Congregations of "privately" religious people are not sure what role, if any, a religious organization should play in "public" community life.
Congregations Overwhelmed by Change. Neighborhoods, towns, and rural areas have gone through dramatic transitions in the fifty years since World War II. The culture does not support church activity as it once did, for North American society has become multicultural. People do not line up at the door to join many United Methodist churches, and the children of church families are less likely than their parents to stay in church as adults.

The survey revealed a widespread helplessness about coping with these changes. One congregation acknowledged the frustration and pain it felt because of an inability to reach the youth of the church, saying, "They are our hope for growth and new life, but we don't seem to be able to develop the strong bonds of love and caring." Several predominantly black congregations expressed concern that more charismatic churches were attracting United Methodist members.

Many congregations seem to be waiting for the right "expert" to come along and give them the "answer" to their situation. Many lack authority or empowerment to claim their own gifts for ministry and seek a new vision. Although some congregations were able to list many of the problems of their communities, one congregation doubted their ability to improve the situation, saying, "Most of our people believe that the local church is not equipped to address the hard-core issues of our time."

We are not sure, in reviewing the responses, how willing many congregations are to make necessary changes. Can they learn to welcome the stranger, especially to be a community of hospitality with people of different ethnicities or socio-economic class? Are they committed to finding out how younger people or people alienated from or not participating in any congregation feel that their religious journeys can be more effectively supported?

Despite more than a decade of intensive program emphasis on evangelism at all connectional levels of the denomination, most congregations in this response process mentioned little about it. Our questions were open-ended; we did not ask the typical denominational performance questions, such as, "What did your congregation do in evangelism in the past year?" or "How many new groups and classes were started in your congregation?" The congregations that spontaneously offered descriptions of their new programs did not often refer to them as "evangelistic." Many congregations mentioned the need to attract young families or the desire for improved youth programs to help retain young members. Yet few congregations listed specific, intentional ways that they were attempting to expand.
the circle of their caring community or create new ministries.

Perhaps congregations are just so accustomed to denominational report forms that lead them to answers, usually requiring numerical data, that they overlooked or forgot to mention such things. On the other hand, when congregations do not voluntarily use the language or articulate a focus of evangelism, this surely reflects their actual self-image for ministry.

Signs of Vision and Hope. Among the responses there were many signs of hope. Congregations wrote with poignancy and insight about their past and future, relating incidents that symbolized the love, care, and justice with which they want to carry out their ministries. Many of these stories appear in the Foundation Document, including this striking narrative:

If one enters our large sanctuary before the people arrive, there is the distinct feeling that many souls from the past still reside there. The round stained-glass window high above the altar; the mahogany baptismal urn; the heavy glass and iron chandeliers; the red seat cushions—much was given in memory of church members or their loved ones. The library in the corner of the sanctuary holds shelves of books dated clear back to the 1800s. There is a picture of the Trinity Union Sunday school in its heyday. The people look like they are related.

We don’t know most of these people. They are dead or gone away. Trinity is a new church now. On any Sunday, there are Africans, Afro-Americans, Cambodians, and Anglo-Saxons. On the bulletin board in Fellowship Hall is a photo of each person who registered for our Sunday school last year, black, brown, and white. Above the Sunday school altar is a handcrocheted picture of Jesus with outstretched hands, a gift from Liberia. Below the picture reads, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.”

Some congregations proudly told stories of the vitality of their churches. One celebrated a fivefold increase in church attendance over a two-year period:

For over twenty years the church labored, ministers came and went and visitors came and left. We had no overall growth. The church was willing to make changes and opened its doors to change, to new ideas, to new methods, to new opportunities. When you offer yourself, God changes you and things begin to happen. Praise the Lord for exciting times.
Another congregation wrote of deciding to stay in its inner-city location when other churches were relocating: "We have successfully redefined our mission which is now characterized by outreach to the immediate, needy neighborhood." Another responded quickly when two families moved to another church: "This made us rethink our children's program and design a new one which has helped us very much."

Some congregations were made aware of their lack of vision during the "gathering" process. One church wrote that although there were personal visions for their church, no real corporate vision had been established. "It is hoped that one of the outcomes of this self-study and assessment will be that the wealth of gifts and graces, evident in the lives and works of the people of the church, will be utilized to help us realize that the Kingdom of God is indeed within the reach of the body of the faithful."

Conclusion

The issues raised by the congregational survey are critical to the future of the church. Many congregations do appear to sustain strong fellowship ties, to worship, educate, and serve effectively. Yet the overall picture of normativity, spiritual drought, and passive tolerance is alarming. Clearly many congregations either have not yet awakened to a sense of purpose or simply feel overwhelmed by the cultural changes that have swept across American society.

The bishops' initiative calls congregations into self-study. Through a process of claiming and celebrating their past, realizing their strengths, and matching their gifts with the needs of their communities, congregations are being invited to discover the vision that God has for them. The process takes time and requires a willingness to look at the realities of congregational life. Only with such intentionality is change going to be possible.

In what is probably the sharpest and most controversial section of the Foundation Document, the bishops call the church to confession. The sins named there include many of the issues that surfaced in the response process. The bishops invite the church to confess "our preoccupation with church business," the way church business "makes us feel distant from God," "our fear of others," our passivity, spiritual emptiness, and fear.

The bishops then call the church to renounce these sins and seek forgiveness. And they announce God's pardon in words of faith:
Hear the Good News: in the name of Jesus Christ we are forgiven. God wants to use our congregations for God’s eternal purposes of saving the world. We are jars of clay indeed, bearing a treasure beyond all reckoning. (2 Cor. 4:7)

God knows the cracks and weaknesses of our vessels; but God entrusts this precious mystery of salvation to us as stewards of the promise. (1 Cor. 4:1)

Our survey identified a critical need for transformation in the church. But in the spirit of the bishops’ document, we conclude that after all, United Methodist congregations are the church only by the grace of God, and by God’s grace they will be transformed.

Notes


2. The bishops’ initiative was launched at an international gathering in Fort Worth, Texas, in early November 1990. All congregations were asked to hear the bishops’ pastoral letter later that same month, calling for a time of fasting, prayer, study and discernment of God’s direction for the church.

The Foundation Document released for study at that time, Vital Congregations -- Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church, was the product of thirty months of intensive consultation, research, drafting and rewriting in response to over a thousand readers. The Rollins Center for Church Ministries at Candler School of Theology was the coordinating agency and base for research. Thomas E. Frank, director of the Center, was principal consultant and writer for the project. Helen E. Casey-Rolland assisted in research and editing. Carol Carwile joined the Center after the publication of the book to help assess findings from the research process.


4. Basic resources in congregational studies include Carroll, Jackson W., Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, ed., *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986); Dudley, Carl S., Jackson Carroll, James P. Wind, eds., *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991); Grierson, Donham, Transforming a People of God (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1984; Hopewell, James F., *Congregations: Stories and Structures*. Edited by Barbara G. Wheeler (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). From over 400 congregations named by their bishops as participants, we received 262 responses representing 38 states. Of the surveys received, 88.8 percent of the responses were from predominantly white churches, 10.1 percent were from black churches and 1.9 percent were from Asian churches. Three-quarters of the churches surveyed reported an average Sunday worship attendance of over 100. The majority of churches responding were from areas with a population size of less than 50,000. The demographic profile of the survey responses was generally close to the profile of the denomination as a whole, with a few exceptions. Because of the individual bishops’ choices of participating congregations, the survey included a disproportionate number of churches with average attendance over 150. While some Native American congregations were invited to participate, none completed the response form. Similarly, we were able to obtain only six responses representing three nations other than the United States.
States, while United Methodism is active in 23 countries.
5. Foundation Document, 81.
6. Foundation Document, 94.
7. Foundation Document, 54
8. Foundation Document, 120
9. We are indebted to Dr. Theodore W. Jennings for this insight into Wesleyan language.
11. Foundation Document, 47.
One often hears laments about the deplorable reading habits of most pastors. Pastors read too few books. And when they do read, so the complaint goes, pastors limit their reading to books that can easily be cannibalized for preaching or program purposes. This lament can be heard in publishing circles and among seminary faculty. It comes up, too, among clergy themselves who feel guilty that they cannot keep current in the theological disciplines, let alone a wider program of reading. While empirical research about clergy reading habits is notoriously slippery, and despite the fact that some clergy are voracious readers, I think there is probably considerable truth to the charge that most clergy do not read widely.

It is not that pastors as a class are anti-intellectual. It is simply that their time gets swallowed up by the demands of administration, counselling, program development, and weekly preaching. It is understandable why many pastors view reading anything but Bible commentaries and professional "how to" books as frivolous, a luxury, an indulgence. They need to be persuaded that reading widely can genuinely enhance their ministry, that time spent reading is as important as time spent in any other essential task of ministry. In short, many pastors need a license to read.

I found my license for reading several years ago when I began work as an editor at a religious publishing house. I had been reading laboriously for years before that, of course. I did my best to keep abreast of my specialty area and a couple of secondary disciplines, all somewhere under the umbrella of theological studies. But I very sel-
dom spent an evening with a novel or a collection of short stories or one of the non-fiction titles on the best-seller lists. That would have been a verboten luxury. There just weren’t enough hours in the day to justify spending even one or two on “trivial” reading.

But employment as an editor changed my thinking. My new job certainly didn’t give me any more spare time. But it did give me permission to range outside scholarly tomes for my reading. For five years I worked on church curriculum materials for youth and adults. My job was to train non-professional writers to write “professionally.” Grammatical errors were the least of the problems I encountered. Much more serious was the lack of imagination some manuscripts betrayed. Riveting they were not. How could I expect the teachers and students who were our customers to embrace the gospel, to live transformed lives, if the curriculum material was so dull?

Literature in Service of the Church

I began to read across a wide spectrum of fields and genres, searching for imaginative “hooks” for biblical and theological claims. Like the pastor who realizes that an effective sermon connects the gospel with the experience and imagination of listeners, I scoured the offerings of fiction and nonfiction for resources that might be mined, refined, and sometimes polished in the service of Christian education.

The treasure I found did offer some immediate rewards. For instance, while working on a publication for youth we were searching for an interesting way to respond to the question “What does it mean to be spiritual?” I happened upon Edwin Abbott’s classic science fiction novel Flatland. That story describes a world of only two dimensions. Everything in that world is located in a single plane: triangles, squares, pentagons, hexagons, and so forth. From the narrator’s perspective, that two-dimensional world seems to encompass all reality. The shapes in a plane are what is real. At least so it seems until the narrator encounters a sphere. Bewildered at first by what he sees, the narrator eventually recovers his bearings. He is astounded! The world is so much more complex, so much more beautiful than the reality he had previously known. Now he knows a depth to reality he had never grasped before. After a brief retelling of Flatland, it was no great leap to suggest to our teenage readers the analogous relation in our world of mundane experience and the experience of spiritual depth. The story had them hooked before a
word of theology was spoken. All that was needed was for them to exclaim "aha!"

Or take another example. In that same publication for young people we were trying to convey the sense of awe before the Creator that creation can inspire. Abstract, formal "proofs" of the argument from design would have fallen on deaf ears, even if we weren't uneasy about the logical flaws in the argument. But how to convey a sense of wonder? I found a promising candidate in a chapter from the splendid collection of essays entitled *The Lives of a Cell* by Lewis Thomas. Human beings, Thomas contends, are alive against stupendous odds of genetics and physics. "We make our living by catching electrons at the moment of their excitement by solar photons, swiping the energy released at the instant of each jump and storing it up in intricate loops for ourselves. We violate probability, by our nature." Each of us is a unique individual, spun out by processes that boggle the mind. "You'd think," Thomas muses, "we'd never stop dancing."

Suddenly, the doctrine of creation didn't seem formal or abstract to our teenage readers. Some of them, at least, felt the sense of mystery and marvel that the writer of Psalm 8 must have felt.

A few other gleanings, in one fashion or another, helped to enliven curriculum materials. And some found their way into my spouse's sermon illustrations. I began to see all manner of fiction and nonfiction as mother lodes of insight and illumination that could be mined to enable others' spiritual journeys. I became shameless in reading popular as well as sophisticated literature.

Two books helped ease my guilt about popular genres. Allene Stuart Phy's *The Bible and Popular Culture in America* helped me see how deeply intertwined in the American experience are the Bible, on the one hand, and popular fiction, humor, country music, and children's literature, on the other. Those popular genres have deeply touched innumerable souls. Andrew Greeley is best known these days for his steamy romances and whodunits, but it was his *God in Popular Culture* that caught my eye. After laying out his theory of the religious imagination and a corresponding theology of popular culture, Greeley helps his readers see why we are so thoroughly taken with fantasy, westerns, romances, horror thrillers, mysteries, and even comics. We read those genres for fun, of course, and for escape (where else can you get a mini-vacation for $5.95?). But Greeley points to some deeper reasons why those of us in pulpit and pew find those popular genres so refreshing.
Novels of Religious Self-Discovery

Oftentimes it is my own self-understanding that is confused and in need of a guide. Pastors are not so different from editors and theologians, I suspect, on that score. We may eventually find opportunities to share what we have learned from our literary forays. But first we are the ones who find ourselves judged, illumined, and sometimes given hope. Over the past several years, three authors in particular have spoken to me of judging and perhaps redeeming my own condition.

Flannery O'Connor's Southern Gothic novels and short stories are filled with odd people caught in bizarre circumstances. And yet her writings have a peculiar power to illumine the Christian life for all of us. Her splendidly strange story "Revelation" is a good example. "Revelation" tells the story of Ruby Turpin, a woman filled with her own self-righteousness, someone who finds in Jesus a satisfying legitimation of a hierarchical world view. But something happens to upset that world view radically. And Ruby Turpin is graced with a vision of God's new order and her own need for conversion. The judgment that so angers and bewilders her makes possible the transformed imagination that carries the prospect of her redemption.

Many of us who frequent pulpit or pew would, I suspect, be quick to protest that we are neither so crude nor so smug as Ruby Turpin. But our own self-assurance convicts us. We need to learn with Ruby Turpin that the last shall be first. We need to learn with her that self-righteousness is not God's righteousness. We need to discover with her that even our favorite virtues have to be burned away if we are to enter the Kingdom. In short, we need to learn alongside Ruby Turpin that our salvation comes as a gift, not as our due.

J. F. Powers's Morte D'Urban, which won the National Book Award in 1962, has won over a new generation of readers. Powers tells the story of a fictitious Father Urban Roche, a talented go-getter in an equally fictitious declining religious order, the Clementines. Father Urban chafes under the uninspired leadership of his religious superiors. He knows how to make the Clementines succeed. His golden opportunity comes when he is put in charge of a floundering retreat center. By purchasing an adjoining golf course, he figures out a way to provide the necessary revenue.

Urban's compromise is hilarious--until I stop to realize that I am prone to the same temptation. I work in a religious bureaucracy that struggles daily with the same dilemma: how to keep the bureaucratic machinery going without betraying the gospel we
profess to proclaim. Clergy in the local church face the same dilemma: how to make a parish church successful without becoming unfaithful in the pursuit of that success. Powers is not particularly judgmental. But he does lay bare the irony of our situation. We are lost souls if we no longer feel uncomfortable with the irony of our predicament.

Of Robert Coles's forty-some books, I will mention only two. Harvard Diary is a collection of short essays that first appeared in New Oxford Review. Each of the fifty-five essays is brief enough to read on a lunch break or before going to bed, but most show a clarity of insight that warrants a slow, deliberate reading. The subject matter of the essays ranges widely, from reminiscences about great and ordinary persons the author has known, to gleanings from literary masterpieces, to political opinion, to musings on theological themes. In "Spiritual Kinship" Coles talks about his appreciation for those moments when his students, without denigrating the intellectual life, recognize that it is not all of life. They feel the gentle remonstrance of Thomas a Kempis: "Deeply inquisitive reasoning does not make a man [sic] holy or righteous but a good life makes him beloved by God. I would rather feel compunction of heart for my sins than merely know the definition of compunction." They feel that same remonstrance in Walker Percy's description of a person who "got all A's, and flunked life." The fifteenth-century monk and the twentieth-century physician-turned-novelist make me squirm a little, too, because I know how loving God with one's mind can degenerate to loving intellectual gymnastics. I agree with Coles: "...there is a spiritual kinship among those [intellectuals] who are alarmed, even frightened, by a kind of scholarly life that goes full steam ahead, year after year, with no self-criticism, no moral anxiety, no sense of mocking humor with respect to itself."

A similar thread runs through the entry "Small Gestures." Coles recounts a conversation with an undergraduate student who came to learn the hard way that

...being clever, brilliant, even what gets called "well-educated" is not to be equated, necessarily, with being considerate, kind, tactful, even plain polite or civil...one's proclaimed social or political views—however articulately humanitarian—are not always guarantors of one's everyday behavior. . . . One can speak big-hearted words, write incisive and thoughtful prose—and be a rather crude, arrogant, smug person in the course of getting through the day.

Professional scholars and church bureaucrats may be especially prone to this fault. But some pastors may tremble, as I do, before
Coles’s warning: “Let those of us who find that words come easy, and who like to play with ideas, and call the attention of others to our words and ideas, beware. Our jeopardy is real and continuing.”13

If Harvard Diary comes in bite-sized units, Coles’s The Call of Stories demands longer periods of immersion.14 These chapters provide a kind of documentary study of Coles’s conversations with students (undergraduates as well as medical, law, business, and divinity school students). I found myself intrigued by his use of novels and poetry to explore character as a key to professional and personal morality. Coles’s method may inspire clergy or Christian educators to do some innovative teaching in the local church. With all of the attention being given these days in theological circles to technical analysis of story and narrative, Coles provides a particularly engaging, readable, practical demonstration of how lives are shaped and illumined by great literature.

Of Saints and Symbols

Several writers are collected in my mind and on my bookshelves under the rubric of “portraits of the Christian life.” They use various genres: novels, short stories, autobiographies. Some are light and humorous; others are sobering. But all will bear rereading. All present a convincing perspective on the struggles and possibilities of Christian living.

In Miz Lil and the Chronicles of Grace and The Manger is Empty,15 Walter Wangerin weaves together autobiographical stories and evocative short fiction that explore demanding law and gracious gospel in everyday life. I cannot seem to forget the moving account of a boy’s guilt and a father’s forgiveness in “For, Behold, the Day Cometh” or the testimony to the power of suffering to redeem in “Matthew, Seven, Eight, and Nine.”

I had previously been acquainted with a handful of Frederick Buechner’s twenty-some books of fiction and nonfiction. But what caught my fancy recently was a transcription of a lecture he gave under the auspices of the Book-of-the-Month Club.16 Buechner recounts three peculiar events in his life that seem charged with the mystery of providential care. He goes on to talk about the betting we do with our very lives on the basis of evidence that is “fragmentary, fragile, ambiguous.” Buechner is always looking for divine clues in human experience “...in a world that half the time we’re in love with and half the time scares the hell out of us.”17 So pay attention, Buechner pleads, to “the unexpected sound of your name on somebody’s lips. The good dream. The strange coincidence. The mo-
ment that brings tears to your eyes. The person who brings life to your life. Even the smallest events hold the greatest clues.18

Four other novelists have come to my bookshelf of late who probe the Christian life with uncommon insight. Clyde Edgerton is best known for his observations of newlywed love in *Raney* and a stubborn, loving elderly widow in *Walking across Egypt*. Religion is part of both novels because religion—for better and for worse—is part of the fabric of the rural South Edgerton writes about. In his more somber *The Floatplane Notebooks*, 19 which tells about the terrible encounter of a Southern community with the Vietnam War, religion is further in the background. Yet this is a powerful portrayal of the physical and moral brokenness of human beings—either caused by the war or revealed by it—and the precarious possibility of redemption. This is judgment and grace without sentimentality.

Mary Gordon has been justly praised for her *Final Payments* and *Men and Angels*.20 The former tells about the awakening of a young woman who, after eleven years of devoted care for her ailing father, is released by his death to face a frightening and exciting world. She is vulnerable and naive, so she gets bruised. But the support of two old school friends helps her keep going until she comes to herself and knows what has to be left behind in order really to live. *Men and Angels* portrays the tensions of a less-than-egalitarian marriage from the woman’s perspective. Gordon enfleshes different conceptions of love: love as mutuality, as equal regard, and as self-sacrifice. Gordon challenges the notion that the highest love must be utterly selfless. Instead she helps us see that human love needs to appreciate beauty in the other.

Jon Hassler has set all of his novels in small town Minnesota, but he is much more than a merely regional writer. Hassler is a perceptive observer of the passions, purposes, and pitfalls of human beings in the complex but perfectly ordinary web of relationships defined by family, friends, and community. In *Simon’s Night*, 21 we follow the life and thoughts of Simon Shea, a retired college professor who commits himself prematurely to a home for the infirm elderly. That’s when the fun starts. Hassler writes of the indignities of old age with humor—but with genuine respect for persons, too. Simon’s religious faith is presented as something steady and meaningful, secure enough to admit to some puzzlement. *Simon’s Night* is one of the best portrayals in contemporary fiction of an ordinary man moving into older age with a measure of grace and maturity.

The protagonist of Hassler’s *A Green Journey*, as with *Simon’s Night*, is facing life in the retirement years. In this case, Agatha
McGee is a feisty, unmarried school teacher. Like her beloved St. Isidore’s Elementary School, she is facing the pressure of changing times. She falls in love with her unseen pen pal in Ireland, which is fine until she decides to visit Ireland and discovers that her pen pal is a Catholic priest! Hassler portrays Agatha’s religious faith sympathetically. Likewise, he presents Agatha’s pen pal as a man of genuine faith who longs to be just a little more ordinary than a priest in Ireland is allowed to be. Some glimpses of the church make it look pretty silly (as, indeed, it sometimes is), but the tone overall is that of an amused loyalist.

Hassler’s *Grand Opening* follows the Foster family of four—wife, husband, twelve-year-old son, and eighty-year-old grandfather—as the family leaves Minneapolis in 1944 and tries to settle into the Minnesota village of Plum. *Grand Opening* is not so funny as the other two Hassler titles mentioned, though it is an engaging read. All four of the Fosters face a struggle. They are Catholics in a town sharply divided between Catholics and Lutherans. The wife chafes under the social constraints of rural life and is torn between her obligations to her family and to herself. Her husband has it a bit easier, perhaps, since he is thoroughly immersed in the grocery store that was their reason for moving to Plum. But he feels the unhappiness of his spouse and wonders what to do. The grandfather is locked more firmly in the past than are other family members, yet he is remarkably resilient. The boy, Brendan, has a tough time winning a place for himself in a new school and feeling that place jeopardized by the unwelcome friendship of a fifteen-year-old social misfit. Hassler’s nuanced depiction of the moral web of relationships in which the Fosters find themselves is simply superb.

Like most pastors I wrestle with issues of theodicy—trying to reconcile God’s beneficence with the inescapable fact of human suffering. One of my persistent frustrations is that the arguments I find intellectually most nearly satisfactory are so stubbornly abstract. How can you explain within the constraints of a sermon or a Sunday school class or a counselling session an “answer” that makes sense only if the listener first has digested a complex philosophical or theological “school” of thought? At a practical level, a story seems to communicate better than an argument. And one such marvelous story, told with a keen sense of humor, comes from prolific writer Madeleine L’Engle.

At one point in the second volume of her trilogy of autobiographical meditations based loosely on the Book of Genesis, L’Engle recounts the misfortune that befell her in 1984 and 1985. 
she says, "was not a good year for my body." Indeed! Shingles. A bad fall that smashed her face. A weird virus causing stabbing pains in her head. A bout of serious intestinal infection from *aeromonas*. And finally a stubborn bronchial cold. No wonder L'Engle was looking forward to 1985. It *had* to be an improvement. But it too started badly. A slip on ice left L'Engle with a broken shoulder—and insult was added to injury in the form of a shoulder immobilizer unsuited by design for anyone without a flat chest! But somehow L'Engle retained her sense of humor and discerned God's grace in the midst of her weakness. To her surprise, the old support network of the village church she had left twenty-five years earlier launched into action: home-cooked meals appeared at her doorstep and old friends called to offer comfort. Best of all, her husband, Hugh, accompanied her as a nursemaid on one of her out-of-town speaking engagements. Hugh, an accomplished actor of stage and TV, agreed to do public readings with her from her work, a treat for the audience and a delight for husband and wife. Was God, who had brought such blessings out of her misfortune, responsible for breaking her shoulder in the first place? Of course not, L'Engle realized, "but God can take anything and redeem it." Pretty good theology, I think, shared in a personal story that doesn't require a graduate degree to grasp.

The Graceful Word

A final category of my non-theological reading that warrants at least brief mention here might be called "the craft of writing." Not all scholars write with a golden pen (or word-processor, as the case may be), nor do all curriculum writers or preachers. Those who recognize that the style and structure of writing are as important to winning the audience's ear as content need to feed regularly upon good examples of nonfiction writing.

Two recent books have kept my love of the English language alive (not bothering to mention Garrison Keillor's works, since everyone is already reading Keillor). *Cheeseburgers: The Best of Bob Greene* may seem like an unlikely source. This is a collection of seventy-two very short essays that appeared originally in Greene's "American Beat" column in *Esquire* magazine or his syndicated newspaper column based in the *Chicago Tribune*. Greene is an irreverent writer and a curious investigator. He describes his stories as snapshots of life in America in the eighties—and that life includes the good, the bad, and the ugly. But the man can write! He knows...
how to capture the attention of readers at the outset, how to keep them reading, and how to wrap things up so the reader feels satisfied. Preachers may not always like what Greene observes (though more often than not, preachers will be as fascinated by his tales as anyone else), but they can surely pick up a few pointers about holding listeners' attention. And occasionally, those of us of a religious bent will find in his stories a secular parable waiting to be translated to a grander tradition. I know I'll never forget his "Permanent Record," a comic lament on the demise of a threat that held in check the lawless inclinations of generations of school children.

Robert MacNeil is known to most TV viewers as half of an esteemed TV journalism team. Fewer people, but still a good many, will recognize him as co-author of a television series and a book, both called The Story of English. But I have come to appreciate him most as the author of Wordstruck, an autobiographical paean to the sound of words, the look of words, the feeling of words. MacNeil's life story is interesting in itself, but the skill with which he tells of his growing appreciation for the English language is a sheer delight to read. Those who claim, by virtue of their profession, that the spoken or written word has power will be reminded by MacNeil that it should also have beauty.

I recognize that casting such a wide net for my reading reduces the time available for technical reading in the theological disciplines. But I think the gain is worth the cost—for editors and for pastors. Reading to feed my imagination keeps me mentally refreshed. And occasionally it sparks new directions for disciplined inquiry. It serves, too, as a vehicle for self-examination. But more than anything else it provides resources to connect human life and Christian faith in ways that speak to people outside clerical and scholarly circles. The habit of reading widely no longer seems to me a frivolous luxury. Rather, it seems an essential part of the vocation of anyone called to preach or teach or otherwise publish the good news.

Notes

11. Ibid., 26.
12. Ibid., 111.
13. Ibid., 112.
17. Ibid., 129.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

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Clergy Morale in The United Methodist Church

A Quarterly Review Roundtable Discussion

On October 16-17, 1991, a group of United Methodist clergy men and women met at the office of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry in Nashville to discuss morale in their ranks. Their conversation was taped and edited for publication. The participants were: Ellen Brubaker, West Michigan Conference; Ben Feemster, Central Texas Conference; Finees Flores, Southwest Texas Conference; Dean A. Lanning, Northern New Jersey Conference; C. Ebb Munden, Nebraska Conference; Joonho John Song, California-Nevada Conference; Mary Ann Swenson, Pacific Northwest Conference; John Ross Thompson, Western Pennsylvania Conference; Don Treese, Central Pennsylvania Conference; William Walker, Oregon-Idaho Conference. For Quarterly Review, Sharon Hels.

Defining Happiness and Finding Community

Hels: I heard a radio commentator say recently that in economic terms the eighties were the decade of success—ambition, high achievement, and status symbols—but the nineties would be known as the decade of happiness—balancing work, family, and outside interests. What does happiness mean for members of the clergy? Are clergy men and women happy?

Walker: I asked that question at our monthly clergy group, although I used the word fulfilled, and maybe that slants it a little. But our group, which includes about 12 to 15 clergy men and women, talked about that for the entire ninety-minute breakfast session. One interesting comment came from a clergy woman whom I had known years ago when she was a lay person. After seminary she was plopped down into a little logging town in the Cascade Mountains that was
hurting because the mill was closed. Karen said, "If I had to rely on fellow clergymen--and in this case all the other clergy in town are men--I would be totally isolated. If I had to rely on getting together with the other United Methodists, I don't think I could make it from one meeting to the next." "But," she said, "in all of it, I'm now beyond the point of saying, 'I've got to move next year,' because I'm finding that I'm having a ministry and I am being fulfilled; although sometimes I could scream--I'm so isolated, as a fiftyish woman, often totally scared." At that point we got into a discussion of grace as a bouncing factor: you don't have to be perfect; things don't have to be nice all the time, and you don't have to be happy.

Brubaker: I think the question is pertinent though. Recently our bishop in Michigan sponsored a round of district discussions. I had a conversation with a group of very talented and committed pastors younger than myself, male and female. I believe they will structure their lives in ways that will bring them some happiness--and not sacrifice happiness out of a misplaced sense of commitment.

I also talked to a person my age whom I had admired because he and his wife stayed in a parish and worked through a crisis with their daughter, and I had believed that things had gotten better. But they didn't; he's been in an endurance contest for eight years in that place. His wife expressed her satisfaction with her own job and described the ministry that she was doing through it. I told them that I thought the object was not just to do what the ordained person needed to do if happiness is an issue. Why don't you look at options around your life and your future and go where the joy is? Maybe not happiness--that's pretty elusive--but go where the joy is. And that's real strange to that family, to even begin to consider options around that. So, again, age and years and concept of what the ordained ministry is are limited in some ways for them. I don't believe they are limited in that younger group that I was talking to.

Thompson: We should explore the word happiness. If you asked me on a given day, Are you happy? I would probably say no. But if you asked, "Are you fulfilled? Do you have Christian joy? Is there deep satisfaction in what you do?" That's another thing. I find that my generation and older were more tied to the institution. We were prone to be workaholics and have more stress. Younger persons are more balanced, they take better care of themselves physically, and they are more attuned to their spouses. They have interests beyond the institution. In that sense they tend to be better rounded and satisfied. When occupational, professional things crash and burn, there's
more to hang on to. Few of us would say we're happy; but many of us would say we are fulfilled.

Swenson: I like the "joy" idea. It evoked Joseph Campbell's phrase, "follow your bliss."

Lanning: I'd like to affirm what John has said. Several years ago now, I participated in a pilot project that was concerned with the high dropout rate among young clergy. They coupled potential dropouts with older clergy for dialogue and assistance over a period of two years. I was one of the more experienced pastors, and I noticed that their happiness or fulfillment--whatever you want to call it--was tied really to the ups and downs of the institution. The morale of younger persons today does not seem to be that closely tied to the institution.

Munden: I got hold of Robert Bly's book *Iron John* this summer. I wasn't really too taken with it, and my wife viewed it with great suspicion. A friend of mine said, "Well, you need to read Sam Keen's new book, *Fire in the Belly.*" So for about a month now, seven of us have been meeting and talking about this book. Keen thinks that the alienation in our society stems from a loss of vocation, and the relationships out of which vocation emerges. He thinks this applies to both men and women--and those in secular occupations, not just those who are interested in professional ministry. But the significant thing is really the group itself, because for one of the few times in my 35 years of ministry my colleagues and I are sitting around talking about our feelings. I really do think that the loss of passion in our lives comes from isolation. It's not just a matter of being around a lot of people, but of being real with each other, sharing real hopes and real fears and real memories, and hearing others do the same. I've just been astonished at the amount of energy and excitement that this opens up in me.

Song: I have a mentor in our annual conference, and he said a group of his peers will get together--people in their fifties--and talk about basic life issues, such as approaching retirement, and the search for meaning. He said, "As I get older, things that really matter are spiritual." At my age there are childhood issues to resolve. I was brought up fatherless, and in Asian culture this is a shameful thing. I lived in silence and secrecy about this all my life. In order to compensate for my low self-esteem, I had to achieve more. I wanted to hide my shame, but I had to come to terms with it, and share it with my wife and finally my congregation. And the interesting thing about that experience was that the people began to open up. It's as if they realize that if the leader of the church is able to be open with them,

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and still be the leader, then they can open up, too. It was truly the
beginning of my ministry. I think the fulfillment you feel is corre­
lated to your own spiritual journey. If you are not consciously on your
spiritual journey, you always feel empty.

Swenson: I interviewed my associate pastor about this topic before
coming to Nashville for this discussion. He’s in his late twenties and
in his first appointment after seminary. His immediate response on
this topic was that if a person works on a team then he or she is going
to know more fulfillment and have higher morale. Loners or people
who want to do everything themselves or who work in isolation will
be less happy. This was not necessarily what I had expected to hear
from him.

Brubaker: The need for success in institutional terms may still be a
primary cause of low morale. The burden of fulfilling institutional ex­
pectations may prevent people from being "real" with one another.
And being candid with a congregation may prevent you from meeting
these institutional goals. If membership is down, and the money isn’t
there, my morale suffers. If I need to be a "successful pastor," then I
shoulder the blame if the members don’t come and the money
doesn’t come. I may want to be real in the way you described, but that
may not be possible.

Swenson: It is ironic that we want our leaders to be real with us,
but we define them as leaders because of their ability to meet institu­
tional goals.

Treese: After I had spent a year at my job [at the Division of Or­
dained Ministry], I came to realize that all the phone calls I received
had to do with problems. Boards of ordained ministry never called to
say, "Just wanted to let you know we’re doing a great job, and we have
a great group of clergy and there’s nothing wrong." I realized that you
had to put things in perspective. My rule of thumb is this: Where cler­
gy experience community, morale is usually good. Where they don’t
experience community, morale is usually low. Because if clergy are ex­
periencing community, you can stand almost anything—even profes­
sional stress and disappointment. But if you don’t have that, either
by location or temperament or by the idea that you have to be perfect
and therefore can’t ever open up to others, you can have a big salary
and a big membership and be pretty, pretty low in terms of your
morale. And that perspective has helped me put the whole morale
issue in terms that I can deal with and live with; because if I based it
on what I hear, I would say that the morale in this church is pretty
awful.
Walker: But community comes in different ways, and some people blame the structure if it’s not there for them. I think you have to make it happen yourself. My first full-time appointment was in South Douglas County, and it happened that my nearest neighbor had just come from twenty years of missionary work in Jamaica. He and I found ourselves gathering, usually at his place, every Monday morning for a little while. We would talk over how things went Sunday and make some hot chocolate that usually boiled over on the stove. We would have some Bible study and some personal sharing together. If it hadn’t been for Cyril—and he has said the same thing of me—I don’t know what would have happened. We weren’t trying to build each other’s morale; we just needed each other; we needed to share that. About once a month, we went to another pastor’s study 125 miles away, just to get some intellectual stimulation. You know, reading a paper, discussing a book, that sort of thing. That kind of community is very important.

Feemster: I think people our age were not encouraged to express feelings as we came along, either in seminary or in early ministry. And as we’ve grown in ministry we’ve had to make ourselves do so. I think people entering ministry today are encouraged to open up and share more, and this is good. I’ve been in ministry for 43 years, and I think one of the highlights of it was when I changed annual conferences and went to a large church that was held at arms length by the other clergy. But some people whose theology was considerably different from mine offered me openness and acceptance. I joined a study group that met for breakfast every week. I don’t think I could have made those first three years if it had not been for that. It was not something that I enjoyed in the beginning, but I realized I needed it.

Brubaker: I think you’re right. I was a pastor’s spouse for many years before I was a pastor, and back then it seemed to me that the institution promised a lot—even community. You want community? Get in your subdistrict. But that’s changed. I’ve found myself saying to the pastors that came on the district, “I know you need this. It may not automatically be here. If I can help you to find it—if you need some help finding it—I will be happy to do that. But don’t expect it to be provided anymore.”

Lanning: By being here today, I’m missing a group that will start this evening and will go for 24 hours. We’ve done this every month for about five years. I came home from one of these meetings one evening and my wife said to me, “I don’t think that group does you much
good. I think you're more depressed now than you were when you left." And here I was feeling really energized by these relationships. My wife's comment made me think—\(\text{you can't always tell by looking when something is fulfilling for someone else.}\)

Flores: I was at a gathering in the early part of this year at Perkins where a group of Hispanic pastors gathered to do some sharing with each other. I was surprised to see these "macho" guys expressing pain, anger, and problems within their own ranks. It was quite clear to me that they were sensing lack of direction. It went all day long, and we were really burned out by the end. But at the same time, there was an outpouring of compassion for each other.

Walker: I'm not sure I agree with the idea that younger clergy, or newer clergy, know how to be in community better than older clergy. Some of the new clergy are very quick to set up what looks like a contractual arrangement with their PPR committees. "How much time do you expect me to be here?" It is as if they see themselves as a counterforce to the congregation.

Feemster: The first-career and second-career clergy differ on the question of vocation and call. The second-career people often come from other professions—law and medicine—and they don't raise the question of how many hours a week they will be expected to work. People who came into the ministry young and have never done anything else are more prone to raise these questions. The second-career people have more of a sense of call.

Song: I have heard my older clergy colleagues say that they gave everything they had to the ministry, and that if they could do it over, they would choose to spend more time with their family. They have this feeling that they were too rigid with their families and over-invested time and energy in their congregations. I think we should get over the idea that our congregations will not survive unless we put in a seventy or eighty hours a week. That's what younger pastors are more tuned into. And I think the D.S. and the ordained ministry committee are more sensitive and aware of the importance of that issue, even to the point where they ask what you are doing to have fun and if you are spending enough time with your family. If you don't have an answer for that, they say, "You're doing something wrong. We don't want a workaholic. We want somebody who has balance."

Treese: I think that's true. Younger clergy understand that they are under the authority of the bishop and cabinet and must go where they are appointed. But they will raise the question "Why?"—which in the end is a missional question. They will go even if the bishop and
cabinet do not answer the question—but they will not go happily. The younger clergy bring a more wholistic view of themselves to the process; it’s not just ministry to a congregation; it’s ministry as husband, father, and so on. But the older clergy have a spiritual discipline and strength that has gotten them through some very hard times. How did they develop that discipline? They have a sense of call in the biblical sense, a call to servanthood. If we can relate the two perspectives on ministry, we can help each other when it comes to morale.

Feemster: What John said strikes home for me. I was busy organizing a congregation when my son was born. When he was four years old, I realized I hardly knew him. He underwent therapy when he was in graduate school in order to deal with his feelings over this. He’s thirty-five years old now, and very active in his local church, I’m pleased to say. But it left scars on him—as well as on my wife. I have been one of those who have said to people like John, “Take time for your family.”

Brubaker: Working with such intensity doesn’t bring the same rewards it used to either. A group of us have been reading and discussing Mary Catherine Bateson’s new book, Composing a Life. Bateson looked at the lives of five significant women whom she had known well for many years and concluded that they lived improvisationally, by phases. They may go through early years raising children, have part-time careers, and so forth. Her point is that, more and more, men’s lives are also taking that pattern. People do not see themselves simply entering the itinerant system and staying in a local church appointment all their lives. They’re looking for different ways to be in ministry. It may include a period of years out of the parish—or years spent in raising a family.

Thompson: When I entered the ministry in the sixties, there was no question whatever in my mind that this was a lifetime call. When I saw people being involuntarily terminated, or forced into early retirement because they did not perform well in the ministry, I felt that these lives were devastated. Now with a lifetime call, with a solid commitment to the institution as well as to God, there are deep roots—and that’s the advantage of that type of call. But I see a healthier call, perhaps, in those that are newer, including second-career pastors, who know that as they grow, they may grow into something else. It may not necessarily be “till death do us part.”

Swenson: It may very well be true that the nineties see more open reflection on the conflict between institutional demands and personal
needs. I'm not sure there is anything new here—for several decades, people have had to wrestle with this conflict. But now there will be a new visibility about the struggle, and people will make different kinds of choices.

Song: Ebb, you talked about those two writers, Sam Keen and Robert Bly. There's another book that has been important to me, called King, Warrior, Magician, Lover, by Robert Moore. He thinks in order to be a whole male person, you need to have these four archetypal figures in place. To generalize things, maybe the older generation has a heavy emphasis on king and warrior and not enough on magician/clown and lover. He says "warrior" without "lover" is dangerous; not enough "warrior" and too much "magician" and "lover" lacks the discipline to go on when things get tough. There needs to be a balance of all four.

Munden: That's really very helpful. I was just reflecting on happiness in my own life, which has always involved the experience of growth. Yet growing always involves change and change is rarely free of pain. I have had more of the experience of growth in failure rather than in success. My failures were painful, but they have been the source of a great sense of joy and excitement. I suppose in biblical terms this is the way of the cross. I've been taught this all my life and never believed it, but in my own experience, it has proven to be true.

Brubaker: I think it's true, too. While I was on the cabinet, my husband died. Soon after, I went off the cabinet and had to take a church that is difficult in a number of ways. We had been planning and saving for me to take a sabbatical, but that couldn't happen. Now I am just weary, and I'm not sure I want to endure someplace just to be a stoic. I would like to be happier than I am now.

Walker: I can relate to that, too. A few of my colleagues are saying, "What am I going to do when I retire?" and I have been responding, "Why don't you do it now?" My wife died last November. We had started talking about where we would live in the future, but before she died we realized that we were already there. I thought I was ready, but after she died I discovered how spoiled I was. The time after Carol's death was tough. But I've been playing the piano more lately and keeping my garden, and I've made my bed every day.

Swenson: This summer I was at a meeting of women superintendents and former superintendents, and a number of them talked about the need for a sabbatical after the season of superintending. Bill has talked about how his congregation helped him to mourn Carol's death. My vision is that our communities undergird us and
support us, so that we can move through these seasons together and enrich each other. None of us has to be everything for everybody.

Treuæ: I think we need to talk about the definition of morale again. We pretty well agree that it’s not happiness, because what’s happiness? That depends on cultural expectations, and our ability to satisfy them—usually by having more things. But is it bliss? Is it joy? Is it fulfillment? But if you seem to lack bliss and fulfillment but still have a Christian sense of grace and peace, do you have high morale or low morale?

Walker: I never perceived or felt that I was going through a morale problem, because the very thing that fed me and sustained me was family, church, faith, laughter, tears, community.

Thompson: It seems like when we say morale we’re thinking about bad morale. We assume that when we’re talking about clergy morale that it’s negative and that we perceive it in others rather than in ourselves. I may be unhappy or having a difficult time, but I don’t perceive it as a morale problem, when perhaps it is.

Treuæ: I’ve read about twelve or thirteen surveys on clergy morale from the conferences, and in every one, the person answering the questionnaire would assess his or her morale as pretty good. Someone else has a morale problem.

Thompson: That was our experience in Western Pennsylvania. When we did the survey, morale for ourselves was fine. The great majority expressed good morale. But they perceived a problem out there.

Lanning: When I read the report on morale from the Nebraska annual conference, I was very suspicious. I grew up in Nebraska, and I remember that when people asked you how you were, you didn’t tell them how you really were. You just said, “I’m fine.” Considering some of the issues the church faces, those statistics raise some real questions.

Walker: Let’s bracket the word morale for a second. Our lives are a combination of highs and lows. When we are depressed or euphoric for too long, we get out of balance; and then there is a problem. It’s the balance that we are after.

Brubaker: Yes, it is. When I look back on the death of my husband, as excruciatingly painful as that was and still is, the reality of it all was something I had to accept. My theology had to encompass chaos, so that I could be angry with God and still be faithful. My grief had nothing to do with a morale problem. But I can tell you when I did have one. In the first year of my pastorate in this conservative com-
munity, the abortion issue surfaced. Some people asked me to let them use space in the church for a pro-choice group meeting. I gave them the space; I had the authority to do it, and I believed it was the right thing to do. And all hell broke loose. Church members joined other people from the pro-life camp to picket the church. When I turned for support to the people I had been in community with when I was on the cabinet, I got institutional responses. They were more concerned about preserving the church than they were in supporting me in a desperate situation. That night, when I realized I would not be getting any support, I had a morale problem.

Treese: But was it a constant, continuing thing? How long did it last?

Brubaker: It lasted for a while.

Lanning: But in the long run, your action may give you strong morale. In my area, Protestants are in a minority. There are many Roman Catholic churches and three large Jewish congregations. I went to one rabbi and asked him about morale. He said, "Oh, I just got back from a conference on that." So I asked him what came up. And he said, "We're going through the one about new identity. For instance, we used to be scholars." Now they really feel that they are spiritual leaders. He also cited the challenge of women rabbis, although there aren't that many yet. But the really big issue, he said, was that many young men went into the rabbinate because they were, essentially, nice guys. Nice guys want to please everybody. So they hedge a little here and hedge a little there, and ultimately that creates morale problems. That may resonate for clergy in all faith communities. I think there are more people who have morale problems from trimming their sails too much than from taking the tough positions you did.

Munden: I think that action is an important part of the idea of being in community—because when community doesn't also include risk and action it becomes very self-centered. Action is needed for wholeness and happiness. I think a lot of us are suffering from the fact that we know that we are called to serve a gospel that requires us to act in opposition to an unjust world, and we're not doing it. And that failure to act, along with the isolation, has just overwhelmed many of us.

Brubaker: I understand that, and I can live with it. But in the middle of a crisis, it's good to have some unconditional personal support coming through persons in the connection. Morale drops when institutional success is valued over individuals.
Swenson: If we agree that community is one of the tools that helps us maintain good morale, then your story was about the failure of a community, Ellen. Where are those people to whom I can say, "This is what I feel and this is what I need." Anyone who gives me an institutional response at that point has failed at the task of being a community. But the community is not only supposed to understand and accept us in our weakness, it is also supposed to empower us for action.

Song: I think Ebb was also saying that unless we clergy participate in meaningful works of God, we burn out. Often we are asked to manage a church and to maintain the system, rather than to truly preach the gospel, which is to turn the world upside down.

Treese: I wonder how the term burnout relates to our discussion of morale. All of us have experienced burnout at times, but to what degree is burnout really crippling?

Flores: Let me add another perspective to the problem. All of my ministerial experience is in inner-city Chicago, with a mix of whites, blacks and Hispanics. We all know about the problems of transitional communities, but the biggest, most difficult stress is for an ethnic pastor to take over an ethnically diverse church. Unless you've been in it, you really can't feel and know what that really does, and how quickly you want out of it. Overworking and overinvesting in the congregation does nothing to help it move toward unity—and if you make that mistake, the congregation will eat you up. But if you commit yourself to this work, then slowly the congregation will organize itself. And even then, you have facilitated change, but it still leaves you feeling very much alone.

Thompson: I've not been in a church with the ethnic mix that you described, but let me try to apply what you said to my own experience. It seems that whenever we're really true to the gospel, including all types of people of various social, economic, and theological backgrounds, the consequence is more diversity, more controversy, and more worry that we're out of control. The people who cannot live with that diversity will end up with low morale.

Munden: Inclusiveness is very divisive.

Thompson: Yes, yes. It happened to us when I noticed there were no persons on financial assistance in my church. So I sought out such people through evangelistic outreach. It was a time of growth for our members, but it did raise some havoc.

Flores: The morale of pastors in inner-city churches is very low these days, because when you try to be of service to the community,
there are very few actual results to measure. Of course, you could create a role for yourself, be a social activist, or a secular priest, and that could give you satisfaction. But really, in terms of souls coming to Jesus Christ...

Thompson: You never get to "pick the fruit."

Flores: ... that's right.

Song: Someone once told me that if you haven't experienced grace in your life, you have no business in the ministry. If we try to carry the burden of making things happen all by ourselves, the consequence is frustration and burnout. The same thing goes for success: if you think you worked hard and deserve all you get, then you aren't discerning the grace of God at work in the church. Unless we as clergy ride on the wind of grace, we will never experience fulfillment in our ministry.

Munden: I think Finees has touched on something that we need to remember when we talk about community. When the church is asking some of us to minister in those kinds of situations that appear to be hopeless, those people need a special kind of community that may not be available in that place. People outside your inner city church need to find a way to stand with you in ministry there.

The Institutional Church and Clergy Morale

Hels: I think we've found so far that it's very difficult to define or assess clergy morale because it is a subjective phenomenon. It's about perception, and feelings, and factors that are beyond our control. But one factor seems recurring: the distrust of institutions. On an individual level, that can mean a real contrast between our private and public selves. Is there a deep gulf between who we are as persons and what we're being asked to do in the church?

Thompson: We usually deal openly with morale issues in the year when we elect general and jurisdictional delegates, because that's when we pit ourselves against each other. We decide on the basis of effectiveness, or maybe popularity or political savvy. But only a few get elected, so lots of people can lose.

Treese: Back in the late seventies, I was a member of the Division of Ordained Ministry, and I served on a committee assigned by General Conference to study the itineracy. Dale Dunlap and some others did some historical writing for us, and it became clear that tension between institutional needs and individual needs is the key to the changes made in the itinerant system in Methodism, and par-
particularly American Methodism. Dunlap found that back in the eighteenth century a deal was struck between preachers and the system that is still with us today: the individual surrenders his or her right to determine where that person will live and serve. The church commits that there will always be a place for that individual to serve.

Our committee took stock of that historic tension and wrote legislation for General Conference that offered a consultative process for appointment-making, less than full-time appointment, maternity leave, and an evaluation process. We thought we were preserving the rights of the individual against the powerful, historical advantages of the institution. But in the last fifteen years we have placed much more emphasis on individual needs than on institutional needs. Some would say that in this time the power and effectiveness of the institutional church has eroded. I wonder if we can ever expect for this tension to disappear, or is there something creative about it?

Song: I'd like to raise the issue of guaranteed appointment. Is it really necessary? Is it serving the church or harming it by having incompetent pastors who bring down the standard of the church wherever they go? Should we guarantee that sort of person an appointment?

Treese: The ministry study report changed "guaranteed appointment" to "annual appointment," but the concept is the same. I would say that the ineffective pastor should be dealt with in a humane way, but they should be led out of ministry. We have a process for that, but you have to want to use it.

Brubaker: Don, your question brings to mind something we talked about at a meeting of the Academy for Spiritual Formation. One of the presenters, Bruce Rigdon, a Presbyterian who has taught at McCormick, pointed out that the church has been on two tracks throughout its history. One is spiritual, and the other is institutional. And he said, "Just be clear, the purpose of the institution is to maintain itself." This was not said in a derogatory way. But two things come out of this for me. One is that I am aware of the dangers of the institution because it confers power on individuals. And the other is that I think institutions are inevitable: wherever two are three are gathered, we'll probably organize. But as for pure institutional maintenance, I'm just not as interested as I used to be.

Swenson: But institutional maintenance says nothing about institutional goals--in the case of the church, caring for clergy and laity. But the institution needs to be flexible enough to include the needs of many different groups and individuals in order to maintain itself.
Walker: One institutional resource that I think we should acknowledge is the Wesleyan idea of conferencing. For us, it is almost sacramental. We think of Wesley not only as a theologian and preacher but also as one who organized people so that a structure for continuity remained after he was gone. He gave us a way of coming together, not only just in annual conferencing but in the class meeting, the smaller group of folk who inquired as to the state of my soul. That had an ongoing effect for the life of the church, even more than theology, in a way. We denigrate it sometimes, but even in local churches right now we ask ourselves how to organize the folk after they've become members so that their faith can grow after we move on. That's a gift of the institution.

Lanning: I think that the definition of institution we are using is a bit cynical. Organizations, or institutions, I think, can also be defined as groups that come together to provide a product on an organized basis. Now the church doesn't have products as such, but it does provide opportunities for spiritual growth in an organized way. The church's greatness appears when it embodies what Christ did in his own life—bringing the unexpected, the surprising. These days, we tend to savage our institutions, even though we can't get along without them, as the authors of *The Good Society* have pointed out.

Treese: If we did not have institutions, there would be nothing but chaos. But the institution that is interested only in maintaining itself should die, and probably will die. I think institutions ideally exist to embody the vision, the dreams of like-minded persons, and ways for communities to express a common purpose, whether it's a school, college, bank, court, hospital, or church. It's easy to disillusion people about common goals by presenting only one side of the story—like apportionments and general church programs and so forth. But that is a distortion. Where would we be without the organization?

Brubaker: I agree with you, but I still worry about how people have a relative value assigned to them according to their position in the organizational structure. Those in leadership positions are valued more highly. The idea that pastors in particular situations are only good enough for a certain amount of salary does have an effect on morale.

Munden: I think the tension we are talking about is more fundamental than that; it's between order and chaos. And this is not a moral issue, because chaos is not inherently evil or unjust. By the grace of God, Chaos has the potential for creating and sustaining new life, just as it has in the opening chapter of Genesis. It is the unknown that must be confronted before new health and wholeness can
emerge. This has certainly been the case in my own life. I think that if institutions can see that new possibilities are going to emerge from the bottom up, rather than from the top down, then they can become creative. So I'm not prepared to give up on them. During the Civil Rights crisis in the sixties, I learned the great value of being in the institutional church. As a pastor in the South in those days, the institution gave me a sense that I wasn't there just as a lone individual, but I was part of a church that existed worldwide, with all the strength and vision of that larger world.

**Lanning:** I like the idea of seeing chaos in a positive way, Ebb. Another crucial polarity is the tension between freedom and order. We usually see both as positive. Our institutions have been at their best when they recognize that one is just as important as the other.

**Song:** At [the University of California at] Berkeley, there is a history professor who won the Pulitzer Prize for his work in American history. He gave a lecture recently for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution. The point he made was that the greatest danger to society comes not from rebels and protesters but from the silent, the unquestioning and the indifferent. People who rebel within the institutions are keeping the country alive. The point is institutional responsiveness. The church has been great because it serves the needs of the people. Over the years, we have forgotten the original fervor that made our institution grow. But that memory and experience must be preserved. We need to go back and say, "What are the needs of the people? What are people hungry for? And how can we be church to these hungry people?"

**Munden:** I'm inclined to think, John, that answering those questions takes some discernment. What people think they need and what they really need are often two different things. The church can easily play into the hands of the consumer society that we live in, where you simply look for an appetite and satisfy it for a price. I think we need to first be clear that we serve God before we can serve people. It is in serving God's will that we are able to discern what people need as opposed to what they want. I just go back again to the civil rights movement in the South in the fifties and sixties. What the community wanted was the preservation of the status quo--segregated society. The church was called to say no to that and to offer instead what, insofar as God's will could be discerned, they really needed. Serving God may well jeopardize the institutional church in our society.
Song: You're absolutely right. I think of the Confessional Church in Nazi Germany. It was a minority. But when history judges—and it's God's judgment, I feel—it was the confessing church that held a flickering candle in the midst of darkness.

Thompson: I notice more and more anti-institutional language, but at the same time, more expectations placed on the institution. More pension, more benefits, and so on. We're talking out of both sides of our mouth.

Munden: And, you know, I think that gets back to what we were saying earlier. Part of the shame we bear is that we are aware that the gospel of God is calling each of us to take some risks. I want security, and I want protection for my family, and for my own future. And yet I feel the gospel is calling me to take some actions that risk those things. At times, I've sensed that God was calling my congregation to do things that actually jeopardized its life. And I loved that congregation. So you're right.

Lanning: Lots of studies these days show an awareness of the gap between clergy and laity. If there are times when you have to take a prophetic stand in your congregation, it's important to do so. I sure would hope we all do. But then one of the greatest gifts to us is what we learn from the laity when they proclaim, "Thus saith the Lord," too. Laity are often prophets to clergy when we'll listen.

Treese: I think of the period in the 1920s, when Walter Rauschenbusch and his followers in the Methodist Church preached the gospel of pacifism. That was also a time when the great city missionary societies arose. In the midst of the "Roaring Twenties," when everyone seemed to be enjoying the good life, they saw the dark underside. Where clergy took that line, they were really standing against the culture, society, and many of their parishioners. What did they do when they experienced low morale? Did those radical stands create a morale problem in general? I wonder if they didn't just think that their sense of the call to ministry included risks that entailed some sacrifice. It just came with the territory. These days when things go wrong and nobody seems to like us, we have a morale problem. Fifty years ago it was just the cost of being faithful.

Thompson: I have a feeling that in every generation people will identify themselves as disadvantaged and will have low morale. And they do that by placing themselves in categories. My morale is low because I'm a woman and women aren't accepted in this conference. My morale is low because I'm a white male and all the positions are going to ethnics and women. Or I'm feeling bad about myself because I'm
conservative theologically and the leadership is liberal. If we didn’t have these categories to help us label these negative feelings, we would find others.

**Brubaker:** You’re probably right—there always will be personal issues that ambush a person’s ministry and lower their morale. But those people in the twenties who took courageous stands did not give up their need to feel valued as persons and as members of the institution. I still say that morale becomes an issue when I get confused about who I am supposed to be: do I matter as a person or according to what I produce? Because if my value comes from running a successful church, then I will be less valued if something goes wrong. The structure of the institution has to come from function, not from relative status based on some idea of success. How can we learn to elect people to delegations and the episcopacy and so forth who understand that there are particular functions in ministry, but one has no more value than the other?

**Swenson:** You can experience the internal stressors of struggle with faithfulness if you have that sense of purpose and positive sense of well-being. But if the institution refuses to be a supporting community that fosters solidarity but questions us and undermines our efforts, then that is just another stressor. It would be impossible not to have bad morale at that point.

**Walker:** I told you about my breakfast group [earlier]. One interesting thing happened after that group meeting ended. A relatively new pastor came up to me and said that he was a part of the group that was feeling very low after the last annual conference. We had passed some petitions for General Conference to get rid of what some of us feel is the derogatory language against homosexual persons in the Discipline. And he had disagreed with our position on that question. But what he said was, “You know, some of us never seem to be on the majority side.” I guess I thought the issue was closed, because we had a debate and the vote was taken and that was that. But he still felt the effects of this occasion, and it made him feel that he didn’t really belong in our conference. How do you maintain the balance and include everybody? I think grace covers us all! What worried me was a tone in his voice that suggested, “Oh, just ignore me; I’ll get by.”

**Thompson:** My morale is always affected by whether I think I’ve been heard. My views don’t have to prevail, which is what Ellen said. Some of the best bishops and superintendents and other visible leaders let people know they’ve been heard and they have a place. That young man was sincerely asking whether he has a place.
Munden: I think that gets back to our discussion about the need for community. If a person feels that he or she can share deeply, and not just at the surface level, then community works, and nobody has to fix problems. I think we often take on the role of fixing things. What community demands is that we just be there with the hurting person, to care, to give a damn.

Treese: Would you say, then, that morale is low among certain groups that have not been heard, who are taking minority positions in annual conferences and are not getting leadership positions?

Thompson: I think that morale is about the same across the board but that certain groups have historical reasons for feeling excluded. Their issues are more visible.

Treese: And you’d say that if you’re a white male and your morale is low, it’s your own fault.

Thompson: Yes, it may very well be.

Swenson: I had a very interesting phone conversation recently as part of my preparation for this discussion. It was with the administrative secretary for our district superintendent. She told me that clergy often put on a positive face for the superintendent, but they would call and tell her other things—that they were depressed, that doors were closed to them, or that they were stuck and couldn’t go anywhere. A few of them were frustrated because their spouses were unable to find employment in that town or community. But she said the group of people with the most specific frustrations seemed to be those in their late thirties. She was wondering if there was a critical age where you either run into a dead-end or get over the hump and reach fulfillment, and said she noticed that those people who thought they had some input and control over decisions that affected them and their families seemed happier, on the whole.

Song: I’d like to mention the situation of the Korean Methodist churches in this light. These congregations have been the fastest growing churches in this denomination, and their members are usually Korean-speaking immigrants who came to the U.S. in the early seventies. The church gives them community, a source of social service, a sense of belonging. But they always feel like outsiders in the United Methodist institution. They pay their apportionments, but it doesn’t make any difference, they feel. I come from California, where it’s so diverse, so pluralistic. But the institutional church really has not made a genuine effort to accommodate people of different cultures. Somehow, when the main culture and the minority cultures come together, minority cultures always have to carry the burden of
adopting and accommodating the main culture, their way of doing things. Asian congregations in general need to be heard, even though they do not want to burden other people with their problems. I'd just like to see the center reaching out halfway and saying, "We want to be your church, too."

Flores: One way for the church to do that would be to work on its own racist attitudes. When you pastor a bilingual congregation, you must pastor both the Spanish congregation and an English congregation. In that situation, you must perform at a higher calibre even to be accepted as an equal in that situation. But your race will disqualify you, regardless of your level of skill.

Song: Yes, there's a mistrust.

Flores: And that's prevalent amongst inner city situations, which I spoke about earlier.

Treese: What are the issues around morale for ethnic minority clergy?

Song: If I could speak for Korean, first generation clergy, morale seems to be tied to the situation in the parish. The Korean church in the United Methodist system runs on the call system, not appointments. If you are a successful minister, a good preacher, and your church is growing, then you have high morale. But when the congregation is tired of this pastor who has been here twelve or thirteen years, and they want a change, morale will be low. He started out from scratch, you've got to remember. He began with a house church. And he built its membership to a certain point, but it has held steady for the last five or six years. The people who are really close to him will let him know that the congregation is ready for new leadership. And he says, "Where can I go?" If you are a well-known preacher, then other churches will call you. But if you are a mediocre or unknown preacher, you've got no place to go. So that's the situation where Korean pastors are. It's very different.

Treese: If the Korean churches were more institutionalized—that is, more a part of the institution, more a part of the appointment system, with built-in evaluation procedures and so on—would this situation be less likely to occur?

Song: I think it would help, because these days there's no support system for clergy under these circumstances. They could talk with their district superintendent, but what can he do?

Munden: Is it the language problem?
Song: Yes. They cannot serve American churches because of the language problem. But there is also the influence of the Confucian social system on the Korean church. It is extremely hierarchical. The senior pastor has absolute authority over the associates, and whatever they do must support and give glory to the senior pastor. The senior pastors served in the same system in Korea. It's hard for me to fit into a system like that, because I was raised in this country, mostly, and feel more comfortable with a democratic, egalitarian approach. When I worked in the Korean church, I was limited to youth and college-age ministry. Why? Because the first generation discovered that their children are also adopting American cultural ideas and speak English, and they want me to reach them where they cannot. But because of those cultural differences between the two generations, the young people constitute a separate, invisible congregation within the church. It is limited, difficult work with few rewards, and after three years I was ready to leave it. When I came to the American church I was to spread my wings wide and become a pastor to the whole congregation. I was appreciated; I felt that I was a significant person. I know the Korean church needs me, but to go back to that situation again would be very difficult. And that's a pain I just have to live with.

Brubaker: The influence of cultural values and social systems on the church really strikes me here. One way we really have been co-opted by the culture is that in American society, money seems to be the only way we know how to value something. Lots of Anglo people that I know give great credit to Korean churches for no other reason than that they are self-supporting, as opposed to other non-white people. When I was on the cabinet, I remember our search for a location for the Native American congregation in Grand Rapids, realizing that I was also presiding over church conferences where people were spending half a million or more to enlarge the churches they already had. We could hardly find a thing, because the Native American congregation had so little money.

Song: The feeling is that we cannot get help from the conference, from the Methodist system, and therefore we have to help ourselves. So the Korean National Caucus is very strong, very well attended. Until they are ready to be integrated into the Methodist system, that's what they're going to do. And I think it is the right thing for now.

Flores: The Hispanic historical situation is different than the Korean, and so is the structure of the churches. The problems vary
according to each conference and where it is located, as for example, the Caribbean or mainland conferences. I'm thinking of Puerto Rico and Rio Grande. But I don't know what will happen in the Rio Grande conference. It will eventually merge with various conferences in the area, I think, and deal with those local issues.

**Walker:** Where I see hierarchy working against us is in the area of salary, as Ellen said. I think we have to explore the idea of an equitable common salary or share salary—but the denomination has been very slow to allow conferences to think that through and make any changes.

**Munden:** We tried to come up with a basic salary plan in Nebraska in the early seventies. That was when the Discipline still allowed it as a possibility. The greatest opposition was from laity who felt that salary was something they should be able to control.

**Walker:** . . . which is the objective of the call system.

**Munden:** That's right. Since then we've introduced the evaluation system, which gives other opportunities for laity to evaluate clergy. And we have a consultative system which does give more voice to the laity, in terms of appointment. With those other factors in the equation, I would hope laity might be more open to this, if the clergy themselves were open to it. But we've never gotten very far with this at General Conference.

**Treese:** How much flexibility, how much bending, can any system undergo before it breaks down or is rendered ineffective? I think people are subject to instances of low morale when they observe that the system could not bend one more time, far enough to accommodate a particular situation. On the other hand, some people seem to have chronic morale problems because they operate with the idea that the system never works and will not even see cases where it has done a reasonable job of being flexible.

**Brubaker:** One area where flexibility is crucial is in dual-career situations. That's going to exist, whether the system likes it or not, or tries to slap clergy on the wrist and says, "You're not being faithful if you won't be fully itinerant." Clergy are giving a commuting radius when they know that they may be up for a new appointment, because their spouse is going to try to hang on to that job. And I think in some ways cabinets are dealing pretty graciously with that new challenge.

**Feemster:** But no matter how hard we try to work at it, and take into consideration the two careers and the children, many times the person has to make a sacrifice as to the size of church and the salary
in order to stay where they need to stay. And even then, sometimes, it's not possible.

**Lanning:** To respond to your question, Don, I think that a system is in trouble when it seems to bend or remain inflexible in a capricious way. Our church appears to be capricious when it comes to individuals near the top of the salary scale. And cynicism always sets in when people believe an organization exists for the people who run it.

**Treese:** But the point I would want to make is that when the system works, and is adaptable, and does a pretty good job, it's never recognized. It's just a given. And that also goes for individuals; it's very difficult for us to say publicly that we do feel good about ourselves and our ministry. If we do say it, the church will find twenty-five reasons why clergy should not feel satisfied or proud of the job they do.

**Walker:** I don't think anybody minds suggestions for improvement as long as they are also getting the pastoral care they need. Our current bishop seems to have the philosophy of delegating the pastoral role to the superintendents. And some of the superintendents don't know how to do that. They don't want to catch that ball that is thrown to them. And so there is a feeling that some of us are not being well pastored.

**Brubaker:** The very fact that the Board of Ordained Ministry has begun to assist the conference to identify spiritual mentors, pastoral presences, makes me think that the message has finally gotten through. There are so many occasions in which institutional representatives can't be pastoral. When the pastor's in trouble and you've got to look to the needs of the church as well as the pastor, you really can't do that. It's been wrong to tell people that it can be done—and it can really set up a morale problem.

**Munden:** The Division sent out a book by Robert Schnase, *You Are Called to Ministry,* which is very helpful. The point is made there that a person who is in an authority position, or supervisory position, is really not able to provide the spiritual direction, support, pastoral care that a person needs. If you think you are being evaluated by a person—and I think in theory most of us have thought that district superintendents ought to be able to do that—then they cannot provide us with basic pastoral care. But it also points up the fact that there is a real need for that in our ministry. I have a spiritual director who is a Roman Catholic nun, whom I sought out for this—a very gifted, trained woman. Ellen mentioned the Academy for Spiritual Formation. Most of us don't have that kind of resource, despite the fact that
we don't have the capacity to do our ministries without guidance. There will always be times when we can't make it on our own. We need one another during those times to be there with us, to help and support until faith is revived again.

Swenson: My approach to getting pastoral care for myself is that certain persons will earn that right with us. I choose who will be a pastor to me when in my experience, I know I need one. That may or may not be the person who has supervisory responsibility for my performance at this moment. I think each of us needs to learn how to discern when those times arise and who can be pastoral for us when they do.

Brubaker: I agree with that, Mary Ann. I think it's also important to be clear about the role that one is taking, whether pastoral or supervisory, and not change from one to the other inappropriately. A young clergyperson told me of an instance in which she was confiding in a district superintendent who actually changed roles in the middle of their conversation. The D.S. was listening and all of a sudden she told the clergyperson that she was going to have to inform the bishop about the situation. That's bad, but at the same time, if what the clergyperson wanted was simply pastoral care, she should have been told that this was not the place to find it.

Swenson: But I do think that there are times when the institutional person—the district superintendent or the bishop or whomever—can be pastoral with us, can show us some institutional solidarity. For example, if you're really out there on a limb, taking a risk for justice, I can come and march with you or be alongside you, or, if you are in a time of personal crisis, I can come and stand beside you and be a companion and a friend.

Feemster: I think a lot depends on the person. The individual must see him or herself in the pastoral role at the time, and the other person has to be receptive. Often people underestimate the capacity of the district superintendent to be pastoral for them, because they are not willing to risk opening the relationship further. But the pastoral relationship involves earning trust, as you said, and that is difficult when you are superintending. When I was area director of professional ministries and had nothing to do with appointments, there were people who would let me be in the pastoral role with them, but it ended after I became a superintendent.

Munden: I think, though, there is a difference between seeking out pastoral care and support in a time of particular need and crisis and developing an ongoing relationship, which over years provides you
with an opportunity to do theological reflection. We need to be asking ourselves questions, such as, What is God doing in my life? What is happening—not just to me, but what is God doing in the situation? I think that’s very helpful, and someone needs to be trained to do that kind of thing.

Call, Vocation, and Morale

*Hels:* What is the relationship between the call to ministry and one’s continuing sense of meaning and satisfaction in the practice of ordained ministry? Does age or background affect the way the call gets articulated? Is describing a call more or less difficult than talking about one’s faith in general?

*Feemster:* I think the second-career people are much more sure about call—maybe because they wouldn’t be changing careers if they weren’t sure. The Walk to Emmaus program in our conference has supported several people in making the decision to consider ministry. Years ago, youth camps and assemblies provided the same stimulus to think about a call to ministry. We don’t do that anymore because we haven’t wanted to play on the emotions of young people, as so many other groups do. But as a result, many young people have not been challenged.

*Thompson:* My sense is that young people are having more and more trouble articulating their call. Second-career people do a little better, but the problem is that people are having trouble talking about their faith in general.

*Swenson:* I’ve had some experiences with people in recent years that led me to think that the call is a lifelong process that takes continuing discernment. People can be clear about hearing the call and wanting to respond to it, but after that, there are so many options. Is it a call to preach? Is it a call to ordained ministry? to diaconal ministry? Being sensitive to those options challenges people for their entire lifetime.

*Brubaker:* I really admire the young people I’ve worked with, because it seems to me that they are hearing a call to be a certain way in the world—to be “faithing” people, rather than to do this or that particular thing. The sureness comes in who God calls me to be, even if there is confusion about what God calls me to do. And I think they are very courageous, because human-service professions do not have the same clout and influence they had in the days when, say, my husband, Bob, entered the ministry.
Walker: Every other year in our conference we have a convocation on ministry, and we always have to decide whether the focus will be on ordained or general ministry. We concentrate on the latter now because we need to begin with a sense of vocation, of marrying God's will, and only then looking at all the ways to do that, whether ordained or diaconal or lay work. A person who is too much on the church career track can be inoculated against the real thing: a deep, true call from God. I suppose that is why I am suspicious of people who think they have been called specifically to the ordained ministry --it's like someone claiming he was called to serve only large churches! I was called by God to be in ministry, and from there we did the sorting.

Brubaker: Years ago, anyone who was very religious was steered toward the ordained ministry. At least this was the case with young men. Now I know lay people who are as deeply committed to religion as I am. They get very resentful at times of the "ownership" of the faith by the clergy. What we need to emphasize is that radical commitment to Christ and the Church, regardless of career choice.

Munden: Candidates have trouble talking about their call for the same reason that all of us, in this secular world, have a hard time talking about God. It's difficult to tell one's story and believe that something so unique and personal has real merit. It is easier to fall back on abstractions and generalities. But let me be candid for a minute. The call I had at first bore a strong resemblance to my overall desire for success. It was a call to more. It didn't make any difference what it was; I wanted more of it. But when our first child died, suddenly the house and the country club were just not enough. I did enter the ministry, but I'm convinced I was still looking for more—the top of my class in seminary or president of the student body or pastor of the largest church, whatever it was. Only later did I realize that what I really needed was a sense of home. That was the true hunger. I can sit on the beach and look at the water for just hours, sensing how much we all belong to this environment, people, dolphins, herons, everything. That feeling of being at home happens only occasionally, but I know that is the call.

Brubaker: That's the call, that's the joy, that's the passion, that's the everything. When I was trying to describe morale for me, that's it. And it's there in moments of great pain and in moments of great joy. But if you lose that sense of belonging, then morale is shaken.

Lanning: I think the thing that is meaningful about what Ebb says is that it is a call to persons, not to an individual occupation. I heard
the call to ministry when I was sixteen. I can't remember it too clearly now; it was probably at the advice of an influential minister. It was a call to leadership among the people of God, as opposed to a decision to enter one of the other professions. It took me a long time to understand what Luther meant by the priesthood of all believers. After a while I began to wonder if being a pastor was not my way of being a religious person and whether I would even go to church if I weren't the minister. Then the shift began, and I began to see that I would worship whether I was in the ministry or not. It was tremendously freeing. Now I'm suspicious of people who claim to have a religious call, because it can become an excuse for doing almost nothing. It is not helpful for our young people to think that if you are going to be religious, the only thing you can do is be in ministry. The real call is to the vocation of being human; it is far more important than a call to the ordained ministry.

Song: What you and Ebb are saying makes me wonder about my own experience. When I was being interviewed by the district, I was so young that I had not really lived life, and therefore I said what I had learned from theological books. That's what they wanted to hear. Young people are going to have a hard time understanding what a true call from God is.

Swenson: I think you told us about your call when you told us about the Korean congregations, and your position with them.

Walker: We still all carry the truth recognized by my brother in the faith, John Wesley—you preach faith until you have faith. We articulate and clean up our act as we go along. I'm still being called, I feel, and nudged.

Treese: There is often a significant third person who gets people on the road to ministry, who helps you sense the call and see it more clearly. What is your experience with that?

Song: For me there was no real particular person. Because I grew up without a father, I had a deep mistrust for older men. Women had always taken good care of me. One day when I was out of high school I got shot, right in the chest. I nearly died, but after I knew I was going to survive, I became philosophical and began to question the purpose for my existence. It was very bleak. I went to college searching for the answer to that question. One of my friends was a poet, and we had long conversations about it. Then during my fourth year of college, I had a conversion experience. I was in a state of eternity, and I saw a figure. I assumed it was Jesus, but I suppose if I had been raised in a Buddhist society, it might have been a Buddha. But it was that sense
of belonging—that I was loved, that I belonged to something that was so much greater and more loving than I ever imagined possible. It affirmed my being. And I wanted to devote myself to that which came and revealed itself to me. My friend in college was the one who helped me on this journey. As I grew older I realized I needed a mentor. Now this fifty-four-year-old Caucasian pastor, whom I respect and admire, has become a mentor to me.

Munden: I really cannot identify a particular person either. I was raised in the church; my parents were very involved. But I never consciously wanted to be in ordained ministry. In fact, the clergy seemed like pious asses and I didn’t really feel comfortable around them. I also had an experience that sounds like the one John described. I was in the navy during World War II, serving on an aircraft carrier. One day, standing on the flight deck, I had an experience of wonder at the staggering enormity of the sky, the stars, and the ocean around me. At the same time I realized that I was loved by God, that I was not just a meaningless speck in the universe. I thought I would never forget that moment, and that it would change my life. But when the war was over I went right back to law school, right on track, looking for more—and did a very good job of that. But as I said, when our daughter died, that moment in the corridor of that hospital when the doctor talked with me, my world just fell apart. Everything I’d ever depended on in life—money, brains, influence—couldn’t make any difference. And yet even then I felt myself held and supported, in the presence of someone who loved me. And I also understood that our daughter was being held, and that she was all right. I’ve often said that the person who had the greatest significance on me was my daughter, who only lived a short while. But that reality never left me. The need to express that led me into the ministry, despite all the wrong turns I’ve taken. That’s why I’m convinced that our strengths betray us, but our failures are the occasions for God’s grace to act. God doesn’t send misery, but God’s grace can come through it.

Treese: And how does the sense and experience of call enable a person to keep the passion, the joy, the bliss, even when the abortion protestors are marching on your church and telling you where to go?

Brubaker: When I live out my call, I am living out of the memory of those holy moments. The contrast is between really being able share in the deepest moments of other peoples’ lives and having your spirit eroded by carping and pettiness. The last two weeks I have spent with the family of a thirty-five-year-old woman, a mother of two, who is dying. On this I would gladly give myself, night and day. But I also have to deal with minute administrative problems concerning a part-
time staff person in the church. It would be great if I did not have to
close with these constraints, but the times when we have moments
of witness with other people remind me what I was called to do.

_Lanning_: It seems important to notice that what calls you in may
not keep you in. The morale problems surface in the transition from
one vision to the next one. I started out with the idea that Jesus was
a kind of social worker, and I've had to enlarge this view because it
couldn't sustain me anymore.

_Feemster_: But the original call, as Don says, can be an extremely
powerful thing. I was fourteen when I was called to ministry at a
youth assembly. I'd planned to go to law school at the time. I took my
first churches when I was eighteen years old. It was that strong sense
of call that has sustained me through forty-three years of ministry
now.

_Swenson_: I'd like to share some of my story, too. I had a sense of
the oneness, of belonging to the universe from the beginning, that
was like being called from the womb. In 1961, when I was fourteen
years old, I rededicated my life to Jesus Christ and pledged myself to
a full-time church-related vocation. That call was appropriate for a
girl growing up in Mississippi--I was called for service under, not over,
some good man. That meant Christian education, missionary work,
being a preacher's wife. When I started college, I looked at the mini­
sterial students and decided I would rather be one than marry one.
My male classmates in colleges were serving churches, but I wasn't
because I was the other gender. I went to seminary, and I was told
that even though I would end up in Christian education it would be
useful for me to learn what the male students were learning. I had to
get to a place where I could live with this and go beyond it. When the
holy moments with people began to occur, they sustained me, and
have done so over the years. The call at age fourteen was shaped by
the mythology of a dominant culture. But originally, there was con­

nectedness--and that's always there. What I decide to do with it, my
work, requires me to push beyond those limiting cultural messages.

_Brubaker_: Hearing your story, I think of a moment of real surprise
and excitement. About two years ago, I was at a school of Christian
mission when a couple of women I've known for years came up to
speak with me. They were telling me about their mentors and their
sense that the church was inviting them to consider second-career
ministry. It was really happening for them! I was in tears, I was so
thrilled for them.
Walker: It’s a real luxury to feel a sense of total call and then to be able to clarify that as you go along. I can remember the “influentials” who helped me into ministry. One was a pastor in high school who just said, “Have you ever thought of being a minister?”—no more than that. But it planted a seed. Other people influenced me by living out my understanding of the Christian life. One person was not even a Christian, but he had spent six months working with Gandhi, and he embodied the very Christ I believed in, a nonviolent activist.

Swenson: It seems to me that some people just have a gift of discerning religious leadership in others and helping them see possibilities that they may not have seen.

Song: But I think also, in persons’ lifetimes, some of the profound experiences really strip away all the superficialities and artificialities of what ministry is about and get to the core. And I think what sustains a person after the initial call is those profound moments of failure, where you get down to the core of what’s real, what’s lasting, what will remain even when you die.

Walker: We are talking about grace, the most basic stuff of all ministry. All the rest is sorting out gifts. Which will win out? The grace of God is that “at homeness.” And the gifts I have may be the very things that do me in. But if I can rely on the grace, then these gifts don’t become gods; they become handles.

Brubaker: I think morale becomes a problem when we forget this perspective and think instead: “I will have arrived when....” This year a man in our conference left. His dad was a pastor, extremely active in the life the church. The young man must have had his own reasons for leaving, but his father told everyone that it was because the churches aren’t big enough in this conference and he had nowhere to go. So the quest for “more” turns out to be an illusion for everybody.

Munden: One thing I’m learning, and constantly relearning: it’s not just in holy moments that real life is to be found; holy moments show us what is true of every moment. The wonder of life is most truly present in its ordinariness. There’s a lot of just ordinary stuff that goes on in the ministry that I don’t like much, but I’m convinced that God is present in those moments as well as in the powerfully dramatic moments.

Lanning: One of my closest friends in ministry, a rabbi, died at age thirty-five. He had been very involved in social action issues in our community. And he died by inches. At one point he said, “Dean, the issues don’t look nearly as important as they did. But relationships are just as important.” Maybe our progress in Christian maturity is to
move toward what might have brought us into ministry in the very first place.

Swenson: I want to get back around again to what really erodes our morale. We can have that sense of vision in the call, the vision to be and do whatever we might be. But then we can just act really ugly to each other, and not in love and care with each other in our way of living out our lives together. When we ask people to be leaders or to do something on our behalf, then we sort of pick away at their necks like chickens. I think our jurisdictional conferences are stages where we act out the depth and pervasiveness of our human sinfulness. If we are called to be at one with one another and to be with each other, why do we do that?

Thompson: When I think about problems with the system, it's not active wrongdoing that impresses me but living with the effects of something missing. So many people are doing without a support system or a covenant group, and they never get to talk about these issues at all. We may wait for the system to organize this for us, but ultimately we are responsible for being part of a group that helps define us, and then can feed us.

Song: The individual still has to be ready to face whatever life has to offer. I really admire someone who can say, "Let whatever must happen, happen!" Your own character must be built, through God's grace, to be able to live fully.

Brubaker: But it also requires trust in a group. For some people, the system can provide those linkages, but for many people there isn't enough trust there; and the circle becomes an ecumenical one.

Song: Maybe then it's really important to have a mentor, spiritual advisor, so that in low moments you can go to that person and have some support and a sense of community.

Lanning: I think we can talk to each other on issues that affect our morale, but we can't instruct others about morale. Life will bring us enough hardship without our asking to be tested—there's nothing hypothetical about it. My biggest morale problem came at one of the happiest times of my life. Everything was great. I was district superintendent—that is the only negative thing I can remember. [laughter] But I will never again question someone who claims to have gone through a "dark night of the soul." I never understood why it happened to me, but it just did. God's grace appeared for me in the form of a friend, and I was delivered from it. Now I would not claim to know how to deal with an issue of morale.
Song: I think what I meant was that a person should live with an openness to what life has to offer, and not out of fear. We should cultivate an adventurous spirit. You might be called to go someplace fearful, but you have confidence that God's grace has led you thus far and will continue on this journey with you. It's not that you can control your own destiny but that you can rely on God's grace.

Thompson: The call is the wellspring I go to, again and again and again in the dry times, to make it through. And yet it is renewed and it's evolving. And I depend upon other people to reauthenticate it. It's there, and in dry moments even when I'm alone I can draw from it. But it changes and evolves, especially through other people. I hear God's voice primarily through others.

Finding and Raising Low Morale

Hels: I am wondering how we can identify and reach out to our brothers and sisters who have low morale, acting as supervisors or peers. If we have experienced low morale ourselves but also found renewal, what can we say to those with low spirits—what will be of real assistance?

Feemster: I'm not sure people with low morale have really been identified. We can estimate their numbers, but it is harder to identify the individuals. People rate other people's morale lower than their own, and that creates problems for people trying to create support systems, such as the Division of Ordained Ministry. Unless people with low morale are willing to identify themselves, we won't find out what is causing them stress and how we can help.

Swenson: I've got a theory about that. As a superintendent, I grew to expect that about 10 percent of the clergy and congregations would be unsettled or unhappy every year, and they would shift, year by year. I think people and congregations have seasons of joy and well-being, and then periodically they come up for a problem that needs resolving. It seems to hold steady at about 10 percent a year.

Walker: But there are those with perpetual problems, and when they are appointed to churches that are always in a state of agitation, then you really hit the bottom.

Thompson: I don't like the idea of labelling people or churches who are not willing to identify themselves. I know we all do it. But I think any remedy that we impose on people who have not sought it would be counterproductive.
**Lanning:** I am also uncomfortable with using percentages if everyone has a morale problem at one time or another—or thinks that someone else does. At the same time, I wouldn't deny that, as in anything, some people have chronic morale concerns.

**Brubaker:** It looks as if clergy might need some help in determining when they have a problem that affects their morale. I wonder who should do the assessing; the person who has a hard time acknowledging that he or she needs help with a situation, or with the state of his or her soul, or the system, which is supposed to support but doesn’t want to pigeonhole anybody.

**Thompson:** One problem with the system is that it penalizes people for taking a sabbatical or making interim arrangements. So if I have a problem or if I have low morale, I end up being punished with financial trauma and potential loss of appointment. I don’t see anybody taking seriously the basic need to step aside for time of rest and renewal. We affirm it in other professions, but somehow never in our own.

**Munden:** I think our morale problems are real and significant, but I don’t think we ought to conclude that the ministry is in some great trauma. If everyone will have a morale problem at some time, then this is not unusual or sinister or dangerous. I think if every clergy could be part of a community of people, whether that is a small group of just clergy, or clergy and laity, or—some small group where he or she could really have the sense that they could, at any given time, honestly share what they were feeling and thinking, we would all be able to work through what kind of morale problems we would be having at a given time, or most of us could.

**Brubaker:** I think you’re right, but I don’t want to lose the point that John is making. We started offering sabbaticals for cabinet members. I was the first and maybe the only one who actually took a renewal leave. It was the summer after Bob’s death, and I can tell you that it saved my life. Everyone got around the bishop to make sure that she could take a leave. Nobody did that for the people in the cabinet. And what about people in the parish? It would be a real mercy and a real grace for the system to recognize that our pastors are giving as much of themselves and that their ministry is every bit as important as the bishop’s ministry. There ought to be a way to get some time off without losing the farm.

**Thompson:** It makes so much sense to me in a connection. We’re not in a call system—we’re connected; we have supervisors.
Feemster: Last year I took sixty days off—I couldn't work out ninety days. It was my fifth year on the District, and it was wonderful. One of the other superintendents filled in for me. A number of ministers came to me at the time and said, "You know, I was in such and such a place and I really should have stayed longer because my work was not done. But I had to get away from all the stress, so I moved to another appointment. If I could have had ninety days off, I could have gone back refreshed and renewed—but there was no guarantee that there would be a place for me when I came back." Several local pastors told me how much they envied my being able to take a sabbatical.

Treese: Ben, you've talked to pastors who say they couldn't take the sixty days because there might not be an appointment waiting for them. Why couldn't they take sixty days' leave while they were serving their current parish? I see Presbyterian and United Church of Christ congregations getting along for a year and even thriving; we can't tolerate the idea that we wouldn't have a pastor for three months! Both pastors and laity feel somehow that they will be disabled if the pastor's not there.

Feemster: It could be done. We've got a lot of retired ministers who would be willing to work with us. There is one in my district who retired at 62 this last year, and he said what he'd really like to do is have temporary assignments, filling in where necessary. So why aren't we hearing these ministers who are saying, "I was in a stress-filled situation, and if I could have had sixty or ninety days off I would have come back refreshed and recharged and stayed to see the church through. But once I reached the point of mental, physical, and spiritual exhaustion, I had to go to another appointment. There was no alternative."

Lanning: I think it's very good to talk about sabbaticals. In actual fact, we often have clergy who do not even observe the sabbath. A day off for refreshment is important, but I think the church needs to think about how its clergy worships and renews itself spiritually. Spiritual formation can be attended to on a practical level in a conference, given a day for concentrating on such matters. It is interesting how many of us have identified small-group experience as the crucial thing that has kept our morale high.

Treese: More care should be paid to the first appointment; by definition it is going to be a low-paying one, but location may be a point of more flexibility. I think a lot of what we would call chronic morale problems begin in that first four or five years; when you're placed in an isolated situation; it's tough sledding financially; and, if you have a
spouse, then that person either can't find work or has to travel a long distance to find it. Maybe the school system is not the best. These people are very easily overlooked because it's the large churches that get all the attention from the superintendent. If the first appointment is not a good one, you can move to one that pays more, but the bad patterns from the first appointment get carried to the second place.

**Thompson:** If those persons are probationers and not full members, they will have supervising pastors. And those people can help monitor, mentor, and set the right patterns, if it's done well.

**Swenson:** There is some subtlety in the appointment-making process at that point. The leader or the superintendent has to really listen and understand the desires of the persons and families being appointed; he or she must also try to see things that the person being appointed either can't see or shouldn't be asked to focus on. But if the superintendent assumes that he or she and the one being appointed have the same values, and the superintendent can use that to plan a person's career, then the pastor will not feel heard—and his or her morale will be low.

**Song:** Ethnic minority churches often feel that the bishop and the D.S. are there for the main churches who are in the system, and that, somehow, we are not a part of it. And so they feel they're not heard; their pains and problems are not understood by the D.S.'s and the bishops. So what I would like to see in our conferences is to have the bishop and his or her cabinet members make an intentional effort to be in dialogue with various ethnic communities—pastors and lay leaders—so that they can be better D.S.'s and bishops to these churches. When they see that effort coming from the top, they will be honored, and they will feel more a part of the community.

**Flores:** In many places those efforts are being made. The cabinet or the Board of Ordained Ministry—primarily the cabinet—will meet with the particular group of ethnic folk and articulate the concerns of ministry, for example, all the issues that relate to the bilingualism of ministry in the urban areas, or strategy for ministry in urban areas. There are no easy answers to these questions. But the dialogue is helpful, not necessarily for the bishop and cabinet to give direction but for support to be given where it is needed.

**Song:** The key is being heard and understood.

**Brubaker:** I want to go back to our discussion about categories, because there is a nagging question around this for me. We all have brothers and sisters beginning ministry and then doing something
else for a phase, and then perhaps becoming ready to serve a local church again. For me, ordination is not about privilege, but the spiritual dimensions of it are important for me. Why does this movement into different types of ministry, or into a leave of absence, seem to compromise one’s ordination and sacramental privileges? Bishops, for example, don’t seem to have this problem.

_Swenson:_ In terms of morale, it really does have to do with the idea of devaluing persons because of transitions in their lives. The system seems to be saying, "You’ve changed, you took time out, and we no longer place the same value on you. In fact, you just don’t belong."

_Walker:_ I keep hearing that unless you experience it, you don’t really know how devalued you feel. A leave of absence doesn’t sound bad until you look at the consequences—and then it begins to feel more negative.

_Brubaker:_ I think there is a perception that it is not acceptable to do various kinds of ministries, or be in a parish for only a certain period of time. The United Methodist system defines doing ministry for the most part by serving in a local church, plus some acceptable appointments beyond the local church, and then moving up the track to large-church pastor, district superintendent, and bishop. But some people are saying that they want to do ministry in a different form for a number of years and may reenter the local church at a given time. And they have to insist that this, too, is authentic ministry.

_Treese:_ I do think that there has been a singular lack of creativity on the part of those making appointments, and even some Boards of Ordained Ministry, around placing people in categories. The leave of absence becomes a convenient place for lodging a lot of unusual situations, which could, I think, be handled in other ways. But individual pastors must keep people informed and give evidence that they know what they are about. Then a cabinet that was open to risk could go along with that.

_Munden:_ There is another factor in judging morale that we haven’t really isolated in our discussion. Everybody experiences morale problems at times. But there is also the ineffective pastor who becomes demoralized as a result of being in the wrong business altogether and the clumsy institutional response to that. We are beginning to respond to the ineffective pastor, but in the past we have avoided confrontation and simply moved the problem on to the next appointment. Now, I think there can be some structural kinds of things that we do, although they may be expensive. The leave of absence can be used to get skills for a new and more positive ministry. It
may also be a time of reflection, enabling the person to exit without disgrace or embarrassment.

Treese: You can't always establish a relation between ineffectiveness and morale. Because you can have a pastor who is judged by the cabinet as being ineffective, who could be one of the happiest pastors; and then ten miles down the road, you have someone who looks successful because he or she is working 80 hours a week but the problem is in the parsonage, and no one knows it until something drastic happens—all of which shows the wide range of this issue.

Song: I'd really like our church to have something in place where Ebb's concern can be implemented. There must be a way, because I think we owe it to the congregations that we send good pastors, not someone who will continue to bring pain and destruction in their spiritual lives.

Walker: Yes, but the reality is that our pool of available pastors is limited. Some churches simply get—and know they are getting—the "leftovers." It affects the morale of the individual and the church. The question is, how do you encourage and support the clergy you have? I'd rather deal with a happy Christian than a brilliant, highly trained pastor whose morale is so low that he or she is completely ineffective.

Brubaker: I still think that the system can help us all by affirming the spiritual dimension of each member of the annual conference: We recognize that you are a spiritual being; that you must pray; that you should allow yourself to be vulnerable within a community or with your colleagues. With some encouragement, we might free ourselves to do those things.

Lanning: But it is important to separate prudential issues, such as money, from faith issues when it comes to morale; because the faith issues are so much more sensitive, and the cost of being judgmental in this area is extremely high. It is not good for a conference to inform one of its members that his or faith is an issue for them. In the end, the individual has to be responsible for his or her own faith issues when it comes to morale.
Some years ago, the eminent dean of Yale University’s Divinity School was entertaining guests at dinner. Just as the whole party sat down for the meal and the dean was about to say grace, the telephone started ringing. The host hesitated. He started to get up, then sat back down. Finally, with marked determination he bowed his head.

"Dean Weigle speaking," he said.

The story ends there, but we can wonder whether the guests were able to turn their attention to the task at hand. The language wasn’t right. Nonetheless, better this peremptory opening of a prayer to the Creator than no prayer at all.

Like much else in religious faith and practice, "prayer" denotes both an objective human action and a subjective sentiment, each deeply involved with the other. Abraham Heschel wrote once that as we walk along the slopes and ridges of the liturgy we are led to prayer. We enter into objective action and move toward the religious emotion. Conversely, the emotion can lead to objective action—to the composition or singing of hymns, for example, or preaching, or audible prayer.

The appropriate language, especially in public prayer, can enhance both the meaning of the objective action and the richness of the subjective experience. Inappropriate language can intrude and interrupt the movement of prayer and can misdirect those people on the
slopes and ridges. We have all had the experience of feeling misled in public prayers, whether offered by ordained clergy or by lay people.

There are several lenses through which one may examine the language of prayer. Theology checks the appropriateness of content. We feel misled if a worship leader seems to think of God in merely pantheistic terms or is so preoccupied with Jesus or with the third person of the Trinity that God's fullness is never addressed.

Moral reflection reminds us that the content might be right, but it is false if the one who leads us in prayer seems to lack a commitment to its ideas. A prayer addressed to "God, the redeemer of us all" and petitioning for racial harmony, but offered by someone known to be racially bigoted would be problematical for most people in the pews.

Aesthetics may contribute another lens. Prepared public prayer is poetic—it dares try to express something of the whole God-human relationship in the course of a few meaningful words. We know our satisfaction when our own religious sentiments are expressed with grace and beauty, and our frustration when we are led instead by someone apparently caught up in merely ritualistic verbosity.

Whether there are any criteria for praying that have universal application is doubtful. Religious traditions and subcultures vary in the extreme. For some, the beads of prayer-wheel-using repetition of phrases or brief prayers is the essence of praying. Others stress spontaneity and innovation. Both figuratively and physically, some kneel to pray while others stand and fling wide their arms. Our focus will have to be limited to the language of public prayer in the so-called "mainline" Protestant Christian traditions.

Here then are some reflections and some guidelines for use as we prepare prayers for public worship:

1. Prayer is addressed to God. Few errors are as distracting as a shift to a third-person reference to God when we are collectively engaged in addressing God second-person, as "you" or "Thou." (It is wrong to say, "O Lord, strengthen among all people the love of God." Far better: "... among all people their love for you.") The mistake seems to show that the leader is not praying.

The exception to this is the bidding prayer—when the liturgist addresses the congregation with an invitation to pray in a certain vein, then shifts back—usually after a silence—to addressing God with a collect. The shifts may be repeated six or eight times, but clarity about them is important to the integrity of prayer.

With respect to our evolution toward more inclusive language about God, this "you" makes prayer easier than preaching. Second-person pronouns in English are already inclusive. However, the rest of the
language—its images and metaphors—needs opening up on the feminine side these days in comparison to older prayers. We will be hearing more of birth images in relation to creation and/or nurturing language for providence and divine compassion. We address a personal God who is yet more than masculine, more than feminine, in holy attributes.

2. Prayer addresses God and is meant to lift our attention God-ward. It ought not call attention to itself. This is an important clue about language in prayer, with many ramifications. Adjectives and embellishments desirable in storytelling and preaching usually have extremely limited place in prayer. Simple direct prose is normative. The less complicated Anglo-Saxon words work better than the multi-syllable Latin ones. Winston Churchill's well-known preference for "blood, sweat, and tears" over words like "sacrifice, perseverance, and suffering" would be equally right in prayer. Florid, "purple" prose is especially intrusive, for it obviously displays itself, instead of getting out of the way to point us to God.

This does not mean that prayers must be dull. Quite the contrary. The right word or image can capture the nuance and ambiance of a theme so well that it may make us catch our breath. Its accuracy and freshness can serve the purposes of prayer without sidetracking the worshipper. I still remember being led by someone praying that a marriage be "spacious," and by another that peace might overcome "layers of rancor thousands of years deep." The classic phrases like the petition for a "righteous and sober life" precisely convey the dimension of the God-human relation being denoted without being trite or dull. These words are not like the cute phrases of prayer in the sixties—"Are you running with me, Jesus?" They are new, but they still direct us toward the Holy, not to themselves.

Addressing God, we needn't summarize the news God already knows. A friend of mine remembers hearing a prayer that began with a folksy "Now Lord, we all read last week in the Readers Digest...." We can pray for earthquake victims without rehearsing the headline and the whole lead sentence from the daily press.

3. The task of prayers in public worship is to gather up a congregation's concerns and lay them before God. These concerns go much deeper than those on the tip of people's tongues. Leading public prayer, we are called on to express commonly repressed anxieties about life and death, about the imprisoned, the poor and the outcast, and even about injustices of which we are the beneficiaries, such as the unfair distribution of wealth in our favor. However, if this gathering up slips into implied "prophetic" and judgmental preaching or moral instruction,
it is off the targeted task of prayer. Instead of uniting the congregation, it divides it. And it invites people to tune out.

4. Pastoral prayer has to build on sentiment at least vaguely felt in the pews, not on the leader's convictions about the sins of the congregation. The prophets themselves were poets, evoking moral sensitivity that would overcome people's calloused or haughty indifference. Walter Brueggemann rehearses this poetic/prophetic gift of articulating the pain of the oppressed and countering the "numbness" of the privileged in *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1978).

There is thus a discipline for our writing of prayers. That discipline includes an appraisal of what resonates with both the great tradition and with the congregation being led in prayer. There may be a local grief or celebration that is on everyone's mind: it must be recognized in prayer or preaching if the leader is to be effective. The discipline includes the God-ward focus of prayer and the avoidance of distracting self-display. It also prevents that topical range of public prayer from being coterminus with the whims of the pastor/leader. Among these standards is the inclusion of varied elements of prayer—thanksgiving, adoration, confession, and concern for others and for the church and the world. These elements may be developed in separate parts of a liturgy, but somewhere they should appear.

5. Familiar liturgical forms and prayers long used have several virtues that innovators do well to remember. Familiarity helps language do what it is supposed to do—keep out of the spotlight so that the worshipper can approach the Holy. If it is a classic prayer, it anchors prayer in the Christian tradition, surrounding us with a "great cloud of witnesses." And it provides stability in the midst of life experience that for some seems full of overwhelming change. Repeated prayers come to be memorized, and the distraction from centered meditation that is involved in reading a prayer book or bulletin can be dispensed with for the moment.

6. Composing new prayers frees us to gather up new concerns, however, meeting the needs of a Christian community that grows restless hearing archaic language or perceives it as dull repetition. New prayers can still resonate with the tradition through Biblical allusions and phrases. These need not be the only kind of reference and image in new prayers, but they should be among them. To achieve something of the poetic gift and to anchor prayer in the tradition, Ernest Fremont Tittle said that before he composed a prayer he would "steep (his) mind in the Psalms, in Isaiah, and in *The Book of Common Prayer.*"  

7. Styles of prayer evolve over time, of course, and ought to. New patterns of worship can be introduced without upsetting many people...
so long as they are announced in advance and interpreted. Startling fresh language can become familiar remarkably soon. Learning from other traditions in ecumenical dialogue is an important and satisfying source of new forms.

8. A leader from outside a congregation needs to listen to a culture as well as to individual parishioners encountered in pastoral conversation. There is no eternally right form of prayer. The griefs and enchantments and struggles of a folk are best put in something like their own idiom, according to region, living situation, ethnic style and social class. To ignore all this and impose, say, a formal liturgy on free-church people of Appalachian Kentucky is to deaden the potential of a congregation. A gospel choir can be led to broaden its repertoire, but the starting point is with the gospel songs. So it is with prayer.

9. Finally, all this must not be allowed to "professionalize" praying. By setting a model of language and then involving lay people in leadership of prayers, we help people pray. One congregation regularly invites written prayers from the congregation on a bulletin insert, prayers that are then collected with the offering and read during the "pastoral prayer." It is usually a moving experience. Other congregations, less inhibited, invite spoken prayers from the pews. Verbal instruction goes only so far in prayer. Learning to pray comes mainly from practice. A person's spiritual awareness and discipline have to undergird the public office of leading others in prayer, or the integrity of the public praying will erode. Immersing oneself in scripture, standing alongside the congregation in the daily rounds of joys and sorrows and being with the congregation in praise and contrition and intercession, even when not leading—those habits are the genesis of meaningful leadership in prayer.
The Ministers' Bookshelf: Worship

The closing years of the 1980s saw a sudden bursting forth of books on worship in the mainline churches. In part, this reflected the end of an era of liturgical revision which began after Vatican II (1962-1965) and was winding down a quarter of a century later. After service books were revised, books of explanation and implementation of the newly revised services were needed. But new concerns were emerging which might have shaped the new services somewhat differently if they had arisen in time. One of these was justice, especially in terms of making women visible in worship. Another was historical scholarship and its ability to interpret present practices with insights gained from the study of the past. Shifting theological currents also surfaced some new concerns.

We shall discuss about a score of new books. This will by no means exhaust the rich harvest of books about worship of this period; but these books will be some of the most immediately helpful for those responsible for worship in the mainline churches of North America.

By all odds, the biggest liturgical event of the last few years was the publication of The United Methodist Hymnal in 1989. Its appearance coincided with the last of the revised Roman Catholic liturgical books to be published in English, Ceremonial of Bishops and Book of Blessings. Publication of the Hymnal brought to a close work on the United Methodist basic services, a work of revision which had extended over a period of twenty years. The reception of the Hymnal has been highly positive and makes it the most widely used Protestant service book in North America with the possible exception of the

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It is far more than a hymnal in the conventional sense, such as the new (1990) Presbyterian Hymnal, which limits service materials to only four pages. The “General Services” occupy nearly eighty pages of the Hymnal plus a liturgical psalter of 100 psalms with antiphons. All this comes in addition to nearly seven hundred hymns, probably the most broadly based selection ever compiled by any denomination. With so much that is new to understand and interpret, two volumes are essential for the United Methodist pastor: The Worship Resources of the United Methodist Hymnal, edited by Hoyt L. Hickman, and The Hymns of the United Methodist Hymnal, edited by Diana Sanchez, both published by Abingdon Press in 1989.

If the United Methodist Hymnal represents a new era for United Methodists, many of the things in it will be familiar to many other Christians. Some of the most essential texts are the result of ecumenical endeavors. The most recent state-of-the-art document on basic texts is Prayer Together (Abingdon Press, 1988). The work of the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), it is the successor to three previous editions of Prayers We Have in Common by the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET). It contains such basic texts as the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds.

The most recent service book to appear will be of interest to many others than just Presbyterians, who developed it. It is Pastoral Care: Ministry with the Sick and Dying, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 6 (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990). It fills a major gap in pastoral care that many churches have neglected, although the Lutheran Occasional Services (1982) and the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer (1979) have some materials. No Protestant church has equaled this volume with its historical, theological, and practical introduction, its services for ministry to the sick, including sickroom communion, services for healing, a service of repentance and forgiveness, and ministry at the time of death. This volume should have wide use among pastors of all denominations. It puts Presbyterians out ahead of other churches and evokes high hopes for the next volume in this distinguished series, Liturgical Year (SLR, #7), which will be published in January, 1992.

So many new service books have blossomed in the last ten years that it is hard to keep track of them all. In producing a revised edition for my Introduction to Christian Worship (Abingdon, 1990), I found it necessary to refer to more than fifty new service books from English-speaking North America and British Isles alone. None were
more than fifteen years old and many were much more recent than that. This high rate of change dictated a new edition of this textbook, which has been widely used in seminaries since first publication in 1980. It is a measure of how much ecumenical progress has occurred in recent years that a book by a United Methodist is the textbook used in many Roman Catholic seminaries and at least one Orthodox seminary. Similar volumes on worship are the English collection of essays *The Study of Liturgy* (Oxford, 1978), or the American Episcopalian Marion Hatchett’s *Sanctifying Life, Time, and Space* (Seabury, 1976).

Another general approach to worship with a special emphasis on building congregational participation is Craig Erickson’s *Participating in Worship* (Westminster/John Knox, 1989). A Presbyterian minister now serving Tokyo Union Church in Japan, Erickson begins by demonstrating why participation is such a key word in modern discussions of worship. He shows how this is of the essence in defining the Christian community. Then he turns his attention to discussing various forms and patterns that participation takes. Much of the book is devoted to examining a whole gamut of liturgical acts common in Christian communities with an eye to how they already function and can be enhanced to function even more as participatory worship. It is a stimulating survey, well sprinkled with historical information, theoretical guidelines, and practical suggestions.

Another general book published in 1990 comes from the pen (or computer) of the distinguished Episcopal liturgical scholar, Thomas J. Talley. *Worship: Reforming Tradition* (Pastoral Press, 1990) is a collection of historical essays dealing with a wide variety of liturgical topics. Some of these are important articles, reprinted and brought up-to-date. Perhaps most valuable is his chapter on “Sources and Structures of the Eucharistic Prayer.” Other topics covered are baptism, ordination, healing, reconciliation, eschatology, and a masterful essay on “The Liturgical Year: Pattern of Proclamation.” Throughout, Talley manages to show how practical history is for reforming modern-day practices. With all its ironies and strange accidents, history becomes a source of the understanding that is necessary to make reform possible.

Quite a different type and period of history forms the content of my own book from 1989, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Westminster/John Knox Press). This undertakes an overview of the worship of roughly a quarter of Christianity in those European and North American churches originating in the sixteenth century and since. It may be either courageous or foolhardy to undertake
such a comprehensive view of a phenomenon with as much variety as Protestant worship. The method for doing this is in discerning nine distinct traditions such as Quaker worship or Methodist worship and tracing the origins, developments, and current characteristics. One can question whether the traditions are as distinct as I suggest or whether the nine I explore (Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Anabaptist, Puritan, Quaker, Methodist, Frontier, and Pentecostal) are the appropriate divisions. At any rate, I consider it my most original work, especially as regards North American developments in worship, which liturgical scholars tend to ignore. More liturgical scholarship is devoted to ancient Armenia than to modern America! My general impression is that Protestantism has moved to ever-broadening degrees and forms of participation in worship and that future traditions will expand these possibilities even further.

Recent years have seen a great spurt in recognition of the close relationship of liturgy and justice. This has come from many sources: feminism, liberation theology, crusades for social justice in society and church, and ethical studies. These factors have forced many Christians to raise questions about the Church’s worship. Does it reinforce stereotypes which we have come to recognize as oppressive, or does it liberate? Is the full human worth of each individual affirmed or concealed? Do our linguistic and other symbols reflect the true nature of the Church’s claim to be an avant garde of the Kingdom of God? None of these are easy questions; none of the answers given are fully acceptable yet. All we can do is to chronicle the state of the art as we seek proximate answers. Even these are full of ambiguities: we make curb cuts for wheelchairs only to find that for blind persons these are very dangerous. So we move further on, discovering injustices that we have ignored all our lives but which after a moment of recognition become intolerable. It is a continuing journey.

Fortunately, there are a number of people who have undertaken to be our guides and who can help us see things we would miss without them. One of the very best of these is Marjorie Procter-Smith, who teaches Worship at Perkins School of Theology. Her book In Her Own Rite (Abingdon Press, 1990) shows her to be equally at home as a liturgical scholar or as a feminist. Not only is her liturgical scholarship impeccable but she is familiar with the vast sea of feminist literature in a variety of fields. This is not an easy book; the topics admit no easy resolution, especially when she moves to God talk. But she moves us toward emancipatory language with the goal of empowering everybody. It is not simply a question of giving women the powers
hitherto reserved (by roles and by language) to men but of reforming
the Church to be a community that values everyone.

The theme of empowerment is picked up by David R. Newman in
his *Worship as Praise and Empowerment* (Pilgrim Press, 1988). His
eyearly death in 1990 was a tragic loss for the United Church of Canada
(where he taught at Emmanuel College, Toronto) and to all North
American Christians. This work remains behind him as still the best
encounter of liberation theology and liturgical studies. He traces the
history of worship as praise directed to God and the moments (all too
rare) at which it also brought power to the people. Unusual for a litur-
gist, he has the sense to take the Enlightenment seriously as a
liberating epoch. After his historical survey, spiced with a wide read-
ing in philosophy, he goes on to explore the possibilities open to us
today for making worship a means of both praise to God and empower-
ment to people. Again the term *participation* resounds as the com-
community recognizes one another’s gifts and calls them forth in doing
together its work of worship.

A somewhat more practical book is *Liturgy, Justice and the Reign
of God: Integrating Vision and Practice* by J. Frank Henderson, Kath-
leen Quinn, and Stephen Larson (Paulist Press, 1989). This ecumeni-
cal team of Canadians has put together a book which is a collection of
thoughtful reflections and practical suggestions for reform. A fine
chapter treats the general “Principles of Liturgy and Social Justice,”
pointing out the various ways in which the two intersect. Further
chapters illustrate these principles in terms of the actual Sunday ser-
vice with its components of gathering, liturgy of the Word, Baptism,
Eucharist, and sending forth. Some reforms are easily accomplished,
often just a matter of “never having thought of it that way before.”
Others will take prolonged work and struggle. But always the em-
phasis is on what can be done and why it is important if we want to
make our worship truly reflect the dealings of God with humans and
our response to God.

Two recent books give Roman Catholic perspectives on the same is-
issues. *Liturgy and Social Justice: Celebrating Rites—Proclaiming
Rights* (Liturgical Press, 1989) consists of two sermons and three
papers from a conference of the same title in San Diego in 1988. Par-
ticularly moving is a talk, “Justice, Power, and Praise,” by the late
James L. Empereur, S.J., and Christopher G. Kiesling, O.P. (Liturgi-
cal Press) appeared. The death of Chris Kiesling in 1986 deprives the
Church on earth of a dedicated worker for justice who persevered
despite the threat of cancer that clouded his last years. Systematical-
ly, the two authors work their way through the seven sacraments, preaching and the lectionary in a discussion that cuts no corners but forthrightly addresses the issues. Although the context is Roman Catholic, certainly most Protestants will find their own concerns addressed in this extensive discussion (262 pages).

Several other recent books on worship escape any specific categorization, but that makes them no less significant. It may seem strange to include a book by a Jewish rabbi, although Lawrence A. Hoffman has exactly the same title as I do, Professor of Liturgy, in his case at Hebrew Union College, New York City. He has been a major interpreter of the Reform tradition in Jewish worship in his essays in Gates of Understanding and in a remarkable book, Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy (Indiana University Press, 1987). The latter, although the illustrative material is from Jewish history, is a highly provocative book for Christians concerned about liturgy. His most recent book, The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only (Pastoral Press, 1988), is a systematic study of what does happen in worship and why so often nothing happens. The second half of the book is devoted to correcting some of the deficiencies of our worship. As the title suggests, worship is seen as having many of the characteristics of an art form and involving great sensitivity to the medium itself. Much of the book is based on probing into the meaning of common acts and words. Like Craig Erickson's book on participation, this one goes to the heart of the matter and in simple but profound ways suggests means of deepening our worship life. Christians need his insights just as much as Jews do.

Spirituality has become almost as common a term among Protestants today as among Roman Catholics. Just as once-Protestant terms such as worship or ministry have been adopted and imbued with new meaning by Roman Catholics, so words such as liturgy, priesthood, and spirituality have been given Protestant definitions. Professor Don E. Saliers has done much to familiarize United Methodists with the meanings unlocked by the term spirituality (cf. his Worship and Spirituality, Westminster Press, 1984). The most recent volume of this type, which includes a chapter by Saliers, is Liturgy and Spirituality in Context: Perspectives on Prayer and Culture (Liturgical Press, 1990). A series of essays, it explores various aspects of the connections of liturgy and spirituality from such perspectives as sociology, formation of children, the liturgical year, and the work week. Although each of the essays is written by a different author, it is a collection with considerable coherence. Partly because they are grounded in value-free observations of American culture, the articles...
have an air of reality about them.

Graduates of Drew University Theological School will be familiar with the teaching of Thomas C. Oden, and many readers will know other volumes in his *Classical Pastoral Care* series. The latest volume, *Ministry through Word and Sacrament* (Crossroad, 1989), is a marvelous journey through the history of pastoral care with excerpts from the great pastors of souls who also happened to be theologians and reformers. Shoulder to shoulder march Tertullian and Luther, Chrysostom and Calvin. Oden has cast his nets widely and many unexpected sources turn up, such as the Irish (Anglican) Canons of 1634; but all are relevant to the topics which are systematically developed. A good preacher’s book this, too, for it takes one through a whole array of concerns that often appear in sermons. The selections range from the first to the seventeenth century, often from sources not readily accessible in a minister’s library.

In *The Liturgy of Liberation: The Confession and Forgiveness of Sins* (Abingdon, 1988), Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., calls us back to a basic component in worship all too easily taken for granted. He shows how confession is a renunciation of bondage and all it implies and how Christians, both individually and corporately, move to freedom through God’s act of forgiveness. He touches on all the difficult issues: the authority to forgive, the role of all Christians, private confession, etc. The concluding section deals with points for dialogue between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Like his earlier book, *Life as Worship: Prayer and Praise in Jesus’ Name* (Eerdmans, 1982), this one is solidly grounded in the corporate nature of the Christian community and its involvement in the everyday world.

I shall mention very briefly several other books that are recent but rather specialized in content. The first of these is *Time and Community: Studies in Liturgical History and Theology*, edited by J. Neil Alexander (Pastoral Press, 1990). This is a festschrift for Thomas J. Talley (mentioned above) and consists of a number of scholarly articles on historical aspects of worship. Of the greatest general interest is probably Paul Bradshaw’s discussion of the various forms that daily public prayer has taken in the past and could take again.

For those involved in church building or utterly baffled by the building in which they are supposed to serve God, *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship* (Abingdon Press, 1988) should be useful. It looks at the various spaces and furnishings necessary for each service of Christian worship and how they may best be designed. Susan J. White, one of the co-authors, also published in 1990 *Art, Architecture, and Liturgical Reform* (Litur-

OSL Publications (5246 Broadway, Cleveland, Ohio, 44127-1500) has put us all in their debt by republishing J. Ernest Rattenbury’s *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley*, long out of print. This classic is the greatest collection of eucharistic hymns in the English language and a common treasure of all English-speaking Christians.

The same publisher has also provided *The Lord Be with You* by Don E. Saliers and Charles D. Hackett (1990). This well-illustrated volume depicts and describes ceremonial for the general services of the Church.

The usefulness of *Workbook on Communion and Baptism* by Hoyt L. Hickman (Discipleship Resources, 1990) is certainly not limited to United Methodists. It succeeds in forcing one to wrestle with the principles by which we act in making well-informed practical decisions about the ministry of the sacraments. More specifically directed to United Methodists are his editorial work and chapters in *Companion to the Book of Services* (Abingdon, 1988).

What conclusions can we draw from this rapid survey of recent books about worship? The number of such books in the last few years is one of the best indicators of a shift in Protestantism to more reflection about the dynamics of worship. I hope this means that planning, preparing for, and conducting worship are treated with more care and seriousness than ever before. After all, worship is the one service that the Church can provide for people that no other group in our society can offer. Worship is the unique and most distinctive function of the Church. Unless we give it our fullest attention, we are failing to provide at its best something that people can find elsewhere.

This does not mean that simply reading books will automatically make us better presiders over worship. This is not a new form of gnosticism. But the appearance of many new books on worship suggests that American Protestantism now has available the scholarly and pastoral resources for reflection on worship that were notably lacking even thirty years ago. If so, this represents a new maturity in American Protestantism. Let us hope that these new printed resources will contribute greatly to the ministry of worship.
Preaching on Luke’s Gospel during the weighty season of Lent is a daring, risky venture. The opportunities to misconstrue these texts are manifold. Satan’s use of Scripture against Jesus in our first Gospel lection, Luke 4:1-3, holds a lesson for modern preachers. As Talbert explains, “The Devil in effect said that the promise of God in Scripture applied to anyone, at any time and place, regardless of circumstances, if that person would only claim them.” We may often observe the truth of Shakespeare’s wry comment: “There is no error so gross but that some sober brow will bless it with a proper text.”

Like Jesus, the preacher must discern the proper application of the promise of God in Scripture for a particular time and place. This is a process, requiring action on our part. But the Jesus we see in these texts, and indeed in all our Gospel readings this year, is not busy in the usual sense of the word. Nor is he exactly the Jesus of tradition and scholarship, for example, the Cosmic Christ of Matthew Fox, the Apocalyptic Christ of Jurgen Moltmann, the autocrat of Byzantine icons or the smiling miracle-worker of televangelists. This Jesus is increasingly passive, both in the sense of being acted upon (“handed over”) and in the more profound sense of suffering (his passion). This Lent we will endure the harrowing of Jesus and see how he embodies the psalmist’s instruction to “be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). Our five lections from Luke show us a remarkably still Jesus, who may teach us to be still.

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To work effectively with this text, we first need to fix the terrain in our minds. From Jericho, tourists today may lift their gaze westward and see what is traditionally known as the "Mount of Temptation." (In the sixteenth century, pious Christians carved a monastery into one of its cliffs to commemorate this event.) In Luke 3:21-22, Jesus has just emerged from the Jordan river and finds himself in the wilderness (or "desert") of Judea. But this wilderness is not a vast expanse of sand dotted with cactus or tumbleweed. Instead, it is a dauntingly rocky zone of precipices and caves, the haunt of wild beasts; people living in the countryside avoided it, considering it to be a home to demons and evil spirits. Jesus willingly exposes himself to this perilous environment. In addition to the loneliness of his solitary expedition, the wilderness will impose on him a gruelling physical test.

The Defense against Grace. In Lent, persons might test their own limits in solitude and prayer. Many of us might admit that we have a hard time enduring even forty minutes of devotional time. But a test such as this may be rightly feared. The high social value placed on activity can result in a physiological addiction to stress. We work frantically and we play frantically, creating an overcharged flow of adrenaline. If we dare to slow down and be quiet, our neurological system revolts, producing unbearable anxiety or else simply shutting down in exhaustion. But solitude and prayer may prove difficult for another reason. Thomas Merton once said, "Much of our coldness and dryness in prayer may well be a kind of unconscious defense against grace." The forty days of Lent are the time to focus upon the demolition of our defenses against God's grace.

The fasting associated with Jesus' ordeal bears little resemblance to the lightweight Lenten "disciplines" of today, such as eliminating one favorite food from our diet. However, if we choose to engage in a fast during this time, Luke 4 challenges us to rediscover its real purpose: to remind us of our own hunger and that of others, and to be humbled (read Isa. 58!). Perhaps in Lent we are called to the kind of change Andrew Canale imagines Jesus undergoing:

So he sat on the rocks under the hot sun and walked the barren desert listening to the silence. Slowly, painfully, his Nazareth life melted away; he shed that old skin like a snake of the desert. Then came that infinite time between what was lost and what is to be found.
The ruckus surrounding Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* demonstrates that we are more comfortable with Jesus' finally being "without sin" rather than with his being "tempted in every way" (Heb. 2:18). If we would take Jesus' struggle seriously, perhaps we could be set free to deal with our own (1 Cor. 10:1-10).

Satan the Tester of Souls. Our story's title, the temptation, has popular connotations. But the Greek word *peirazo* does not mean "to tempt" in the sense of what an extra brownie might do or the effects of a "hard sell" by a used car salesman. Jesus does not need to sell himself against luxury or overindulgence. Instead, Jesus is allowing himself to be tested in a lonely place, where ultimately he is not alone at all. *Peirazo* is used elsewhere in the Gospels for the "testing" questions put to Jesus by local teachers—questions meant to trip him up.

The biblical world assumes that there are demons led by a devil, the ultimate trickster. In the Old Testament this "Satan" is a member of God's heavenly court; his role is to be the accuser, tester. Historically, the Church has regarded the devil as very real and to be dealt with rigorously. The desert fathers believed themselves to be locked in mortal combat with the devil. The world of the Protestant Reformation was "with devils filled"; Martin Luther hurled his inkwell in the devil's direction in the castle at Wartburg. On the American frontier, camp meeting preachers routed the devil in their sermons. Consider the popularity of popular Christian novelist Frank Peretti. None of this is passe. A recent Gallup poll indicates that 80 percent of Americans believe in the existence of the devil—roughly twice the number of those who regularly attend church!

Scripture itself checks our tendency to dismiss the devil as primitive Israelite mythology. Likewise, a sermon on this text should wrestle with the dynamics of evil. Only the naive and sheltered see no evil in our world. But what about evil within the human psyche? Did Jesus have to struggle in himself on this issue? Luke can speak of "growth" in Jesus' life (2:52). People can have self-destructive urges that cause pain to others; we may experience this reality as a power tugging at us from outside ourselves. Dostoevsky brilliantly captures a familiar aspect of evil in Ivan's words to Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

*I think that if the Devil doesn't exist but man has created him, then he has created him in his own image and likeness.*

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Satan and the Modern View of Evil. But can we reduce the extensive aura of evil in the world to a human creation? Consider non-fiction books on crime or Scott Peck's book, *The People of the Lie.* Look beyond individuals to systems that perpetuate suffering and bigotry or social and political structures that dehumanize and wreak injustice. Systemic evil is not abstract or understood only by intellectuals. In Solentiname, a village on a remote archipelago on Lake Nicaragua, Ernesto Cardenal engaged the *campestinos* in dialogue on our text. Why didn't Jesus turn the stones into bread? he asked them.

Francisco: The devil wanted him to perform a senseless miracle that wouldn't do anybody any good.  
Olivia: Later he gave bread to a whole crowd, but that was different.  
Gustavo: Revolution doesn't mean just giving food and clothing and comforts to people; bread is important, but we can't stop there.  
Laureano: He's like a politician, that devil. Because that's what political campaigns are like. A man comes into a town and makes all kinds of promises so people will vote for him. And people do vote for him, and afterwards he doesn't give them shit.

Where did the devil get his riches? He stole them! Pedro noted the phrase, "Seized him and took him up," and observed how the devil seizes many people and lifts them into positions of power.

The preacher must grapple with the specter of evil. Luke knew about this "strong man, fully armed" (11:21). In this Gospel, the nature of the demonic is that it is personal and that it is attractive. In Luke 4, the testing of Jesus comes through a face-to-face dialogue, a conversation (compare Genesis 3). The power of the demonic is that it looks pleasing and even urges us toward what seems to be praiseworthy; Satan does quote from the Bible. Wendy Farley puts it well: "Sin does not require a self-conscious desire for evil as such. Deception is the mask evil wears to disguise its true nature and to make itself palatable to people who would be disturbed by concrete suffering."  

Jesus is able to discern what is contrary to the Kingdom of God in this world. In so doing, he can "defeat" the devil (Luke 10:18; compare Isa. 14:4-20), which is one of his primary objectives in this Gospel. Jesus makes us aware that Satan's tactic is to take what is good and subvert it to another end. C. S. Lewis's letter-writing devil, Screwtape, makes this clear in his advice to Wormwood:

...through this girl and her disgusting family the patient is now getting to know more Christians every day, and very intelligent Christians, too. For
Very well, then; we must corrupt it. No doubt you have often practised transforming yourself into an angel of light as a parade-ground exercise. Now is the time to do it in the face of the Enemy.

The Passive Resistance of Jesus. What Jesus does not do is attempt to explain logically the existence of evil. Jesus does not try to justify evil; rather, he resists it. Critics have highlighted the implicit comparison between the Fall of Adam and the triumph of Jesus in this text. The triumph of Jesus, his resistance of Satan’s assault, is accomplished by a marked inactivity. In Alyosha’s tale of the Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamozov, the dread bureaucrat takes Jesus prisoner and rails against him in private, justifying his power and position against the passivity of Jesus. If Jesus really loved humanity, he says, he would gladly have satisfied the hunger and poverty of his own people; he would have reordered the world with justice and peace; he would have glorified himself to give the evil and ignorant final proof of the power of divinity.

But Jesus does none of these things. In fact, in his encounter with Satan, he does almost nothing except to quote three Bible verses. Fundamentally, in quoting these passages Jesus observes the summons to "be still and know that I am God." Against the reality of God and God’s Kingdom the devil can unleash his energy, but he will stumble and self-destruct. It is that truth, articulated in the face of Satan, that frees Jesus from the assault of Satan. In The Brothers Karamozov, Jesus answers the Grand Inquisitor’s challenge of his authority with a kiss; stunned but unrepentant, the Inquisitor releases Jesus and bids him, "Go, and come no more...come not at all, never, never!"

Stories of Christians who were "still" come to mind: Polycarp, under the torch of martyrdom; Thomas More, silent when pressured to recant before Henry VIII; Clarence Jordan, diligently hoeing the ground the morning after Koinonia Farms had been burned out by the KKK; and Martin Luther King, Jr., standing with Coretta and ten-week-old Yoki in front of their firebombed home, calming a crowd that craved vengeance, reminding them to love their enemies, to meet hatred with love. Wendy Farley sums this up:

The profound integrity of Gandhi’s or Martin Luther King’s nonviolent struggles condemned their opponents by the contrast between them. These movements...simultaneously empowered victims to resist their suffering...
and revealed to oppressors their guilt, struggling against the evil from both directions.12

For Jesus is not alone with the tester. Luke adds that Jesus strode into the wilderness "full of the Holy Spirit"—the fortification of God's very presence. Having met the tester, Jesus emerges from the test "armed with the power of the Spirit" (4:14, translated by Fitzmyer).13 He departs, not drained but bolstered by the test. And bolstering he will need: while Satan slinks off "for a little while, his henchmen remain in the field (Luke 4:31f.), lurking around every corner. Jesus' ministry is hardly devil-free; but now he has authority over the demonic. The devil plots his vicious reprise in the person of Judas in the Last Supper (where peirazo describes the climactic "test" for Jesus). This is the ultimate test. Then, too, Jesus will be "still" and passive, again letting his foe fling himself into oblivion.


As we proceed along our Lenten journey, we find Jesus threatened with death from political authorities. But Jesus shows no anxiety for his own safety; rather, his heart is pained because the people he loves have set themselves at odds with the Kingdom of God. Jesus' unrelenting compassion even in the face of personal danger is striking.

The Cast of Characters. In first-century Palestine, Pharisees were not cut from a single fabric, although the New Testament writers tend to oversimplify and caricature them. But what shall we make of these Pharisees? It is impossible to determine the motivation behind their warning to Jesus that Herod "wants to kill you." Is this evidence of their goodness? Or are they lying to Jesus in hopes that he will leave their territory? The Herod to which they refer, and whom Jesus calls "that fox," is not Herod the Great, menace to the holy family and the holy innocents of Bethlehem. It is his son, Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, notorious for his marriage to Herodias, his niece and the wife of his half-brother. John the Baptist lambasted Herod Antipas for his marriage, only to wind up in fetters; later, he was executed (Luke 3:19-20; 9:7-9). With regard to Christ and his followers, however, all Herods are alike. All hysterically suppress the faith and take pleasure in building their own fame and fortune by "grinding the poor" of Israel.
**The Glory and Doom of Zion.** Luke gives Jesus' poignant lament over Jerusalem an unusual context. In Matthew, Jesus stands on a hillside vantage point and looks at the city (Matt. 23:37-39) sometime during the last week of his life. But for Luke, Jesus is not in Jerusalem, at least not yet. Still in Galilee, still en route to Jerusalem, he "often" wishes to nurture, to love the city, so loved since boyhood, held squarely in his mind's eye, the matrix of Jewish hopes.

As a boy, Jesus would have gone with his parents and dozens of fellow travellers to the holy city for the great festival of Passover (see Luke 2:41-52). Massive caravans of pilgrims would form, most on foot, but some riding donkeys. Their numbers would provide companionship and a measure of safety during the arduous trip, exposed as they were to harsh weather and roadside thieves. As they travelled, they would have sung lyrics from the Psalms (such as, "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord," or "Glorious things are spoken of you, Zion, city of our God," or "How lovely is thy dwelling place...my soul longs for the courts of the Lord"). And when the devout Jews finally reached the crest of one of Jerusalem's surrounding hills, Mount Scopus or the Mount of Olives, and finally caught their first glimpse of the great city of David and the gleaming stones of the temple mount, these pilgrims might well have fallen to their knees and wept with joy.

How heart wrenching, then, for Jesus to return to Jerusalem as an adult for the Passover. How he must have grieved over the tainted holiness of the city, perceiving that he would lose his own life by her hand! For the greatness of Zion's calling was matched only by her failings. In Jesus' day, there was already a strident prophetic tradition that perceived Jerusalem as "killing the prophets." Perhaps Luke is thinking of the prophet Uriah, murdered by King Jehoiakim (Jer. 26:20ff.); or the thwarted attempt on Jeremiah's life (Jer. 38:4f.); the death of Zechariah (2 Chron. 24:20f.) or even the fate of Isaiah, who according to legend was sawed in half by King Manasseh (see the Martyrdom of Isaiah 5). Neh. 9:26-31 also makes for sober reading in this regard. Luke shares this perspective, describing how early Christians such as Stephen would be martyred by Jerusalem (Acts 7; Luke 11:49 anachronistically adds "and apostles"); John the Baptist, too, would be numbered among the slain prophets.

Jerusalem raised impressive monuments to the prophets who were slain there. Just across from the southeast corner of the temple mount is the tomb complex of the Bene Hezir, a high priestly family; included is the co-called Tomb of Zechariah, pyramid-roofed with
Doric columns cut in living rock, originating 150 years before Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Further along the Mount of Olives, tourists will discover a catacomb with kokhim shafts, dated to the first century BCE, purportedly the tomb of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The building and endowment of these tombs was a much-admired, pietistic effort—but ironically the wrongdoing condemned by God through these prophets continued (see Luke 11:47-51). As Eduard Schweizer said of Jerusalem's walls: "They will be visited only by tourists with an interest in art history, whose guides repeated the terrifying echo, ‘this is the temple of the Lord’" (Jer. 7:4).1

A Lament over the Distraction of Jerusalem. Perhaps Luke himself had gazed from an overlook upon the city, smouldering and in ruins (cf. Gen. 19:27-28) and wept. Luke knows of the city's destruction in 70 C.E. by the Romans, and this fact informs our passage as well. First, despite the implicit judgment on Jerusalem, Jesus' tone in this passage is not one of condemnation but of lamentation. A stone's toss away from the traditional tombs of the prophets is the tear-shaped Church called Dominus Flevit ("the Lord wept"), built on the site where this occurred as designated by medieval pilgrims. During Holy Week, Jesus is said explicitly to have "wept" over the city (Luke 19:41-44). Based on modes of Jewish prayer at the time, Jesus' words would have been uttered aloud as a wailing lamentation. Jesus' lamentation in Luke 13:33-35 would have had this character as well.

That Jesus actually wept is crucial for persons to envision and comprehend. Jesus did not rain fire and brimstone on the city; he did not shake his head and walk away. He simply wept. In today's society, where God is presumed to be nonexistent, remote or vindictive, it is worth looking at Jesus' love for Jerusalem, and his anguish at its downfall. It is worth noting, too, that Jesus wept openly. We who value strength, the stiff upper lip, stoicism, may mask our basic inability to deal with tragedy in life. If we could face reality with one mind with Christ, then we might well lament as he did. "Tears release us from the prison of power and control into the vast love and infinite possibility of God."15 Releasing our tears for our own predicament may allow us to notice and weep with those of other races and cultures. Our primal response to the nonsense and tragedy of our world should be simply to grieve, to have one long cry, sharing God's pathos, taking the first rending step toward healing.

Grieving for Sin in Lent. Luke's reshuffling of Jesus' lament into a new context invites us to do the same. What is the "Jerusalem" over
which Jesus might weep today? Near many towns and cities, there is some vantage point that permits a view of the community. The preacher may imaginatively take the congregation to this spot to look at itself from a new perspective. Or we may broaden our concerns to the world community. Lent surely is a time for repentance. We must look at individual sin and lack of spiritual growth, but we should also use this time to consider collective guilt, corporate and systemic sin. We are not skilled at thinking theologically about public, social, political issues. We have at the same time forgotten how to grieve, to lament, to be outraged at what goes on in God's world. Perhaps we have achieved enough distance from the Gulf War to suggest that God was surely grieved over what so many gloried in uncritically. Our parallel text, Luke 19:41, indict us: "Would that today you knew the things that made for peace. But they are hidden from your eyes." The preacher must stand apart, take note of the flag-waving and celebration and ask, "Where are the tears, the grief, the sorrow of finding ourselves in a violent world?"

Lent is the time to name the outrage. Prophets are still being killed; we still reject the bearers of hope. Stories of heroism and martyrdom from Central America, or South Africa, or even locally, may help us show that "killing the prophets" still goes on. Early in 1980 Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador said:

I have been learning a beautiful harsh truth, that the Christian faith does not separate us from the world but immerses us in it; that the Church, therefore, is not a fortress set apart from the city, but a follower of the Jesus who loved, worked, struggled, and died in the midst of the city.15

On March 24, that same year, Romero was assassinated while celebrating Mass at the Convent of the Good Shepherd. On Dec. 2 of that same year, Jean Donovan and three other Catholic missionaries were ruthlessly murdered by government operatives in El Salvador. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed April 8, 1945, in the Flossenburg prison camp. When will the blood of the prophets cease to flow?

Martyrdom is crucial for our text. Jesus has called Herod a predator of his people ("that fox"). But he, like a mother hen, would gather this brood beneath his wings (compare Deut. 32:11; Ps. 17:8; 36:8; 91:4). Jerusalem, stalked by a hungry fox, has no chance on its own. But mother hens have been known to sacrifice their own lives to distract a fox from their brood, giving them time to escape. Time for escape is the subject of the lection for Lent.

We rewind a few verses from last Sunday to a most difficult text. Death still looms—but now for Jesus’ hearers. “At that very time” weds this pericope to the preceding apocalyptic invective. That connection persists to the following pericope, where Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath. The directness of Jesus is highlighted in his response to reports of killings and accidental death in Jerusalem.

The Problem of Innocent Suffering. Pontius Pilate, the scourge of Palestine, reportedly has ordered the execution of a group of Galileans, which takes place as they are offering their sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. (The Jewish historian, Josephus, who recorded most of Pilate’s deeds, does not mention this.) On hearing this news, Jesus reminds his listeners of the eighteen who died when a tall stone structure hovering over the pool of Siloam at Jerusalem’s southeast corner crumbled.

Pilate’s bloodletting clearly sounds a note of injustice in the political realm, while the collapse of the wall seems to be tragic. Kenneth Bailey identifies the wall as an aqueduct Pilate was building with pilfered temple treasury funds; there may be an implied accusation of Pilate in this story. But as incidents of sudden death, these reports bring injustice and tragedy together for a single response. Jesus, himself a Galilean brother, might have chosen to console his friends with a judgment on the wicked foreigners, the Romans. Instead he instructs the fuming disciples to repent. There is suffering all around. Self-righteous bluster can only shield one from the ongoing responsibility simply to repent.

In our congregations, there are those who have suffered for the sake of a just cause; they still need to hear the clarion call to repent. Others have been the object of tragic events and have endured meaningless suffering. They, too, need the “turning” of repentance. Repentance, as Bonhoeffer wrote, is “not in the first place thinking about one’s own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event.”

Refuting the Doctrine of Retribution. Jesus refrains from perpetuating the trite dogma of retribution (called “theological sadism” by Dorothee Soelle). He does not say “They got what they deserved.” Instead he raises a priceless rhetorical question: “Are they worse sinners?” There persists today that abysmal habit of distinguishing the magnitude of various sins. Countless examples present
themselves; a bold preacher might point out the common attitude that imputes innocence to victims of heart disease but guilt to victims of AIDS. Or he or she might point out the systemic sins that allow the pollution of our air and our water supply, creating carcinogens. Jesus' reasoning was revolutionary for those who regarded sin as the direct cause of disease and death. Let us hear once more from Farley:

One of the most terrible beliefs of Christianity is that God punishes us with suffering. It is a belief inflicted on grief-stricken or pain-ridden individuals to justify their suffering and on groups to justify their continued oppression. The association of suffering with punishment denies even the right to resist suffering. This sadistic theology conspires with pain to lock God away from the sufferer. This is the theology of Job's comforters...

Preachers must use all the sensitivity at their disposal to help their congregations face death, because it is so universally denied. Jesus spoke quite frankly of the imminence of death (Luke 12:16f.). The burnt, blackened palms of Ash Wednesday are an ominous reminder of our mortality. Lenten preaching, too, must be ashen, staring boldly into the blinding flash of our mortality, our chronic vulnerability.

The Parable of the Fig Tree. Luke 13:6-9 transforms the searing news of death into a ray of hope. To those who tremble before the angel of death, Jesus, in his typical earthy manner, speaks of a fig tree. The tree has been granted three years for growing; for another three years its fruit could not be harvested (Lev. 19:23). Even after this time of preparation, the fig tree has not produced fruit for three years (according to Bailey), putting it in the ninth year. Chopping it down seems in order to the owner. But the patient vinedresser pleads for time; he will dig around it and put on manure. Then, he says, the decision to cut it down can be made.

This underachieving fig tree has proven fruitful for allegorists: according to Ambrose, the vineyard represented the Jews, the fig tree the synagogue, Peter (apostle to the Jews) the vinedresser, hoping for conversion. The manure he considers to be a most appropriate metaphor for the confession of sins. Augustine saw the owner's three visits to the tree as humanity prior to the law, subject to the law, and finally under God's grace (see Rom. 5). The gardener represents the saints praying for lost souls.

Clearly the vinedresser's efforts portray God graciously extending time for repentance, a vital Lukan theme (5:32; cf. 2 Pet. 3:8f.).
Without repentance, men and women will perish more profoundly than if they were murdered or lost in a tragic accident. In light of Jesus' instruction to repent, the parable of the fig tree presses the urgency of our response to this opportunity. The fig's tenth year is decisive indeed. So intent is Luke on showing God's mercy to this poor fig that he omits entirely the Markan account of Jesus' withering of a fig tree that hasn't had any time at all! Ps. 103 (today's lesson) extols this mercy with unmatched eloquence. The ashes, a sign of mortality, are a token of penitence and remorse. Note that the story is open-ended. We never learn whether the tree bears fruit. Preach the text—and then endure the time of waiting.

Lent 4: Luke 15:11-32
The Parable of the Undignified Father

The parable of the Prodigal Son is no easy subject for the preacher. There is no improving on the story itself. Furthermore, the young man's journey to the pig sty and back again is so familiar that we may find ourselves in the predicament described in that old joke: a preacher dreamed he was preaching, and when he woke up, he was. But venture into this story we must.

The Cultural Background of the Story. Certain legal customs are assumed in this remarkable story. Having property to divide between his sons, this father is a man of some means. Critical opinion is divided regarding the appropriateness of the younger son's request. Some commentators contend that no son would dare ask for his share in advance of his father's death. Others, however, point to the custom among Palestinian Jews for younger sons, who inherit far less than the eldest, to request their share in order to seek their fortune in the burgeoning mercantile economy of the diaspora. The younger son may legally be entitled to his share, regardless of the circumstances under which he parts from his family. How will he fare in a foreign land? What interest will he take in the welfare of his family after he has gone?

Although the son might make the request, the father would have had good reason to resist fulfilling it. The son's possession of the property was one thing; that he might nickel and dime it away was another. The property being claimed would be the father's support in his old age; in addition, a lump sum of money had no restrictions placed upon it, and with his wealth, the father risked his honor.
Streetwise fathers were therefore reluctant to dispose of their holdings in so risky a manner. Sirach 33:19-23 warns fathers against giving control of their property to others, "...in case you change your mind and must ask for it. For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hand of your children." Only a foolish father would not see that transferred wealth offered a young man a tremendous temptation. But only a reprehensible son would spend it all, with nothing to show for it, leaving nothing to support the dependent members of the extended family.

The worst case occurs: the lad converts all the property into cash and wastes that; he then disgraces himself by wallowing with pigs. We can almost sympathize with the poor boy when famine strikes; a wise planner, like Joseph of old, might have been prepared for calamity. And what if famine struck back home? The son has all but said to his father, "You do not matter to me; you are dead as far as I am concerned." To him, the father is merely someone to be used. The fifth commandment lay shattered at his feet.

The Role of the Prodigal’s Repentance. Traditionally, this story has been read allegorically, as emblematic of inner change: the younger son is the sinner finally come to repentance; the father is the merciful God; the older son is originally the self-righteous Pharisee, and later the smug, self-righteous Christian. The church fathers allegorized every detail. The citizen whom the prodigal serves is the devil, the robe is the innocence won in baptism (Tertullian). The laborers in the father’s fields are the Jews; the pods the lad ate are vices; the “falling on the neck” is the easy yoke of Matthew 11; the feast is the Eucharist, and the shoes the preparation to preach the gospel (Jerome). Medieval morality plays portrayed the story of the prodigal son, hoping to move spectators to remorse. In his Confessions, Augustine took this parable as the mirror of his own life, alluding to it in his famous prayer: "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." James Weldon Johnson captured this dynamic eloquently:

Jesus didn’t give this man a name,
But his name is God Almighty.
And Jesus didn’t call these sons by name,
But ev’ry young man, ev’rywhere,
Is one of these two sons

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On the way, it's a "smooth and easy road," "nothing like the rough furrows behind my father's plow." But "smooth and easy is the road that leads to hell and destruction,"

down grade all the way.
The farther you travel, the faster you go.
Just slip and slide, slip and slide, till
ill you bang up against hell's iron gate.\textsuperscript{21}

We think of John Newton, slavetrader and scoundrel, who penned these stanzas in 1779: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." We think of Francis Thompson, squandering his life in dark London alleys before being redeemed by a Christian family, leading him to write of the "Hound of Heaven": "I fled him down the nights and down the days/I fled him through the arches of the years."

So much hinges on our interpretation of the words in verse 17, "he came to himself." This is not a full-fledged repentance. In the pigsty, the son is thinking of only one person: himself. If anything, he plans to use his father again in the most cynical fashion. James Breech argues that this manipulator will say whatever the father might wish to hear (as do Goneril and Regan when King Lear proposes to divide his property).\textsuperscript{22} If the son changes at all—and the text nowhere says in plain terms that he does change—it must be after the father has fallen on the boy's neck and ordered the robe, ring, sandals, and fatted calf. We know nothing of sin on our own; it is only in the bright light of the love of God that we see that shadowy darkness of our own lives. C. S. Lewis, in an eloquent Evensong sermon ("The Weight of Glory") at Oxford on June 8, 1941, said,

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us... We are far too easily pleased.\textsuperscript{23}

St. Jerome understood the paradox of such seeking: "The son couldn't be satisfied, because pleasure always creates its own hunger." We misdirect our energies on lesser goals. Faith is when we learn that our destiny is not the far country, however enticing. We begin with God, with glory, splendor; but we use anyone, God included, to pursue that which cannot profit. Facing this truth, we may nevertheless by grace affirm that we are children of God. Our task is simply to be ourselves. Mother Teresa was once asked, "Why are you so holy?" She said, "You speak as if holiness is strange or abnormal. Holiness is normal. God made us for holiness. To be anything else is abnormal." God is our home. T. S. Eliot's line may be used to advantage:
The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

The Gifts of the Undignified Father. As most commentators are swift to remind us, the real protagonist in this story is the father. Given the legal scenario, his behavior is truly startling. Rebellious sons could be put to death (Deut. 21:18ff.); we expect at least a “Where’ve you been?” or an “I told you so.” Jesus knew that such fathers are all too familiar, a dime a dozen, clouding our lives and our vision of what God is about. Bernard Brandon Scott adduces a clever rabbinic parallel:

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of a hundred days; his friends said to him, “Return to your father”; he said, “I cannot.” Then his father sent to say, “Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way.” So God says, “Return to me, and I will return to you.”

In his famous ballet based on this text, George Balanchine portrayed the son’s seduction beautifully in the form of a red-clad Oriental girl, her body snaking about the promiscuous son, coiled, hissing to kill. Yet Balanchine mistook the homecoming. The son is choreographed as grovelling (as in Pushkin’s story, “The Station-master”) toward an austere father who stands waiting, arms folded. But in the parable itself, the father preempts any grovelling the son might be planning. The father actually runs! In the biblical world, this is something a man of dignity did not do. Onlookers would think him a fool.

But this father has no need or desire to save face. He lets himself be taken advantage of. The son has lost dignity in the pigsty; but the father’s indignity exceeds the son’s. This father does not require his son to prove himself; no discipline is meted out, as Craddock writes:

Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of the penitent returnee, but where does it say that such provisions include a banquet with music and dancing? Yes, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not fatted calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a new ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing.

The best robe would be the father’s own. The ring, a signet, confers power on this wastrel. The boy not only receives the necessities of survival but is honored, glorified. It is the father’s surprising joy that dominates the story and captures our imaginations. The son is for-
given before he can even repent, and his scheme to save his own life by becoming a slave is thwarted by his father's action.

The younger son can no longer live as the one who indulges himself; instead, the man [father] becomes the one who indulges him. By indulging his son, the man has incorporated him into his own programme of having a son.24

The parable "redefines the conditions under which "family" can happen."25 Family is not property; family is not earning, deserving. Family is when this giddy one runs out to meet us.

The Fate of the Older Son. Verses 11-32 complete the unity from which we may not subtract without damaging the story. During the party, the son is characteristically "in the field," working, productive, the ultimate do-gooder. "He lives--outwardly--with his father, but not inwardly," as Schweizer notes.30 Considering the younger son's request, the older son's claim is telling: "I have served (= been a slave) all these years." Scott pinpoints his ironic misfortune: "The elder fails to recognize that the father is always on his side, and he need not earn his father's approval. He has made himself a slave for something that was already his."31

Why is the older brother so angry? Self-righteous indignation? Failure to be invited to the party? Yet one more case of parental favoritism toward the younger, and more roguish, son? Exasperation over the father's shameful humiliation? The answer may be more mundane. The younger son is hungry not for spiritual nourishment, but for bread, potatoes, beans. Whose food would he eat now that he has been welcomed home? And whose sandals would he wear? All these good things by implication now belonged to the older brother. And the father simply takes some back to redeem this lost brother.

Here is the clue to the whole story: for the lost son to be redeemed, the older son has to part with some of his own goods. The father had divided his property between them. Elsewhere in Luke, God takes sides with the poor—literally the poverty-stricken. The irony of it all is that the elder brother's own joy hinges on his willingness to share what is rightfully his. Admittedly, he has worked hard and earned his possessions. But the redemption of the lost brother, as well as his own redemption, depends on his willing sacrifice. There is fodder here for a creative preaching angle: persons in your congregation need to be reminded that they need to part with some of their goods for the sake of the lost and that they need to part with some of their goods for their own joy and fulfillment.
The Role of Christ in the Prodigal Son. Where is Christ and his redemptive work in this story? For Jerome, "the going out" of the Father is the incarnation, a thought echoed by Helmut Gollwitzer, who suggests that "Jesus is hidden in the kiss which the father gives his son." Ambrose saw Christ in the fatted calf (an identification resurrected recently by Robert Farrar Capon, who sees the calf’s sole purpose in life being "to drop dead at a moment's notice in order that people can have a party." Karl Barth construed the younger son christologically: "Without ceasing to be true God...God went into the far country by becoming man." Having ventured into this far country of human corruption and perdition, taking the place of all lost sons, taking on the sin and shame, as if having committed them himself, he returned home, so that humanity too might return home.

Of greatest significance is the fact that it is Jesus—or rather, God's son, the clearest image we have of the life of God here on earth—who tells this story. It is his story, and in it no one is brought to his knees in shame or remorse, there is no father to demand penitence, no triumphal older brother. And it is most concretely a story, for life in the kingdom is not to be captured in propositions, in theses, in metaphysical speculations. Rather, life in the kingdom is only revealed elusively, indirectly, in story form—just as real life is lived. The story has no "moral," no real conclusion. The futures of the sons and the father are open-ended. Instead Jesus tells a story to show the joy of the kingdom, and in capturing the imaginations of his listeners offers an irresistible invitation to find it.

The Passion Narrative

Luke's Passion narrative bristles with interesting details. His Last Supper account is much longer than Mark's or Matthew's, carrying as it does Luke's fondness for evening meal discussion (chapters 13-14). It is Luke's version of the last meal that includes the debate over who is the greatest (beautifully captured in the movie In Remembrance, by Evangelical Films), which Jesus silences with a stiff "No more of this" (22:49-51). Luke adds a vivid detail to Peter's denial of Jesus: just after the cock crowed, "the Lord turned and looked at Peter" (22:61). Herod Antipas puts in a cameo appearance (linking the sham trial to the known murderous intent of "that fox" in 13:31). And only Luke tells us that Simon of Cyrene carried the cross "behind Jesus," a rather obvious summons to discipleship (9:23; 14:27).
In many churches, the pageantry, special music, dramatizations, and other liturgical celebrations of Palm Sunday can squeeze out the time allotted to the sermon. Certain significant details of Luke's Passion account, however, are worth looking at more closely for the purposes of a sermon.

The Devil's Role in Luke's Passion Narrative. Luke places the devil's dark role in broad daylight. It is the devil, manipulative and deceitful, who entices Judas (compare John 13:21); indeed, he would "sift" all the disciples (22:31). It is not merely that one disciple has gone astray. Superhuman forces of evil are taking the field against the Lord's anointed one. Like Hitler's "Operation Greif" through the Ardennes Forest in December, 1944, when the Allies had hemmed in the forces of the Third Reich, the devil's assault is frightful, desperate, and has an air of finality. If Lent is a time of testing (peirasmos, used in Luke 4:13; 8:13; 11:4; and 22:28), then Holy Week is really about mortal combat with evil.

Jesus at Gethsemane in Luke. More than the other evangelists, Luke has a didactic intent. Jesus is serving as a model for Christians who will be harrassed and persecuted, as Acts will begin to show. Readers will be familiar with Heinrich Hoffmann's painting "Christ in Gethsemane," copies of which have adorned countless Sunday school classrooms (the original hangs in Riverside Church, New York). Hoffman's sentimental painting shows Jesus as pious and composed; he may as well be saying his bedtime prayers.

The Jesus of Luke's Passion account appears to be contained, but he is actually profoundly "still," not meek and mild. The text includes only one hint of Jesus' deep inner turmoil. As he prays (vv. 43-44), Jesus sweats drops (not "of blood," but "like blood")—and even these verses are missing in many important manuscripts, including the Bodmer papyrus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, Origen and Ambrose. Based on other authorities, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Jerome, and other ancient versions, the majority of scholars defend their authenticity. Luke has an angel minister to Jesus. But the impression of Jesus given by this passage is of a brave man bearing utter agony, who will not collapse in his pain (as he does in Mark 14:35; Matt. 26:39; and which finds its way into film so effectively in The Last Temptation of Christ). Jesus' courageous response to his peirasmos is to be emulated by Christians who are put to the test (Acts 26:19, where peirasmos—[test] occurs once more). One who has a dis-
ciplined life of prayer need not writhe and fall on the ground before that final hour (of trial)."

Gethsemane is the first moment of the matchless suffering borne by Jesus. Lest our well-polished, empty crosses allow us to forget this, we may do well to meditate upon greater works of art, such as Matthias von Grunewald's famed Isenheim Altarpiece (in which a gruesome Jesus bears a thousand points of pain) or even the stunning 1930 bronze by Floriano Bodini.

**Jesus and the Compassion of Women.** In 23:27, Luke alone notes that many women followed Jesus as he staggered along the via dolorosa, weeping for him. We have already encountered the motif of weeping (see the lection for Lent 2, Luke 13:31-35). As the women mourn, Jesus recalls once more the ominous fate of the city of Jerusalem. According to the Catholic tradition of the Stations of the Cross, at the sixth station one of these women, moved with compassion for Jesus, breaks through the cordon and wipes his face with her veil. Legend has it that this veil, purportedly housed in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, has forever borne the imprint of Jesus' face. The name traditionally given to her, Veronica, means "true image." A small gesture, this wiping of his face. But she did what she could. Karol Wojtyla, before his elevation as Pope John Paul II, wrote that "the Savior leaves his imprint on every single act of charity, as on Veronica's handkerchief."37

While it is admittedly a tangent to the text, the preacher may explore gestures of love that bear the image of Jesus. The ministry of Mother Teresa, celebrated as extraordinary, consists merely of small, ordinary gestures, such as wiping faces. A tale is told of an atheist being moved to faith simply by observing one of Teresa’s sisters bathing a man pulled out of the gutter. He claimed in that moment to have seen Jesus. A probing Lenten question: do our small, daily actions, as individuals and as a Church, show traces of the face of Jesus? Or do we merely line the streets, never comprehending the drama that is played out?

**The Last Words of Jesus.** On the cross, Jesus is once more focused and calm in comparison to his behavior in Mark and Matthew. Throughout Luke’s Passion narrative, Jesus is in silent command of the situation. Jesus’ last words are not screams of dereliction. He pleads forgiveness for his executioners (v. 34; a vignette missing from a few ancient manuscripts, but probably to be retained). No more awesome word is conceivable (compare Acts 7:60; Isa. 53:12)! Among

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the eloquent comments on this forgiveness, we may choose Douglas Ottati’s:

*The innocent one who suffers at the hands of the power of sin in our history is not driven to ask that his suffering be avenged; neither does he withdraw into stoical detachment. Instead, by asking that his executioners be forgiven and that the malefactor receive new life, he turns the tragedy of his own crucifixion into the lasting occasion for repentance that hangs over all other occasions of innocent suffering.*

The irony of the death scene is rich: the mocking ascription of Jesus as innocent describes Jesus accurately. We began Lent seeing Jesus refuse to exploit his power, and we finish Lent on the same note. Jesus extends the promise of paradise to the criminal, a stunning detail unique to Luke. And just before breathing his last, Jesus quotes not the anxious lament of Psalm 22 ("Why have you forsaken me?") but the expression of trust in Psalm 31 ("Into thy hands I commit my spirit").

The Acts of the Apostles will continue to demonstrate that, like Jesus himself, Luke’s community would be severely tested. Called to suffering, even martyrdom, for the sake of the gospel, these Christians would join the prophets of old, bearing witness in the face of death.

Notes


7. Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 44. This is a brilliant, quotable analysis, especially helpful on Lenten themes.


11. Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamozov, 313.
18. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 361. Compare Luther's warning against "gallows penitence": "A contrite heart is rare indeed and an eminent gift of grace. It is not attained by contemplating sin and hell, but only by receiving the inpouring of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, Judas' contrition would have been the best, for he thought of his sin with great sorrow. And a forced and imagined contrition is very popular, as experience shows, for many confessions are made in Lent and yet there is little improvement in men's lives" LW 32, 35-38.
19. Soelle's in-depth analysis of this subject, Suffering, tr. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), is of great value.
25. Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 117.
31. Scott, Hear Then the Parable, 121.
34. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV.2, 20-26.
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