The Preacher as Philosopher
Ronald J. Allen

Countdown to the Millennium
Paula D. Nesbitt

Challenges to Education in a New Century
Paul Kennedy
Editorial Board

Ted A. Campbell
Wesley Theological Seminary

Jimmy Carr
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry

Rebecca Chopp
Candler School of Theology
Emory University

Patricia Farris
District Superintendent
San Diego United Methodist Church

Grant Hagiya
Centenary United Methodist Church
Los Angeles, CA

John E. Harnish
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church

Roger W. Ireson, Chair
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church

Jack A. Keller, Jr.
The United Methodist Publishing House

Thomas W. Ogletree
The Divinity School
Yale University

Harriett Jane Olson
The United Methodist Publishing House

Russell E. Richey
Duke Divinity School

Judith E. Smith
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki
Claremont School of Theology

Linda Thomas
Iliff School of Theology

Traci West
The Theological School
Drew University

Sharon J. Hels, Editor
Sylvia Marlow, Production Manager
Tracey Evans, Production Coordinator
Quarterly Review

A Journal of Theological Resources for Ministry

Volume 17, Number 2

A Publication of The United Methodist Publishing House
and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry
Contents

Introduction
Sharon J. Hels .......................................................... 85

Articles

The Preacher as Philosopher
Ronald J. Allen ........................................................ 87

Countdown to the Millennium: End-of-the-Century Trends
Paula D. Nesbitt ....................................................... 111

The Challenges to Education in a New Century
Paul Kennedy .......................................................... 129

Mainline Churches in Decline:
   Turnaround Strategies for United Methodists
Jeffery N. Decker and Donald W. Griesinger ..................... 141

What I’m Learning about the Ministry from Thomas Merton
Ken Carter ............................................................... 159

QR Lectionary Study

The Mysterious and Moralizing James: Preaching on The Letter of James
Robert Martin Walker .............................................. 169
Introduction

The *New York Times Magazine* headline was good-natured, even cheerful: "Experts Agree: We're Finished." The article featured a selection of books about the shape of things to come in the next century.

Unfortunately, all the news seems to be bad: savage conventional wars begun by a) Islamic nations, b) China, c) North Korea; nuclear war begun by Israel; the rise of the Antichrist, who is assassinated but then is reborn; total stock market collapse just when baby boomers retire; a "killer virus" (like Ebola, I guess) spreads through North America; Armageddon takes place, with Jesus arriving in person to defeat the forces of evil.

All this drama! Perhaps it has something to do with the magic number 2000, known in Western Christian circles as the millennium. The cynics among us would say that this is just a calendar event that will shortly turn into a media event. The historians among us might remind us compare it to the pandemonium throughout Western Europe on the eve of the second millennium, when portents and signs augured divine fury. Those with a rational mindset might want to dismiss it altogether. For us, the contours of the future may already be made out in the realities of the present. The third millennium may be celebrated with fireworks and fortune-telling—what T. S. Eliot called "[the] usual pastimes and drugs, and features of the press"—but the fact is, January 1, 2000 will probably look a lot like December 31, 1999. Staying truly connected to the here and now is hard enough.

But the beginning of a new millennium does raise the question of how we might think of the future together, as a faithful community. I like Paula Nesbit's approach for that reason: she takes it as axiomatic that whatever affects one religious group affects the rest. Millennial thinkers have added flavor to the whole of Christianity, and the effects of their views are likely to increase in the next few years. It makes sense to know what they think and to see it related to other key trends in religion these days.

For others the future does mean change. Paul Kennedy's article sounds a clarion call to recognize the global forces that will inevitably
shape the future. We know that unrestrained population growth brings with it much of the world’s misery, which often falls disproportionately on women and children. We also know that there is new technology every second, fueled by constant demand for new and better products. But Kennedy asks us to consider a combination of the two trends into one awesome global dilemma: how to assimilate huge numbers of new workers from poor countries into the workforce (so as to prevent social chaos) without simultaneously knocking the bottom out of the labor force in the richer countries and destroying their economies. The future will indeed demand new solutions from us. But there can be no solutions without training our current students to see things differently, to widen their circle of concern to embrace the entire world.

Next we have an essay by Jeffrey Decker and Donald Griesinger that puts into perspective United Methodism’s decline in numbers. Basing their work on sound statistical analysis—which should inspire confidence in their observations—Decker and Griesinger isolate factors that, if taken seriously and acted upon, might offer hope and encouragement to those who want the church’s mission to succeed in the world. Will we be defenders or adapters of the church? Will we protect the church against the evil marauders or find a gospel to heal them? Ronald Allen’s article on the preacher as philosopher dovetails beautifully with this message. As we search for a way to encounter and embrace the change that is coming our way, we must do so thoughtfully, always answering the question, why? We must tell our congregations what we think and listen when they reply.

After all the serious business in this issue, we might want a little relief. Help is on the way in the form of a delightfully simple and wise meditation on the relevance spirituality of Thomas Merton. Though he died twenty-five years ago, Merton’s inimitable voice leaps off the page. Ken Carter is to be commended for bringing these gifts to our discussion. And for a truly imaginative trip through the lectionary, please turn immediately to Robert Martin Walker’s treatment of passages from James. The mysteries of modern technology don’t stand a chance against a mind that could devise Politically Correct Parables (Andrews and McMeel, 1996), including the “The Geographically Dislocated Sheep,” “The Ethically Impaired Stewperson,” and “The Differently Waged Persons.” Happy translating!

Sharon Hels
Ronald J. Allen

The Preacher as Philosopher

We can never fully understand. But we can increase our penetration. A. N. Whitehead

Preaching seeks to be in conversation with other disciplines that can help it discern and strengthen its vocation. In recent years, preaching has engaged such far-ranging conversation partners as the Biblical Theology Movement, literary criticism, rhetorical theory, theological method, and the various contemporary theologies (e.g. fundamentalism, evangelicalism, postliberalism, liberation perspectives, revisionism).

Philosophy, too, often sits at the table of homiletical conversation. At times its presence is quite evident. For example, preachers in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas have explicitly turned to Aristotle for guidance. Preachers influenced by Rudolf Bultmann have used existentialism as a lens through which to focus the gospel for the contemporary church. Tillichian preachers, operating in a mode of philosophical theology, explain theological concepts with philosophical categories.

At other times, philosophical concerns are in the background of homiletical discussion. Preachers and theorists implicitly (and sometimes unconsciously) assume philosophical perspectives on

Ronald J. Allen is Associate Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana. His most recently published books are The Teaching Sermon (Abingdon, 1995) and, with Scott Black Johnston and Barbara S. Blaisdell, Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Post-Modern Ethos (Abingdon, 1997).
significant issues. For instance, the preacher who tells a real-life story to illustrate a theological claim may presume (perhaps unconsciously) the notion that truth is the correspondence of statement and reality.

An occasional preacher or scholar decries the importance or validity of philosophy for theological discourse and professes to operate without being polluted by philosophical concerns. Yet, this assertion itself presumes philosophical (if unstated or unrecognized) bases.

Philosophical perspectives are integral to recent hermeneutical and theological movements. For instance, Gadamer, Heidegger, McIntyre, Wittgenstein, Habermas, Derrida, Foucault, and Whitehead are foundational to various contemporary theological viewpoints. However, few preachers (and relatively few homiletical theorists) seem to think systematically, or even consciously, about the contribution that philosophy might make to preaching. Indeed, preachers sometimes adopt a hermeneutical or theological viewpoint that is deeply indebted to selected philosophical underpinnings without being able to identify those underpinnings or to evaluate them critically. Hence, philosophy is not able to make its optimal contributions at the table of conversation about sermons.

This essay explores the relationship between preaching and philosophy, particularly as important for pastors in Euro-American congregations. The article begins by distinguishing the work of the philosopher from that of the sage and by noting that our time is ripe for a recovery of understanding of the philosophical dimensions of preaching. The article then reviews the essential work of philosophy—critical thinking—and identifies practical ways by which philosophy can help the preacher.

In popular North American culture today, the term philosophy is used loosely to refer to a wide spectrum of attitudes, values, and practices. For instance, our daughter’s soccer coach says, “My philosophy is that foot skills and passing are the basis of a winning soccer team.” I reserve the term more narrowly for Western critical philosophy in the tradition of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their diverse heirs. This tradition continues in the contemporary era through thinkers as different as Derrida and Whitehead.

Differentiating Philosopher and Sage

I begin by differentiating between the philosopher and the sage. The term sage is borrowed from its specific use in the history of
philosophy. It describes someone who simply makes pronouncements which the audience is expected to receive as true. The sage does not engage in critical analysis. On the other hand, the essential work of the philosopher is critical thinking. The philosopher tests all assertions by means of critical analysis (as explored below).

I note this distinction because a fair number of contemporary ministers preach in the mode of the sage. They make pronouncements as to what is Christian and true without examining the warrants for their conclusions. They expect the congregation to accept their sayings on the basis of little more than the fact that the preachers have spoken.

I notice this pattern especially in sermons on controversial issues. The preacher seldom thinks carefully and critically through the issue. The preacher does not ask what is meant by the various terms or name assumptions within which to understand the issue or identify and evaluate the different interpretations of the issue (and their supporting evidence and arguments). The preacher does not compare and contrast the various ways of understanding the issue so that the congregation has a sense of what is gained and lost in connection with each different way of thinking. The preacher simply announces a point of view and presumes that the congregation ought to agree.

From time to time, former students and acquaintances send me audiocassettes or manuscripts of sermons with a note, "Would you please tell me what you think of this sermon?" In the last five years, I have received more sermons on the subject of homosexuality than on any other single subject. Most of the preachers who send their material commend homosexuality as a possible sexual orientation for Christians. These pastors tend to address the subject more as sages than as philosophers. Messages sometimes drift in the direction of critical analysis by drawing a bit on selected conclusions from psychology or biology to suggest that homosexuality is an inherent way of being (and not a learned behavior). A preacher sometimes mentions revisionary
exegeses of biblical texts dealing with homosexuality. Such exegesis usually claims that selected biblical texts (e.g., the story of Sodom and Gomorrah) do not cast a negative light on homosexuality. The sermons censure homophobia, but they do so vaguely and often without definition or sensitive exploration of homophobia.

However, few sermons on homosexuality that I have heard or read explore general attitudes toward homosexuality in the world of the Bible or assess visionary biblical interpretation. Few preachers review attitudes (or reasons for them) regarding homosexuality in Christian tradition. Those sermons typically lack rigorous attention to theological analysis of human sexuality. Not many preachers who refer to social and scientific studies that support homosexuality as a normal pattern of relationship also deal with studies that come to opposite conclusions. In short, many preachers abandon critical discussion. Instead, they function as sages. They speak as if the congregation should simply adopt their claims.

Not surprisingly, many lay people in congregations react strongly against the preacher’s opinion. Many in the congregation are unconvinced that they should replace centuries of traditional Christian objection to homosexuality on the basis of little more than a preacher’s opinion delivered in a fifteen-minute sermon.

Five Reasons for Thinking Philosophically

Why, then, should the North American preacher be more philosopher and less sage? Five reasons are paramount. First, philosophical thinking often helps people make their way through the vast plurality of choices regarding values, life orientations, and ethics that are a part of the contemporary cultural context in North America. What should people believe? How should they act? Many people are bewildered by the variety and persuasiveness of today’s options.

Critical thinking in the philosophical spirit, as outlined below, helps the preacher and the congregation sort through the multiple layers of assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses that are associated with major life choices in today’s cultural diversity. Philosophically informed thinking helps pastor and people understand the implications of different choices and why some options are preferable to others. Sages often leave their followers with nothing more than the sage’s opinion as to why
particular possibilities are more or less desirable. When questions arise, the disciples of the sage are often ill-equipped to respond.

Second, thinking critically is a key component of the Euro-American context. A significant conclusion of much recent philosophy and theology is that philosophical and theological systems are contextual. Critical thought is a part of the fabric of Euro-America when that fabric is its fullest and strongest. For instance, the capacity for critical analysis is the soul of the democratic political process. To think critically is to be contextual.

Third, most people have a deep-seated yearning to know why things are the way they are (or why—as well as how—things could be different). A study of listeners to sermons found that the listeners want to know the evidence for the viewpoints they are asked to adopt so they can consider the degrees of its persuasiveness. Listeners particularly want to understand the complexities and ambiguities in texts, thoughts, actions, and situations. Indeed, people are typically suspicious of the preacher who offers an interpretation of life that overlooks real questions and uncertainties. People are willing to live with a high degree of ambiguity if it is clearly acknowledged as such. They respond positively to the preacher who is a “questioning listener,” i.e., who helps them articulate and think through their own questions. Critical reflection can help the congregation at these significant points.

Fourth, sages can easily become demagogues who lead people into situations of oppression and even violence. Critical thinking can help guard against such developments by exposing the weaknesses and dangers of a particular sage’s leading (and of the sage system itself). It can offer alternative options that may be more helpful. Of course, critical thinking cannot guarantee that sages, their followers, or others will acknowledge the difficulties of their positions and behaviors, but it can try to bring such potentialities to light.

Fifth, when it is true to its own best insights, the Western philosophical tradition is not imperialistic. It can correct itself. In the best practice of Western philosophy, the principles of critical reflection are applied to philosophy itself. The critical philosophical tradition should be able to revise itself in the light of its omissions, distortions, prejudices, and misreadings.

Clearly, the time is ripe for the preacher to recover the philosophical dimensions of preaching. It is opportune, then, to consider several practical dimensions of the help that philosophy can offer the preacher.
The Relationship between Philosophy and Theology

Philosophers debate the nature and purpose of philosophy. However, nearly all philosophers agree that philosophy aims to help people arrive at a critical understanding of the network of values, beliefs, and practices that comprise life in the cosmos. At the basic level, philosophy does not so much deal with specific subject matters as it deals with how people think about those matters. Philosophy helps us clarify how human beings interpret the cosmos and our life in it. It also helps us clarify why we interpret as we do and leads us to evaluate the adequacy of our ways of thinking and acting. The philosopher seeks to establish the nature and parameters of knowledge and truth. Hence, philosophers sometimes characterize their work as "thinking about thinking."

At this juncture, a word is in order regarding the relationship of theology and philosophy. It is arbitrary and artificial to draw a rigid demarcation between these two arenas. Indeed, as noted earlier in this essay, every theology (and every theological claim) depends upon some philosophical assumptions, even if those assumptions are unrecognized. And many philosophical arenas overlap with theological concerns.

The preacher's calling is to make theological claims and to justify those assertions in the dual faces of Christian tradition and contemporary experience. Recognizing that the distinction is imprecise, we may say that theology makes assertions about the world, God, God's activity in the world, and the world's response to God. Philosophy helps clarify the nature and adequacy of those assertions. In particular philosophy helps the preacher understand why those assertions are commendable (or noncommendable) in today's intellectual and emotive climate.

Particular philosophical positions help (and frustrate) the preacher at particular points in connection with their particular emphases. However, we may point to several general arenas in which philosophical reflection can offer practical help to the preacher, recognizing that specific philosophical positions result in specific lines of interpretation that are characteristic of each position.
The Essential Work of Philosophy

To use a single phrase, the essential work of the philosopher is critical thinking. The critical thinker identifies the assumptions that underlie people's habitual ways of thinking and acting. What does a thinker, speaker, or active person assume to be true or false, important or insignificant? At its simplest, the philosopher asks what people mean by their expressions and actions. The philosopher seeks to help people become clear about their presuppositions.

For instance, a preacher may assert that God acts in the world through Jesus Christ for the world's good. The philosopher asks, What do you mean by God? What does it mean to say that God acts? What are the criteria by which you name an event in the world as an act of God? What do you mean by Jesus Christ? What do you mean when you speak of the good? What are the criteria by which to identify the good?

Philosophy then assists a person and community in evaluating its assumptions. Why do people or communities continue to adhere to those assumptions? Critical thinkers seek to determine the degree to which people or communities are conscious of their presuppositions. To what degree are people or communities unconscious of, but perhaps powerfully affected by, their assumptions?

To continue the preceding example, a philosopher might ask, Why do you believe in God? What are the bases of your confidence that God exists? Do you attribute certain events to divine activity in the world but not other events? If so, why? If not, how do you conceive of God as related to all events, including bad ones? Why is it important to say that God acts through Jesus Christ? And how is God active through Christ? What leads you to identify the good as you do? Why do you find your criteria more satisfactory than others?

The philosopher explores what a community gains (and loses) by virtue of its ways of interpreting the world. From a contemporary philosophical perspective, no stream of interpreting the world is completely pure. The critical philosopher wants people to be clear about the strengths and weaknesses of their positions and practices. To put it crudely, a philosopher wants people to be clear about what they gain and what they give up when they adopt a given point of view.

As a part of this process, critical thinkers sometimes imagine other ways of interpreting the world and their experience. Do alternative explanations also make sense? If so, what are the reasons that a person...
continues to hold to a certain set of understandings even in the face of questions and difficulties? Of course, people may not continue to hold their prior understandings. The questions, difficulties, or alternative points of view may cause people to revise their assumptions to take better account of the uncertainties.

To continue our illustration, some thinkers claim that God is at the same time perfectly loving, perfectly just, and completely powerful (in the sense of unilaterally being able to do anything God wants). Other thinkers claim that this tri-fold affirmation runs into difficulty with logic and experience. A God who is perfectly loving and perfectly just would not allow evil in the world. These three qualities cannot exist in the relationship commonly attributed to them (perfectly loving, perfectly just, all powerful). The perspectives must be coordinated in another way. Hence, some preachers argue that God is perfectly loving and perfectly just, but God is not all-powerful. They conceive of God’s power less as unilateral force and more as persuasion. The community gains a concept of God that is moral, but it loses its reliance in unilateral divine power.

In regard to these issues, as with many others, the Christian community must understand what it gains and what it gives up as it chooses certain alternatives over others. Philosophers seek for a community’s life perspectives to be integrated with one another. The best interpretations of the world are usually logically consistent.

Philosophers urge communities periodically to evaluate the adequacy of their conclusions and practices. From time to time, our interpretations of our experience need to be revised in order to account for discrepancies, new data, or fresh insights. At its heart, philosophy is not a static entity but a way of critically reflecting on life and the cosmos.

The philosopher explores what a community gains (and loses) by virtue of its ways of interpreting the world.
Philosophy Can Help the Preacher Grasp the Relationship between Perception, Interpretation, and Language.

Philosophy helps the preacher take account of one of the most important recent developments in our understanding of the relationship of perception, interpretation, and religious language. Thinkers in the Enlightenment heritage believed that they could achieve objective, unbiased knowledge of themselves and the world. Many philosophers today contend that such knowledge is impossible because all perception is interpretation. Relatively few philosophers today believe that it is possible to reach pure, objective, unbiased foundational perceptions of the world. Even the philosophers who move in the direction of seeking such knowledge recognize the presence of interpretation.  

In this context, the critical method can often help us become cognizant of how we are affected by significant aspects of our interpretative grids. It can help us understand how our worldviews and actions are touched by our social location, race, ethnicity, political persuasions, and, yes, by our religious beliefs and philosophical convictions. We may never attain so-called objective knowledge of ourselves and the world, but the Western philosophical tradition can help us name strengths and weaknesses of our interpretive patterns. We can then magnify our strengths and work toward transcending our weaknesses.

These perceptions of perception are particularly important when the preacher names God and God’s purposes in the world. While the preacher aims to speak the truth, the preacher must always recognize shades of relativity in his or her interpretation. For the pastor’s very perception of God and of God’s purposes is itself interpretive. Whitehead’s commentary on the relationship between language and philosophy has analogues in the relationship between language and religious experience. “Our understanding outruns the ordinary uses of words. Philosophy is akin to poetry.” Hence, the preacher must

People can live with a great deal of ambiguity when it is named as such and when they know the reasons for it.

THE PREACHER AS PHILOSOPHER
Sometimes turn to poetic forms of discourse as the most adequate mode of language for expressing a particular interpretation of religious life. However, even poetry has its limitations. For, as Whitehead continues, "...our clarity of intuition is limited, and it flickers." Both propositional and imagistic language represent "an imperfect penetration into our dim recognition of the world around—the world of fact, the world of possibility, the world as valued, the world as purposed." Hence, the preacher can never idolize particular linguistic expressions. Philosophy can help the preacher reflect critically on the sufficiency of particular uses of religious language.¹⁵

Preachers who recognize this perspective will speak less in the absolutism of "Thus saith the Lord" and more in the mode of "Come, let us have a conversation about how we perceive the divine presence and intentions." Such conversations will often conclude with a degree of open-endedness as pastor and people recognize relativities and uncertainties. At such times, the Christian community takes heart in the fact (as noted above) that people can live with a great deal of ambiguity when it is named as such and when they know the reasons for it.

**Philosophy Can Posit an Understanding of the Cosmos that Helps the Preacher Construe Its Various Elements and Their Relationship.**¹⁶

Some philosophers go beyond critical analysis. They seek to understand how the various dimensions of the universe relate to one another.¹⁷ Alfred North Whitehead succinctly explains that this philosophical endeavor frames "a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of 'interpretation' I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme."¹⁸ The philosopher interprets how the various elements of the world and our human perception and experience fit together in a meaningful whole, so that each part (material and transmaterial) is related to each other part. Such a pattern of interpretation tries to show how the various dimensions of the universe relate to one another: thought, feeling, religious belief, intuition, behavior, data from the physical and social sciences, the

---

¹⁵
¹⁶
¹⁷
¹⁸
various realms of nature. As Whitehead elegantly summarizes, "Thus, the task of philosophy is the understanding of the interfusion of modes of existence."\(^{19}\)

As noted earlier, today's philosophical climate is permeated by the conclusion that all human statements are acts of interpretation. Hence, few philosophers today think that they can describe reality in such a way that their descriptions of reality make a simple one-to-one correspondence with reality itself. Instead, many philosophers create models which articulate their construals of experience.

Ian Barbour elucidates how models function. A model is "an imagined mechanism or process, postulated by analogy with familiar mechanisms or processes and used to construct a theory to correlate a set of observations."\(^{20}\) Building on this insight, Russell Pregeant recounts an event that clarifies the function of philosophical models:

> A good, standard example of what is meant by this is the use of the solar system model to grasp the reality of an atom. It came as a great shock to me when I first realized that those diagrams my chemistry professors drew on the chalkboard were not literal representations of how an atom is constructed—i.e., that a superpowerful microscope would not in fact show an atom to look like that! The scientist is confronted with certain data about a given phenomenon and, not being able to observe the phenomenon directly or depict it literally, has to imagine a way of understanding it. The result is a model—a humanly constructed mental picture of the reality that, although not a literal picture, helps us to understand what the phenomenon is really like.\(^{21}\)

Such models, then, are not wooden depictions of the cosmos but, are ways of helping us interpret the universe and our experiences in it.

Pregeant further offers criteria by which to evaluate the success of any such interpretation of the world. "Does the model give the best account of the widest range of experience and of other knowledge? Is the model coherent—i.e., is it internally consistent, free of contradictions?" The preacher asks of a model "whether it is believable, and whether it is in fact more readily believable than alternative views."\(^{22}\)

While any model is to be tested for adequacy, the preacher-philosopher needs to remember that all awareness of experience is
interpretive. Hence, the preacher's interpretation of experience must itself be the subject of critical reflection to gauge the degree to which it continues to be satisfactory for the task. Whitehead is to the point here: "Speculative boldness must be balanced by complete humility before logic and before fact." Philosophers and preachers must be ready to amend their perceptions of the cosmos in response to fresh discoveries and data.

This enterprise can be a distinct help to preachers, especially as they strive to speak credibly of God's presence and purposes. Indeed, one of the preacher's most nagging problems is how to interpret the interrelationship of God, the human community, the animal world, and the realm of natural elements. How does God operate within the cosmos? And how do the various elements of the cosmos relate to one another? A model of the universe can help the preacher give a credible response to such questions.

In the contemporary era, process philosophy provides one of the clearest examples of such a construal of reality. As an example of its potential help to the preacher, consider its portrayal of how God acts in the world. As its name implies, process conceptuality begins with the fundamental observation that life is process in all its phases and manifestations. Life is comprised of a series of events. Our perception is primarily the awareness of constant change. Each moment is a brief assemblage of circumstances, awarenesses, and feelings that is giving way to another moment that is different.

Process philosophers seek to account for two characteristics of life. (1) Life is marked by constant change. (2) Yet, within life's perpetual change, patterns persist across time and space. Process philosophy seeks to explain both creativity (novelty, innovation) and stability within life process. Process philosophy finds the clues to this relationship in the way in which events constitute themselves and in the nature of God and God's relationship to the world.

Each event evolves from the circumstances of its becoming. Many of the actors in an event (e.g., people, animals, the elements of nature) contribute to the character of particular moments. Sometimes, actors consciously decide to help create an event in a certain way. At other times, actors contribute to an event by default; instead of deciding to contribute to a life process in a given way, they are simply present while the moments take shape around them.

Each moment of life process influences the event(s) that follow. The character of future life is thus determined by the events of the past as
they influence the present and by the creative decisions of those in the present. Indeed, the process worldview is inherently social. All entities in the cosmos are related to all other entities. Process philosophers sometimes speak of the interconnectedness of all things as "internal relationship," meaning that all entities are affected by (and affect) all other entities.

Whitehead explains how God is related to this worldview: "God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles." Rather, God "is their chief exemplification." The idea of divine power comes into play at this point (and is of special interest to process philosophers and to preachers). God has more power than any other entity, but God is not omnipotent in the sense of being able to do anything that God wants at any time that God chooses. God works not through unilateral, brute force; but God works cooperatively with people and with the realm of nature through the lure of possibility. God offers possibilities to each occasion, but the participants in the occasion must decide (consciously or unconsciously) whether to accept or reject God's offer. God lures the participants in that occasion to decide for the possibility because of their attraction. Human beings and the natural world thus join God in creating significant aspects of the unfolding world.

God contains within Godself both stability and change. In the lane of stability, God is the unrelenting source of optimal possibilities for each occasion. God continuously offers each moment the possibility to develop in accord with the highest relevant good. In the lane of creativity, God is affected by what happens in the world. God does not change God's overriding desire for each participant in each event to realize the highest possibilities for that event. As I said a moment ago, God offers the highest relevant good to a situation, because circumstances (including the choices made by participants in an event) can limit what God can offer. So sometimes God has to make available a good that is less than optimal but that still can make the most of a particular situation. An important corollary is that God is often able to see possibilities in situations that human beings and others do not see.

To oversimplify, evil results when inhabitants of the cosmos choose against God's purposes. Yet, even in the midst of evil, God offers possibilities for some relevant good. For instance, the homeless person who freezes to death alone underneath the picnic table in the park is not alone. God is with that person and feels all that person feels.
God is omnipresent through life process. God does not live outside the world so that God must intervene in cosmic affairs in order to manifest the divine presence and purposes. God is everpresent, offering the best relevant possibilities for the circumstances of each event. God is responsive to life changes, yet God provides continuous opportunities for positive life development.

As Pregeant might say, you can't look at an event through a superpowerful microscope and see the divine presence and the interresponsiveness of all entities. This philosophy is a model of how things happen in the world and of how God is involved with them. For preachers who find it persuasive, it helps explain how God is active in the world.

**Philosophy Can Help Preachers Make Their Way among Differing Truth Claims or Interpretations of Life.**

One of the distinctive features of life in the late twentieth century is respect for differing points of view and for different cultures, practices, and ways of life. The diversity that characterizes our time is immensely enriching. However, for the preacher, respect for diversity poses a problem with philosophical dimensions. Which points of view can the preacher commend as true, especially given that some interpretations of reality cannot be mutually true and that some are mutually contradictory? For example, can the several West African religions, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism all be true?

Philosophy can befriend preachers as they confront the maze of pluralism. Philosophy can help the preacher identify different responses to the phenomena of diversity and the relative gains and losses offered by each response. While oversimplifying, it is possible to speak of three loci on the spectrum of approach to these matters. These views have direct implications for the nature and purpose of the sermon, for different philosophical orientations result in different understandings of the preacher's calling.

At one end of the spectrum, some philosophers today subscribe to versions of the Enlightenment ideas that empirical observation and (or) rational deduction can lead to universally verifiable descriptions of reality. Propositions are true when they correspond in a one-to-one way with reality as reality has been observed under scientific methods...
or described according to logical canons. Truth is true in every time and place.

In this case, the preacher’s job is to identify universal norms and to measure all propositions, claims, doctrines, and practices against the norms. A religious claim can be accepted as true when it is empirically verified or when it results logically from necessary first principles. A claim that cannot be verified or that does not cohere with the community’s basic principles cannot be accepted as true.

Most advocates of this approach allow that a community’s understanding of the empirically verifiable or the logically necessary may change from time to time in accordance with fresh perspectives. Even scientists change their minds about how to interpret selected pieces of data on the basis of changes of perception. Hence, these philosophers and preachers acknowledge the importance of being cognizant and critical of their interpretive axioms.

At the other end of the spectrum, deconstructive philosophers argue that the category of truth is itself outmoded. These thinkers conclude that we create our own interpretations of the world. Everything that we think is a function of the biased interpretive grids with which we see the world. We cannot formulate propositions that correspond with reality because our understanding of reality is itself our own projection. Hence, we cannot know “the truth” because there are no universally accepted (or universally applicable) standards of truth. We can only describe and critique the different lenses through which people interpret the world.

Some deconstructionists contend that every interpretive scheme, whether or not consciously intended to do so, offers some people security and power at the expense of other people and at the expense of the natural world. Many points of view result in exploitation, oppression, violence, and death.

Hence, in this system one of the preacher’s most important tasks is to exercise suspicion with respect to every interpretation of the world. The great virtue of this approach is that, as the preacher deconstructs each element of a worldview (e.g. each text, each doctrine, each claim, each practice), its repressive possibilities are unmasked. Indeed, it
safeguards against idolatries. The great weakness is that it does not offer a positive vision of God and God’s purposes for the world. It also manifests a curious contradiction. While the radical deconstructionists deny the possibility of universal claims, they evidently believe that exploitation and oppression are universally bad. Perhaps they allow for more measures of universality than they admit.

Most philosophers probably fall somewhere between these two loci, thus giving us a third. In the current homiletical scene, two differing philosophical approaches contribute to two differing approaches to theology that, in turn, contribute to two different conceptions of the purpose of the sermon. These are revisionary theology and postliberal theology.27

Revisionary theology (as typified by David Tracy, Sallie McFague, John B. Cobb, Jr., Marjorie Suchocki, Clark Williamson, and Gordon Kaufman) leans toward the first end of the spectrum (as described above), for it is concerned to make a credible Christian witness. The revisionary theologians work to determine the degree to which the claims of the Christian tradition are true.

Their method is often called mutual critical correlation. They try to correlate elements of the Christian witness with contemporary views of the world. But the correlation is mutual; it goes both ways. On the one hand, the revisionary theologies aim to show how key aspects of the Christian witness (often clothed in the language, imagery, and mythology of earlier eras) are still true and can shape the contemporary community’s understanding of the world. On the other hand, they show how the contemporary understanding of the world reshapes the Christian community’s understanding of its own claims. In the process of mutual critical correlation the Christian tradition is itself transformed. I hasten to stress that revisionary theologians explore ways in which the Christian witness calls the contemporary church to enlarge or refashion its understanding of truth and the nature of perception and reality.

The sermon, then, is an act of mutual critical correlation. The preacher seeks to discern the plausibility of Christian witness in a...
biblical text or a Christian doctrine or practice and the ways in which that truth ought to shape the contemporary Christian community’s understanding and practice. The preacher also probes for ways in which contemporary readings of the world ought to cause the Christian community to reinterpret its tradition.

Postliberal theology (as represented by Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, William Willimon, Kathryn Tanner, and Stanley Hauerwas) leans toward the deconstructive end of the spectrum as described above. It has several of its important roots in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. According to Wittgenstein, language does not simply describe reality in a simple one-to-one correspondence. Rather, each community uses language in its own way to picture its own understanding of reality. Wittgenstein did not believe that philosophers (or others) could speak of universal understandings of truth that could be applied in each and every culture and situation because any such “universal” norm was the product of a particular community with its particular notions of truth.

Enlarging on this theme with respect to the Christian community, the postliberal theologians reject the idea that the Christian community is obliged to test the credibility of its witness against norms from outside its own language world. Such a probe would be similar to applying the rules for U.S.-style football to a soccer game. In particular, the postliberals reject the idea of measuring the claims of the Christian tradition against the norms of truth found in a limited sector of the contemporary setting, such as the Enlightenment’s norms of science.

The preacher’s task, in postliberal perspective, is to describe the world created in the Bible and in other Christian texts and practices. These two ways of conceiving of preaching are not mutually exclusive. Both the revisionary and postliberal theologians search for...
authentic understandings of the gospel and its implications for the contemporary community. But their differing viewpoints lead to differing emphases in preaching (and in their conceptions of their larger theological tasks and of the mission of the church).

The preacher who is a critical thinker and who is acquainted with the basic issues of philosophy is in a position to make an informed choice regarding which of these choices (or a hybrid, or some other option) seems the most sensible way to think of the interrelated tasks of theology and preaching. The philosophically naive preacher may not recognize the differences between such positions; the preacher may not be able to think critically about the significance of the differences. Such preachers may adopt a viewpoint without realizing many of the ramifications of that viewpoint. I have even known some preachers who seem to be persuaded by the winsomeness of the style of the latest lecturer on the preaching circuit they have heard or the latest book on preaching that they have read.

**Philosophy Can Help the Preacher Deal with Vexing Theological Problems.**

Philosophy can often help the preacher make sense of vexing theological problems. Some of these are deeply embedded in the history of the church. Others are of more recent origin. To illustrate how philosophy can help with such problems, I discuss four conundrums that are on (or near) the surface of the consciousness of many congregations. Even though the Christian community may not recognize their connection to philosophy, philosophy can help the preacher cast light on them. Philosophical thinking can help in similar ways with other problems.

The existence of God is a problem that is almost as old as philosophy itself. This problem reached a recent zenith of intensity in the modern era, when Enlightenment empiricists insisted that all claims to truth needed to be verified through the five senses or through rational deduction. The nonmaterial God cannot be casually verified through the senses. And some thinkers concluded that God is not a necessary first principle. Hence, philosophers sought to show why belief in God was intellectually credible.

The emerging postmodern ethos of late-twentieth-century North America is more hospitable to the idea of a Transcendent Being than
was modernity. However, it is still not obvious that God exists. To many people in our technophilic culture, God is not necessary to explain the meaning of life. Unrelenting evil—e.g., the Holocaust, savage conflicts, racial and ethnic tension, the ecological crisis, massive poverty—challenges the idea of a benevolent Other.

Hence, the preacher can still help the congregation understand why it is possible to believe in God. Philosophy has a tremendous reservoir of “arguments” for the existence of God (e.g., cosmological argument, teleological argument, moral and aesthetic arguments, ontological argument). These reasons do not provide “proof” of divine reality in the same sense that a mathematician can solve an equation. But, as a friend of mine says (following William James), they can at least help a community recognize that it is not irrational to have faith in God. Such rationales can help a congregation in the manner of Anselm’s “faith seeking understanding.”

The presence and power of evil is one of the most aching and challenging of phenomena. What is its origin? Why does it persist? What is God’s relationship to it? At the core of the discussion is the question of God’s nature, purposes, and power. Does God directly will evil? Or does God permit it? Is God omnipotent (in the sense of being able to do whatever God wants whenever God wants)? If so, why does God permit evil? If God has the power to end evil but does not do so, is God truly moral? If God is not omnipotent, then what is the extent of divine power, and what is the relationship of divine power to the power of evil? The preacher and the Christian community need to know what they can count on God to do, and what they need to do, in the face of persistent evil. Philosophers have thought about such matters for centuries. For example, some attribute evil to the existence of Satan (as the architect of the brokenness of the world). Some think of the possibility of evil as the necessary correlate of human freedom. Others think of evil as the privation of the good. Some regard evil as a testing ground for human faith. Still others interpret evil as a classroom teacher that God (or some other force) uses to teach life lessons. Some depict a God of unlimited love but limited power. Such a God does not “permit” evil. God cannot end evil in one fell swoop. Philosophy can help preachers locate themselves on this spectrum as it helps them come to a vision of God and of how the universe operates. Philosophers can help the preacher clarify the possibilities of prayer. Virtually all Christians known to me believe that God is responsive to the human community’s conversation with the divine in
prayer. But questions arise as to the nature and purposes of the divine response. Petitionary prayer is the most perplexing dimension of this discussion. Does God “answer” prayer? If so, how? Does God respond positively to some petitions and negatively to others? If so, what are the bases of God’s responses?

These are immensely practical questions. The preacher’s answers to them directly affects what the preacher says to the congregation. And the preacher’s answers often affect what the congregation believes it can receive from God (such as, “Do I pray for a miracle?”). Again, philosophy helps preachers make their way through these knotty problems by explicating the nature of God, the world, and God’s relationship to the world. The preacher’s resolution of these matters unlocks the preacher’s interpretation of prayer.

Based on a view of God as omnipotent and omniscient, the preacher may claim that God responds directly to every petition. God looks favorably upon some but unfavorably upon others. There seem to be almost as many criteria for determining divine response as there are philosophers and theologians. Some believers correlate positive divine response to prayer with the presence of sufficient faith in the petitioning community. Others think that hidden virtues or sins move or frustrate the divine heart. Some claim that the capacity of God’s omniscience penetrates deeper than human desires; God knows what people need in specific situations. Still others believe that God desires to teach the community certain lessons through saying yes or no to specific petitions. A few preachers bow before the mystery of God. “We simply cannot understand why God does (or does not do) these things.” Others, who view God as limited in power, contend that God is already doing all that God can do to help a situation. Prayer makes a difference to God and to the human community in that it gives God more room within which to work with a people and a situation. But it does not alter the divine will. For that will is perpetual love.

Philosophy can also help the preacher’s witness concerning life after death. Is it possible to believe in life after death? If persons or communities do live beyond death, what is the character of that life? When does it begin and where does it take place? Philosophy helps the preacher identify a range of options for responding to these questions. The pastor’s understanding of the nature and activity of God and the preacher’s philosophical construal of cosmic (and transcosmic) reality helps the preacher determine which option, if any, the preacher can
commend. In order to posit eternal life, one's construal of reality must allow for a mode of eternal life.

Some philosopher preachers conclude that the nature of God calls for some form of eternal life. The divine integrity (unconditional love) would be violated by the trauma of death and extinction. Others argue that God must compensate the righteous and the innocent for their unjust suffering in this life. As a corollary, some notions of justice hold that God must punish the wicked. Some believers think that God's power and the nature of the universe are such that God cannot grant a form of eternal life. I have heard a few Christians claim that God's sovereignty is such that God can do whatever God wants in whatever way God desires. God could arbitrarily grant eternal life to some and deny it to others.

Some ministers contend that at death one loses individual consciousness; life after death takes place as one's influence lives through one's children and others who are affected by one's life, but the self as such does not continue conscious existence. Some think of the self as entering into an eternity of vague consciousness void of pleasure or pain (on analogy with Sheol, the netherworld common to some biblical lines of thought). Some preachers believe that at some point after death, selves are assigned eternal destinies that are radically different—some are destined for eternal punishment and others for eternal joy; for some, this separation takes place at the moment of death while others anticipate it at a future time (e.g. on a universal resurrection day). Some regard the self as composed of two parts—the material, dispensable body and the immaterial soul that contains the essence of the self; the soul lives after death with God while the body disintegrates. A few contend that the soul migrates from one body to another. Still others regard the self as a unity; at death, the self loses consciousness and awaits the day of resurrection when the self will be raised to immortal life. Communally conscious preachers conceive of life after death as involving more than the human individual; they
look forward to the day when the whole cosmos and all who have lived will be regenerated into a world in which all entities live forever without decay or brokenness. Some think that at death the soul goes to be with God while the body lies dead, but the two are reunited on the resurrection day. Yet other preachers believe that at death the unified self (including consciousness) disintegrates, but the self is remembered perpetually in the mind of God. Not surprisingly, some are unwilling to speculate about such matters but leave them entirely in the hands of God.

The preacher cannot turn to unquestionable empirical data to resolve such matters. But the preacher can offer a view of eternal life that is logically consistent with the preacher's view of the nature and purposes of God and that comports with the preacher's view of the cosmos.

Conclusion

As the postmodernists remind us, the Western tradition (even with its many, and sometimes contradictory, points of view) is only one of several approaches to interpreting life which are found in the pluralistic contemporary world. Hence, the preacher-philosopher needs eventually to reflect on how the Western philosophical tradition relates to other approaches to wisdom, value, truth, and reality. This modest essay is not the place for such a comparison. And, to be candid, this author is not sufficiently informed about other traditions to engage them in a meaningful way. But perhaps this writing can contribute to that project by helping Euro-American preachers on the journey to a critical understanding of their own tradition, an essential first step in developing a perspective on the relationship of the Western philosophical tradition to other modes of construing wisdom, truth, and reality.

Notes

2. As an example of the low level of philosophical consciousness in the preaching
community, note that the latest (and very fine) reference work in preaching contains no entry under *Philosophy* and few entries under traditional philosophical categories. However, several authors make use of philosophy in their articles. See *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995).

3. By focusing on the importance of philosophy for Euro-American preachers and congregations, I do not mean to elevate this community above others. I establish this focus for two reasons. First, Euro-America is the community that I know best. Second, as noted below, one of the important conclusions of much recent philosophy and theology is that philosophical and theological systems are contextual. My context is Euro-American.


5. Many of the readers of this essay are familiar with the wisdom traditions in the Jewish and Christian communities, especially in the biblical era. A central figure in communities that honor these wisdom traditions is sometimes described as a sage. In that context, *sage* has a precise, technical meaning. When I use the term, I am referring not to the biblical sage but to the philosophic figure.

6. My observation of the sermons that have crossed my desk and ear is that the preachers who oppose homosexuality as a possible sexual orientation for Christians make better use of theological argument and scientific studies than do those who believe that homosexuality could be a possible sexual orientation for Christians.


8. Indeed, the classic study of cognitive dissonance reveals that people whose views are challenged sometimes become even more committed to those views. See Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956); and *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962).

9. For a readable survey of how philosophers have understood the philosophical task, see John Passmore, “Philosophy,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 216-226.

10. For example, philosophers ask, “What do we know?” “How do we know that we know?” “What is true?” “How do we recognize truth?” In our pluralistic postmodern ethos, does truth even continue to be a useful category?


12. Different philosophical schools recommend different criteria of adequacy. Philosophical schools often fiercely debate which criteria for adequacy are themselves adequate. For a luminous account, see William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 24-104.

13. To trace this theme in contemporary philosophy, see Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 24-104.

14. Indeed, I believe that critical thinking can help people in many different social and cultural contexts come to a clearer awareness of their own perceptual consciousnesses and the functions and biases of those consciousnesses.


16. In a classic exposition of the relationship between the two basic philosophical tasks, C. D. Broad describes the first as critical philosophy and the second as speculative philosophy. The purpose of speculative philosophy is “to take over the
results of the various sciences, to add to them the results of the religious and ethical experiences . . . and then to reflect upon the whole. The hope is that, by this means, we may be able to reach some general conclusions as to the nature of the Universe, and as to our position and prospects in it.” C. D. Broad, *Scientific Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), 20.

17. Some philosophers object to this enterprise.


22. Pregeant, 100. Whitehead proffers similar criteria for evaluating a philosopher’s construction of the relationships within the universe: “...the philosophical scheme should be coherent, logical, and in respect to its interpretation applicable and adequate. Here *applicable* means that some items of experience and thus interpretable, and *adequate* means that there are no items incapable of such interpretation.” (*Process and Reality*, 3).


24. Ibid. 343.

25. In order to complete the circle of critical reflection on process philosophy as a source of help for the preacher, I should now identify the points at which it seems to provide relatively adequate or inadequate interpretations of experience. I should compare and contrast its construal of life with those within the Christian tradition and assess whether process philosophy provides views of God and the cosmos that are compatible with (and perhaps even enlarges) Christian teaching or whether the use of process philosophy compromises Christian doctrine. I should name the strengths and weaknesses of process conceptuality so that preachers have a clear sense of what they gain and lose when they adopt its worldview. But space does not permit such an enterprise.

26. I modify these viewpoints from William Placher’s typology in *Unapologetic Theology*, 74-122.

27. I develop these lines of thought further in “Two Approaches to Theology and Their Implications for Preaching,” *Journal for Preachers* vol. 13, no. 3 (1996): 38-48.


29. Philosophers often treat miracles along lines of thought that are similar to those which I sketch for the interpretation of prayer.
Paula D. Nesbitt

Countdown to the Millennium: End of the Century Trends in Religious Movements

Recently a Roman Catholic priest, a Protestant pastor, and a Jewish rabbi discussed current religious trends on a television talk show. Nowhere were differences more evident than in how they approached what has often been referred to as the millennium in various sectors of Christianity as well as in the secular media. The priest mentioned the Catholic Church's six-year plan to prepare what it calls "the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000," a bimillennial eucharistic birthday party of sorts. The Protestant pastor pointed out that the significance of the millennium within the diversity of Protestant Christianity has ranged from end-of-the-world prophetic apocalypticism to a symbolic rebirth of hope for this world manifested in the Christ event. The rabbi noted that in the Jewish calendar, the year 2000 averages out to the year 5760. Had an imam been present, he probably would have added that Muslims consider it to be the year 1378. In other words, for much of the world the year 2000 will be just another year.

Now well inside the three-year countdown to the turn of the century, it's important to reflect on the interdependence of our
religious tradition, since what affects one holds reverberations for all. Whether, for example, an extremist group believes that it has been divinely ordained to usher in Armageddon by taking up arms against what it perceives as the rise of Antichrist, false prophets, and other forces of Satan during the Great Tribulation, or, alternatively, mainline groups understand the millennium as a symbolic call to renewed efforts at peacemaking, helping those in need, and creating more loving bonds of human community, the effects of Christian millennial thinking permeate the wider society.

The notion of a new millennium is primarily symbolic. As scholars point out, the twentieth century signifies that we currently are completing the first hundred years of the second millennium. Scholars also assign various dates to the birth of Jesus, usually 6-4 B.C.E. Nonetheless, the significance of a dramatic calendar change has incited a millennialistic fervor in many sectors, perhaps expressive of our longing for fresh beginnings, especially given the pain and suffering wrought during this century. Indeed, the approaching change serves as both symbolic and historical benchmark while religious denominations, along with the wider society, struggle with economic and social change.

A Definition

Church and society not only exist in close relationship at the symbolic threshold of another millennial era but they also are built on historical interaction, as religious people over time have thought and acted on their understanding of the nature of God's activity in the world. Millenarianism, the belief in a millennium of Christian prophecy and the advent of an ideal society, has been evident across the historical face of Christianity, particularly in its Protestant forms. However, relying as it does on the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, millenarian thinking found in Judaism as well as in other religious traditions. Central is the belief of the rebirth of the world or the universe through divine agency. In the case of premillennialism, scriptural interpretation and proof-texting provide a deductive framework through which contemporary social history is interpreted and then the distance gauged as to how far society may be from the apocalyptic event. Past historical events are taken to support the inevitability of these prophecies.
Typically the bottom line of millenarianism urges conversion in face of impending doom which is counterpoised to the prospect of a glorious future for those who repent. Some groups, going so far as to forecast an exact date for the apocalyptic event, enter into dangerous territory, as the Millerites found in 1843 and 1844; as the Jehovah’s Witnesses learned in 1918; and more recently as several conservative Christian sects such as the Dami Mission in South Korea and the Church of Praise in Aurora, Colorado found in 1992. Other predictions have since been made, variously placing the apocalyptic event between 1998 and 2002.

The deplorable state of our world along with a rise of public distrust in our communities, our government, and our international commitments have been regularly portrayed through the media, both as social analysis and even as basic reporting. Some private productions and publications have been more frenzied, making explicit references to Armageddon, and the rise of a world government, often attributed to the United Nations, which has been perceived as the fulfilled embodiment of the Antichrist. Even some general interest programming on national television networks has subtly yet persistently blended end-of-the-world prophecy with historical accounts, such as the recent “Ancient Prophecies” series which, after initial disclaimers, proceeds with dramatic techniques intended to produce anxiety. In this case, a litany of prophetic references from ancient pyramids to Nostradamus to Edgar Cayce are echoed by an underlying persistent message of predicted cataclysm by the end of the century. While stopping short of an explicit Christian call to conversion, the program serves to heighten social anxiety. Cut loose from an explicitly religious context, such presentations can contribute to collective fear which can lead to exaggerated reactions to normal political and economic events.

Religious historian Jerald Brauer makes the point that religious revivalism and millenarianism often occur together. Both have been intrinsic to the Protestant American cultural milieu. Religious revivalism tends to surface when a society is in flux: either people have newfound opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility and political efficacy, or such opportunities have been threatened. As a
religious movement, revivalism preaches and justifies a gospel of prosperity for those on their way up; to those systemically excluded from realistic access to upward social mobility, it can provide a transformative hope of a more just future society.

One of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* paradigms,2 "Christ against Culture," describes religious groups in which good and evil are polarized and the surrounding society depicted as hopelessly corrupt. This paradigm may be seen clearly among various sects and cults as they attempt to minimize interaction with outsiders and focus on millenarian visions of preparing for a world order to come. Some move in the direction of another Niebuhrian paradigm, seeking to "transform" a culture they see as corrupt but capable of improvement. The line between these two perspectives is highly permeable, as North American Protestant fundamentalism has illustrated by its shift from an "against culture" to a "transforming culture" paradigm over the last half-century. Nationally and internationally, religious movements seeking to transform culture provide both the action—and the conflict—to maintain religion's visibility and role in society, whether it is a question of fundamentalist or ultraorthodox sects seeking to throw off the cultural vestiges of Western colonialism and imperialism; Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition seeking to recharacterize American moral and social life; or Civil Rights, liberation theology; and other liberal progressive movements aspiring to create a more egalitarian society justified upon their religious principles. The various types of religious movements projected to impact our society most over the next five years fall within Niebuhr's "transforming culture" paradigm.

The various social, economic, and political challenges we face at the edge of a new century — or, symbolically, a new millennium — play themselves out in the rise and clamor of diverse religious movements. More volatile and changeable than denominations themselves, their vision and passion nonetheless are strongly influencing and shaping the issues that mainline denominations must face. Five types of religious movements are capturing a substantial amount of public attention: religious cults, the religious right, denominational breakaways, backlash in mainline denominations, and religious liberalism. These are not the only trends to consider, and they are not likely to predict the future with any certainty. Since all scholarship involves some crystal ball gazing, by the very nature of human imagination, one must keep in mind that trends are constantly open to revision based on changing economic, political, and human spiritual need.
Trends in religious cults

The term *cult* has been used as a catch-all category for groups believed to be dangerously violent, those feared to destroy the social order if allowed to grow or groups which are strikingly different from the status quo. Sociologists such as Stark and Bainbridge define cults merely as religious movements that arise innovatively out of the surrounding religious and cultural milieu. They characterize cults in a way which can be envisioned as a series of concentric circles: the outer layer, represents an *audience cult*, where people may support a group’s aims but have little or no direct personal contact. The growth of the internet’s worldwide web holds important implications for a sizable growth trend in audience cult participation over the next several years, as people simply link into the home page of Osho International (formerly the Rajneesh movement), for example, or other religious groups and their array of discussion forums and materials.

The middle circle would represent what Stark and Bainbridge term a *client cult*, where people may attend or participate in activities but maintain strong ties to their own religious and secular networks. Various revivals, meditation groups, workshops, restaurants, and coffee houses sponsored by religious movements have been sources of
member recruitment; but their efficacy depends upon the strength of a prospect's existing linkages to other religious communities. Trends such as high geographic mobility, job loss, and family dissolution tend to increase the likelihood of low religious commitment or participation and greater susceptibility to client-level recruitment.

The inner circle would represent Stark and Bainbridge's *cult movement*, where dedicated adherents focus their ties and commitment on the mission of the group. Where linkages of audience, client, and movement levels in an open communication network with wider society become dissolved, an aura of secrecy can develop, fostering an atmosphere of anxiety and distrust among those within the group and on the outside. Strong internal-external communication linkages are vitally important for a religious group's social survival and stability, especially in reducing religious tension with wider society. Where social tension between a religious group and the surrounding community becomes exacerbated, the potential for violence increases. Warning signs have included the tendency for groups to form a closed, secretive organization rather than seeking to build bridges with the surrounding society; sexual or gender relations deviating sharply from the norms of the surrounding community, and a world-rejecting apocalyptic belief structure or a world-transforming structure moving to a world-rejecting pattern, with suicide or martyrdom representing the only way to maintain religious integrity. Not only can armaments buildups be interpreted by society as a direct threat; heightened internal as well as external anxieties can result in more employment. Sensing that they are backed into a corner with no viable alternative other than through an apocalyptic event, religious groups are more likely to turn to violence. The growth of armed survivalist and supremacist cult movements is an increasing concern in this respect, as is the presence of hard-liners seeking to corner and eradicate such groups.

Cults tend to flourish during times of cultural upheaval. Today, the cultural tumult in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have provided fertile ground for a thriving religious cult activity. Cult movements, like ethnic tribalism, represent an attempt to build some form of society with an authoritative grounding structure for those disenchanted by socioeconomic, political, and cultural instability, and the resultant social distrust.

Urban gang activity, in which ritual and social solidarity bond youth who face overwhelming social frustration, is essentially cultic.
gangs which maintain ties and two-way communication with the religious and social establishment ultimately have the structural potential for providing stability rather than slaughter within their communities.

In sum, cult movements may serve socially creative as well as potentially destructive purposes. But as we struggle with our place in an ever more global society, attendant with its continuous interrelated economic and political crises, we concertedly need to build and maintain whatever linkages we can to cult movements, even when there is sharp disagreement with their religious and social solutions. To do so will minimize the mutual anxiety and distrust that otherwise could escalate into violent conflict under certain conditions, such as what occurred at Waco.

Trends in the Religious Right

The New Christian Right represents the great revivalistic movement of twentieth-century North America. With social and religious authority heavily grounded in scripture, the Religious Right represents a collection of diverse religious movements with multiple agendas but a shared attempt to give clarity to an increasingly complex and opaque economic and social world. Beyond Christianity and the Western Hemisphere, movements often called fundamentalist or ultraorthodox have been strongly reactive against the imperialistic economic and political aftermath of Western colonialism. An essentialistic sense of ethnicity becomes as important as religion itself for the authoritative bedrock upon which adherents ground collective social and political identity. Yet these movements also have complex linkages related to social mobility, the emergence of an educated middle class, and a protective sense of communal empowerment against erosion of this status.

As with cult formation, the rise in fundamentalist movements has been linked to socioeconomic, political, and cultural destabilization and change. Internally, they represent a reassertion of social authority based upon what they understand to be the ultimate ground of religious authority. Externally, as movements seeking to transform
culture, they aspire politically to ground their sense of social and religious authority into the wider society. For instance, the thrust of the New Christian Right into the North American political structure over the last two decades has been a debate less about religion than about lifestyle and the authoritative basis for lifestyle choice. In this respect, it shares similarities with the Temperance movement of a century ago. According to sociologist Joseph Gusfield, our lifestyles, when grounded by our moral commitments, provide an indicator of our status group. Consequently, the use of political legislation to shape or coerce lifestyle choice becomes, at a symbolic level, a conflict between status groups.

By the early 1970s, the conflict over changes in civil rights and women's rights and the emergence of the gay rights movement had crystallized into four key social issues which shared an important element in common: erosion of the hierarchically dominant status of the European-American heterosexual male. This erosion was evident in the widespread adoption of affirmative action measures, public education curriculum reforms which supported gender-inclusive and multicultural learning, the Roe v. Wade decision affirming a woman's right to an abortion, and the gay/lesbian rights movement by which men and women refused to be socially closeted or made to think they were more sinful than their heterosexual neighbors. Traditionally dominant perspectives on each of these four issues, which until the 1960s had been supported by segregation, secrecy, and silence as tactics of social control, have been publicly challenged through status group as well as ideological confrontation. Two additional factors—assaults on patriotism, which has been a deeply embedded part of U.S. Christian conservatism, and a chain of economic events which leveled the socioeconomic gains made in the 1950s and 1960s by middle- and working-class men—also played a crucial role in setting the stage for the emergence of the religious right movement. Sociologist Jerome Himmelstein points out how, by the late 1970s, political conservatives formed an alliance with religious conservatives which brought together by 1980 an elite class economic conservatism manifested in the new political right and a middle- and working-class moral conservatism exhibited in the Moral Majority and more recently in the Christian Coalition.

Working concertedly at the grassroots level, the Christian Coalition aspired to train more than 25,000 leaders and activists in local religious and political networks by 1995, and in some cases has
assisted with financial support for activities on all four of the key social issues—deconstructing affirmative action, educational reform through control of local school boards, anti-abortion pressure, and legislative measures allowing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. All four of these commitments have the intended result of reasserting the hierarchically dominant status of the European-American heterosexual male in relation to all other constituencies. The 1994 Congressional turnover can be attributed to a concerted effort by the religious right toward accomplishing that end.

Or in the religious right, the strategic political alliances have been built across denominational divisions which traditionally were wary if not bitter rivals, namely between Evangelicals and Pentecostals and between conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics. Despite shared political objectives, the ecumenical bridges may represent a mollifying trend which could substantially reduce denominational frictions and increase tolerance for differences. Such bridges also could weaken the intense passion of the Religious Right’s transformative efforts, moving instead toward Niebuhr’s “above culture” or “in paradox” paradigm, the former representing virtually a mainline denominational synthesis of shared religious and social norms and the latter embodying distinctive religious groups coexisting in neighborly tolerance while focused primarily on their own faith objectives. Another likelihood is the rise of internal factionalism as coalitions gain more political and social power, especially among ultraconservative and extremist groups, reflective of a more traditionally “against culture” posture, especially those fusing white racism with religiopolitical commitments. The latter constituency continues to represent potential embarrassment to Religious Right attempts to build alliances across racial lines.

Since the Protestant Religious Right traditionally has been the most prone of all religious groups to revivalism and millenarianism, religious fervor of the approaching millennium may spark even more energy, commitment, and urgency to meet political and religious objectives by the year 2000. It’s unlikely that this level of fervor can be sustained long afterward, if millennial expectations have figured significantly into the movement’s efforts. Letdown and political fatigue should be expected to set in, as is the case with all politicized movements over time.
Trends in Denominational Breakaways

Religious sects, according to Stark and Bainbridge, are more likely to break away when the parent religious group has reduced tension with the surrounding society and in times of heightened social tension when differences become polarized and unreconcilable. The problem with sect formation, as historian David Sumner has noted, is that once the common denominational enemy is left behind, the sect is subject to further splintering which can diminish financial and human resources. Some factions may return to the denominational fold, but if not they will tend to decrease tension both with the parent denomination and the surrounding society given time.

Like traditionalist reform sects, progressive exodus communities similarly are subject to splintering. But unlike conservative reform sects, they face the added challenge of rejecting their tradition rather than embracing what they perceive was its original religious bedrock. Religious communities without tradition to act as cultural glue are highly vulnerable to demise beyond the founding generation.

Some groups have concentrated on providing linkages for people who are alienated from their denominations and who otherwise would be likely to let go of all religious ties. Such communities include “affirming” or “welcoming” congregations which openly welcome people irrespective of sexual orientation; women-church; and various twelve-step groups. The leader of one twelve-step group described to me how daring was the decision to hold a Sunday evening service at a local church. For many of the group’s members, even walking into a church was an emotionally painful step. Consequently, the group chose to hold services in the parish hall instead of the sanctuary. Such an example raises the question of what our denominations have done to people on the margin. Parachurch groups are likely to be increasingly important mechanisms of outreach for moderate and liberal congregations.
means of straddling denominational tension with traditionalist reform movements.

Today, most mainline denominations are caught in an intense tug-of-war between traditionalist factions convinced that the church has strayed from its fundamental authoritative underpinnings and progressive factions wanting to maintain social change momentum. Where denominational tug-of-wars have sizeable membership constituencies on each side, neither side feels compelled to break away. The worst-case scenario is that our denominations, which, according to Peter Berger, form a sacred canopy over society, will rip down the middle. If this were to occur, an array of sectlike groups likely would form, creating a certain amount of social destabilization as they take root, consolidate and grow. But more likely, denominations will attempt to steer a middle course amid the tug-of-war, holding the institution together but frustrating those at both ends. The danger in charting this course is structural fatigue and a flagging spirit or sense of mission as to what our denominations actually stand for. The liberal-conservative strife also results in a loss of momentum for ongoing programs and commitments.

Trends in Backlash Movements within Mainline Denominations

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow in *The Struggle for America’s Soul* discusses the conflict between religious liberals and conservatives in mainline Protestantism today, quoting Peggy Shriver of the National Council of Churches: “Both [liberals and conservatives] often caricature the worst in one another and fail to perceive the best.” The rise of the conservative movement in the late 1970s took many liberals by surprise. Many liberals, put on the defensive, patiently hoped that conservative activism would soon blow over. Instead, it gained vigor and voice.

Conservative backlash to the 1960s and 1970s also can represent a positive sign for liberals. Backlash against inclusivity in mainline denominations suggests that liberal movements committed to transforming denominational culture have struck a sharp blow to the heart of a traditionalism that has tolerated and justified the subordination and control of women and other marginalized status groups. Backlash, by the force of its resurgence as a response to that blow, illuminates the amount of traditionalist vitality which remains.
The conservative theological wave sweeping across mainline denominations, gaining momentum at the outset of the 1980s and extending well into the 1990s, can be partly interpreted as a response to the impact of women's movements—such as feminist, womanist, and mujerista theology, inclusive language, and pressure for women clergy in senior leadership positions—and their new understanding of authority and utilizing power for both women and men. The backlash is well-illustrated in the ongoing reaction to the 1993 nondenominational Re-imagining Conference, explorations in feminist theology, spirituality, and the recovery of the biblical wisdom, or Sophia, tradition.

Sociologist Keith Roberts has pointed out that episodes of backlash and the disparagement of women, including witchcraft persecution frenzies, tend to occur in periods when women are becoming more independent of male dominance. While proportionately few women are in senior denominational leadership, gender differences in senior leadership styles have been documented by sociologist Edward Lehman, who found that men are more likely to use coercive power, to seek positions of formal authority, to prefer rationally structured decision-making, and to manifest ethical legalism, while women are likely to utilize a more personal and congregationally-empowering style. The latter facilitates democratic empowerment which can benefit all. But it abrades hierarchal power and control, opening the way to wider plurality and increased negotiation of religious language, doctrine and discipline.

Both the economic and political ramifications of conservative backlash result in lukewarm support for voluntary equal opportunity and affirmative action programs within judicatories, as well as diminished commitment to inclusive language. Traditionalist backlash movements also have joined forces with denominational concerns over the prospect of occupational feminization of the clergy, particularly as the number of women clergy has greatly increased while the number of male clergy has fallen off due to retirement. The impact of this coalition is evident within several denominations in both the slowdown and the actual losses that women clergy have experienced in placement opportunities, ordination rights, religious language, and legitimating theology. Furthermore, substantive changes being considered in denominational organization and clergy deployment seldom are supported with research on the potential impact as to who would disproportionately benefit or sacrifice from
such change. For instance, elimination of the United Methodist appointment system could have a strong negative effect on leadership opportunities for women clergy if the lengthy experience of congregational denominations is any indicator, yet this concern has figured little into the discussion on the issue.

The backlash movement is manifested in the resurgence of parochialism, where congregations have sought to become fortresses against their denomination. As members look inward instead of outward and as a reluctance to help others different from oneself sets in, focusing only on what the denomination is doing for the congregation rather than what it can do to support the overall church—denominationally and ecumenically—such parochialism becomes a breeding ground for racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism and furthermore risks regression to what Bellah et al. in *Habits of the Heart* described as privatized “lifestyle enclaves,” which ultimately risk cultural as well as religious stagnation.

While backlash can be a positive sign for the movement being acted against, concurrently it must be actively resisted if gains are to be maintained. Backlash movements such as the religious right are likely to increase their urgency, energy, and commitment until the turn of the millennium. Since backlash can ally easily with socioeconomic concerns, denominations need to reflect carefully on the basis of substantive organizational changes they seek to make in order to assess what may be the issues underlying the surface arguments, who is likely to be hurt by the changes, and how that is justified. Such change should involve the active participation of the spectrum of voices within the church in order to assure just solutions.

**Trends among Religious Liberals**

These are tough times for liberal Protestants—those who still admit to liberalism. Liberal Protestants have been on the defensive for nearly two decades, attempting to maintain strides made in civil rights, women’s rights, social welfare, and human rights during the 1950s through the early 1970s against the press of religious right backlash and political activity. Liberal efforts during those years were facilitated by a strong U.S. economy in which unprecedented numbers of North Americans experiencing upward socioeconomic mobility. Liberals benefitted from the truism that people with a “full plate” are
more likely to share with others. The downward pressure on socioeconomic mobility since the early 1970s has severely weakened support for helping the less fortunate, as became evident in some of the mean-spirited arguments contributing to the welfare reform debate. Both black and white constituencies making socioeconomic gains into the comfortable middle class have risked developing a fortress attitude to maintain their status in an era of economic uncertainty.

The religious right poses a galvanizing challenge to religious liberals: What do liberals really stand for? To what are they willing to commit, and how much of a commitment are they willing to make? While liberal religious commitment has been unified in issues of racism and sexism, sexual orientation has driven a wedge within the liberal establishment. It is an issue which touches the core of how people understand religious and social authority and a tradition built upon a benevolent patriarchal order. My hypothesis is that neither liberals nor others will be able to resolve the sexual orientation issue until they seriously struggle with what authority means and how it should be legitimated and what it means to be a gendered humanity. As long as people define themselves in opposition to one another, they construct identities based upon who they are not, with a polarizing effect that tends to pigeonhole, categorize, and ultimately limit human potentiality.

Religious and political conservatism, as well as backlash to liberalism, are likely to persist into the new millennium. For liberals, or for religious progressives to use the more politically correct term the 1990s, the next few years can be a galvanizing period in which to radically question what the church should be about in the twenty-first century. Robert Wuthnow believes the conflict between conservatives and progressives can be beneficial to both:

...the strength of American evangelicalism is partly attributable to the visible liberal theology in relation to which evangelicalism can define itself. And religious liberalism might be even weaker were it not for the strength of American evangelicalism.13

Yet increasing outrage is stirring within religious and political liberals, as justifications are made for the rightness of children going hungry and suffering if they are not born into a married or middle-class family or if their parents don’t have the right visa or green card status and as
blatant racism has become politically correct again. For the first time
in decades a serious public dialogue has been generated over what our
human responsibility is to one another; is it possible to have a human
society if people are only willing look after their own kind? The
challenges posed by such questions can produce responses that speak
even more inclusively than liberal movements have done in the past.

The close of the twentieth century continues as a time of trial for
religious liberals, although the galvanizing energy of the New
Christian Right currently shows some signs of flagging despite a
millenialistic fervor to restore moral values to communities and the
country by the year 2000. Movements, whether liberal or conservative,
seldom last more than a generation without languishing. Economic,
political, and social conditions can change markedly over a decade or
two. The constellation of political, economic and social issues that
catalyzed the recent religiously and politically conservative era in the
mid-to-late 1970s were sharply different from those of today.

Furthermore, the youth who need to be recruited to support a
movement beyond the generation of its founders invariably raise
different questions and critiques than those of their parents, owing to
their growing up in the midst of a dominant movement and perceiving
from the inside its various strengths and weaknesses. As movements
wane, they need the cycles of rest, internal reflection, restructuring,
and the dominance of other movements to reinvigorate their own
critiques and commitments. In this manner, diverse movements need
one another for self-definition, generational correction, fresh
stimulation and vitality.

Besides the historically rhythmic sea change in religious
movements every generation or so, accumulated sociocultural change
tends to be on the side of a moderate-to-progressive perspective
capturing our national imagination in coming years. Numerically and
proportionally, more people are broadly educated than at any other
time in human history. More people have access to a range of media
and the free flow of ideas than any other period. And in the U.S., men
and women of diverse races and sexual orientations in reconciling
churches and communities have shown that there indeed are
foundational bases upon which to construct a stable multicultural
society. While liberals struggle over how to take the next great leap
beyond the gains of the 1960s and 1970, and moderates and
conservatives ponder whether such a leap should be taken at all, there
nonetheless is a plethora of ideas and visions as to how we might
shape and nurture an intellectually and spiritually creative human society. If there is no failure of will, liberals should be poised for a leadership role in this discourse at the opening of the third millennium.

While the religious and political right may solidify its visible public stronghold over the remainder of the 1990s, the dawn of a new millennium is likely to instill fresh optimism in a society which then will be as fatigued by conservatism as it was by liberalism in the late 1970s. An economic climate which either “bottoms out” or steadily improves for middle- and working-class North Americans will contribute substantially to such optimism. The U.S. culturally, then, well may be on the edge of another transformationist movement; or it could continue along its current course, struggling to stay afloat in the tide of transformative dreams and traditionalist concerns. Or it may sink back into factionalism and localism—*a de facto* religious feudalism of sorts. But if liberals are to spearhead the next widespread religiocultural movement, they need to become sufficiently passionate, energetic, and committed. This trend is occurring among those working on the racial, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic margins, determined to help diversify those who hold the power to articulate the dominant voices in our denominations as well as in wider society. Some liberal congregations have begun to experience vitality and growth in recent years, as people seek fresh ways to link spirituality with social action. And despite religious right and backlash pressures, many moderate and progressive religious leaders have continued to be elected. But any liberal resurgence that may occur in the next few years will necessarily come as a fresh creation and response to concerns of the 1990s. It may look very different from the mainline liberalism that activists during the 1950s and 1960s might remember. And, as its predecessors, it too will peak far short of any hundred-year, much less thousand-year, reign.

Invariably, the future of both the church and society will be shaped by the next set of religious movements on the horizon, just as the debates and challenges of recent movements have shaped them.

If there is no failure of will, liberals should be poised for a leadership role in this discourse at the opening of the third millennium.
through the end of this century. While many people may choose to remain polarized from one another over various doctrinal, political, and social issues, a nascent neoprogressivism that seeks to build bridges and alleviate fears could go a long way toward building partnerships across religious and social divisions, and toward actualizing positive millennial hope across a variety of Christian perspectives that God is in our midst. For those of other faith traditions, Christian commitments to strategic negotiating and peacemaking efforts can make a powerful and constructive witness in the world.

Notes

The Challenges to Education in a New Century

The Challenges to Education in a New Century is a topic that is important and critical to us all. It is also fearfully open-ended; it could embrace almost anything. With that in mind, the conference organizers asked me to focus upon international issues for education, which I plan to do.

But even that is a daunting task, and it is made the more difficult because we use the word *education* to mean different things. In the simplest sense, it is about acquiring knowledge, whether it is of a chemical experiment or a foreign language or how to repair a car. Then there is a broader, more philosophical meaning to the word, which the Germans call *Verständnis*, that is, an understanding and an appreciation of the way of the world, a deep sense of why and how people, societies, and nations do things; an understanding, often mingled with feelings of awe or sorrow, of how things are unfolding. Finally, there is that aspect of education to which John Wesley and Henry Newman and Hans K\"{}ing attach importance, namely, the acquisition of a personal, *ethical* sensitivity to all that is going on in

Paul Kennedy is J. Richardson Dilworth Professor of History at Yale University, with a focus on modern strategic and international affairs. He is the author of eleven books including *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1988) and *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* (1993). This article is the text of an address given to the World Methodist Conference Committee on Education and the International Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (IAMSCU) in Rio de Janeiro on August 8, 1996.
our world, whether near to us or far away. It is that sensitivity which from time to time permits the emergence of leaders with vision, such as Vaclav Havel and Nelson Mandela, who can inspire people to better things because they articulate eternal truths and aspirations.

It is impossible to talk about "education in a new century" without placing it in the context of how our late-twentieth-century world is changing. I would like to comment upon a few of the really broad global challenges that humankind faces as we move into the next century, challenges so extensive that no society will be immune from their implications.

Thoughts on the Turn of the Century

I should warn you in advance that my remarks will be rather somber and dark, although not fatalistic. I will be describing global trends that are troubling, but I will also be suggesting responses. The text for this secular homily will be H. G. Wells's famous quote at the beginning of the twentieth century that humankind "is involved in a race between education and catastrophe."

Looking back over this troubled century of ours, especially its devastating wars and conflicts and repressions, it is hard not to be impressed by Wells's forecast. Many people had approached the close of the nineteenth century confident in humankind's creativity; the bustle of new industries like steel, chemicals, electrical goods; new forms of transportation like the automobile and flying machines; and new forms of communication like the telegraph and, slightly later, the radio. Commerce was growing, new lands were being opened up, the world was humming . . .

But Wells understood that human creativity could be used for less peaceful purposes, that the new industries were also creating guns and tanks and warships, that aircraft could be used offensively, that the radio and the newspaper could be agents of nationalism and colonialism, that the emergence of new economic giants like Germany and Japan were challenging to the more established powers, that the pace of change was making certain groups feel uneasy, alienated, disoriented, resentful. Wells was not surprised to observe how the peoples of Europe cheerfully welcomed the coming of war in 1914—a conflict not only horrible in itself but one which spawned and
stimulated those twin movements of Fascism and Communism that were to afflict humankind for generations to follow.

I do not know whether we stand at the opening of another century that will bring a further bout of Great-Power conflicts. Among scholars of international relations, there is no consensus. The realist school, which asserts that nation-states always are prone to jostle against each other because they exist in an anarchic world and are naturally competitive, expect the story of “The Rise and Fall of Great Powers” to go on, though perhaps with the greatest clashes being in Asia rather than in Europe. They point to continued arms races, proliferation, border clashes, and so forth. The other schools of thought are more optimistic. Some assert that the growing interconnectedness of national economies and the coming of truly global trading patterns make for peace. Others feel that humankind has learned from the past the lesson that wars are devastating and unpredictable and to be avoided and that nuclear weapons especially can never be used. Still others argue that, since democracies never go to war against other democracies, the trend towards democratization over the past ten or fifteen years is an encouraging one. Finally, one can point to the emergence of what might be called “international society,” using such instruments as the United Nations, non-proliferation treaties, and the International Court of Justice, that will help to head off the prospects for serious interstate wars like those in 1914 and 1939.

As opposed to that traditional way of looking at international affairs, with the nation-state at the center and power-politics as the main agenda, a relatively new group of scholars has started to argue that we should pay much more attention to certain transnational nonmilitary trends that might well provide the sources for future instability, insecurity, and conflict.

What are the global trends that have this potential to become newer causes of insecurity, if we cannot understand them and control them over the next decade?

THE CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION IN A NEW CENTURY
Considering only truly global trends—as opposed to important but regional trends such as the rise of Asia—the three broadest are probably the following:

a) the continuing technology explosion;
b) global population changes; and
c) the transformation of the global labor force.

Technology

The first trend, the impact of technology upon our lives and businesses and governments and nations, is so profound and obvious and pervasive that it needs but little discussion. Since the invention of the wheel, the plough, and controlled fire—and especially since the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions of 200 years ago—technological changes have steadily and increasingly affected our material condition. The pace of today’s change is enormous and astonishing, and yet it is easy to explain. We have more scientists, engineers, technologists, laboratories, and research institutes across the world than ever before. According to one estimate, 85 percent of all the scientists who ever lived are living now. Put that together with the total liberation of investment capital, the information revolution, and the heightened competitiveness in virtually all areas of goods and services, and the result is an outpouring of new devices, techniques, instruments, and products—items which we swiftly take for granted but which hardly existed ten years earlier.

The general consequences of this heightened competitiveness, I would suggest, are an increase in efficiency, productivity, and overall wealth. The world is getting wealthier faster than ever before. This, together with the growing acceptance of a more level playing field in international trade under World Trade Organization rules, is having a deflationary effect on prices in general. The effect upon wages and other compensations is more mixed and interesting: these developments tend to reward those who either possess venture capital or own knowledge—software engineers, patent lawyers—but they simultaneously put downward pressures upon farmers, textile workers, and others supplying basic, transferable and reproducible goods. There is an increasing squeezing of the margins everywhere, whether it is upon oil and gas extraction rates in the energy industry,
competitiveness among the airlines, or the traditional notion of the nine-to-five working day. For individuals, there are deep, secular pressures for re-education and retraining simply to stay up-to-date. Even a college degree is not enough without subsequent professional training.

Rise in Population

The second major global trend I'd like to discuss is the vast increase in the human population of this planet. There were two billion people living in 1925, and by 1975 that had doubled to four billion. There are now approximately 5.8 billion beings alive today, and we are adding to that total by around ninety-five million each year. These increases are not uniform across the globe: 95 percent of the forecast doubling of the world's overall population in the next half-century will take place in poorer, resource-depleted societies, whereas the richer countries, such as the twenty or so nations who are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), will contain slower-growing and older populations. The overall consequence will be a steady increase in material demands. The forecast rises in the requirements for capital, infrastructure, and energy that flow from Asia's economic expansion alone are colossal; and there are now equally ambitious plans being developed for South America.

The other consequences of these demographic shifts are less pleasant to contemplate. It implies further enormous strains being placed upon Third World societies that are least well equipped to handle these pressures; collapsed social fabrics such as Rwanda are more than likely. Some of these crises could well have serious spillover effects that would unsettle world capital markets; population pressures and disputes over resources like water supplies in Asia and the Middle
East would make the markets very volatile. It is going to be a miracle to get these societies, with their heavy percentages of energetic, frustrated young people, through the next twenty years without great social implosions or explosions. As a rule-of-thumb, when more than 20 percent of a society's population is between the ages of 15 and 24, there is a strong likelihood of turbulence. If we are not careful, I also think, this could be the background to serious North-South tensions, because it will show up further the "disconnect" between where the wealth is and where the people are (i.e., the top 15 percent of the world population possess 85 percent of its product). Finally, there are staggering environmental concerns—if India and China (especially) continue to industrialize at their current pace, and continue their present "dirty" emissions, their global warming becomes a very real thing.

It is most symbolic, therefore, that we meet in Rio—not just because Brazil, with its present population of 160 million forecast to rise to 250 million by 2025, is plainly exhibiting all these strains but because it was in this city that the U.N. Conference on the Environment took the first steps to respond to these problems.

The Expanding Global Workforce

The third major force for global change is actually the product of the other two: a combination of the technology-and-globalization revolutions and great population growth, which will lead to the vast expansion of people entering the global workforce over the next generation. By "global workforce" I mean people producing manufactures and other wares for export, not just local farmers and craftsmen. According to Professors Jensen and Fagan of the Harvard Business School, around 250 million workers exist in North America and the European Union. They enjoy relatively high wages internationally, and in some countries like France and Germany a very high social wage (pensions, etc.). Over the past twenty years, many of them have come under pressure due to the emergence of 90 million further workers in Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea, who can produce much the same goods—cars, electrical goods, computers—though at a considerably lower price. In the industries affected, this has led to considerable downsizing and relocation of factories to lower-labor regions.
But the biggest pressures are to come. Jensen and Fagan estimate that over the next generation alone (twenty years), a further 1.2 billion workers will enter into the global workforce in South Asia, East Asia, and Latin America, with an average wage of merely US $3 a day compared with the average wage in the United States and Europe of $85 a day—i.e., earning only 1/30th in wages, yet producing much the same goods because of the universality of assembly.

You can easily begin to imagine some of the consequences of this process. The sheer numbers involved are staggering. They will have a severe deflationary affect upon Western wages in all fields where this international competition exists and is supervised under the rules of the World Trade Organization. Jensen and Fagan believe that real wages in affected industries will fall by up to fifty percent over the next two decades, that there will have to be severe cuts in the social wage, and that social and political tensions will mount, with some democracies collapsing in the meantime. The alternative to this Darwinian struggle would be a return to protectionism or at least the strengthening of regional blocs. On the positive side, the emergence of this vast group of Developing World consumers promises to increase demand for goods enormously, if the story of what happened in, say, Taiwan is replicated. The big question is one of speed and numbers: can 1.2 billion people enter the global workforce within one generation, smoothly, peacefully, and without damaging the ecosystem—or are those numbers simply so large and is the pace of change going to be so fast that it will overwhelm existing social and political structures, both in the developed world and the developing world?
Devising a Strategy for Change

If the above picture of the future of our global society is roughly correct—that is, of a world enjoying greater productive growth but also suffering from increased inequalities, environmental stresses, and social distress—then it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the early twenty-first century will see many domestic and international turbulences as countries crack under the pressures of change. The final question is, therefore: What, if anything, can and should be done to ameliorate our volatile global condition and to bring us away from the ecological and social thresholds that many experts fear we are fast approaching? Instead of just thinking and writing about the future, what should we be doing about it?

Bear in mind also that these technological, demographic, and environmental forces for change are not separate from but are in fact increasingly interacting with the domain of politics, regional rivalries, territorial quarrels, and ethnic and religious tensions and with fears of proliferation . . . and all this complexity seems to expose as inadequate the responses and the thought-world of politicians from Tokyo to Rome, from Washington to Berlin. The confusion and the pressures also encourage the popularity of demagogic and fundamentalist political movements, the disparaging of other cultures and other peoples, and a turning-inwards. Just last year, France, for so long a traditional asylum for all types of refugees, declared itself to be a "zero immigration" country.

Can anything be done to ameliorate or perhaps even arrest these ominous general trends? Of course there can, in theory. What if we employed the tens of thousands of scientists and engineers now released from Cold War-related research to devote their talents to producing solutions to our global problems? These solutions could range from the truly dramatic and large-scale (like a significant breakthrough in solar and photovoltaic energy systems) to low level, appropriate, sustainable, village-based technologies that are, in experimental form, already showing promise in West Africa and India. What if we could find a way of transferring the results of biotech advances (for example, disease-resistant and heat-resistant crops) to poorer nations without requiring large patent or user fees? What if the rich OECD countries actually fulfilled their 20-year-old promise to allocate a mere 0.7 percent of Gross Domestic Product each year to development aid (in which
regard the U.S., alas, has one of the poorest records of all, offering less than 0.2 per cent of GDP to such purposes)?

Changing priorities and reallocating spending targets clearly requires political leaders with a global vision and a willingness to articulate larger, universal principles. Perhaps we have such leaders now. But perhaps they are so concentrated upon domestic fiscal and health-care issues—admittedly important—that they will be slow and hesitant to act. What could get them to change priorities? In a democracy, the answer is clear: persistent pressure and expressions of concern, especially by the more articulate members of the public; by university-educated people; by executives, bankers, teachers, scientists, healthcare specialists; and by the graduates and future graduates of Methodist and Catholic colleges and universities, as well as pressing secular institutions of higher learning.

But why should our graduates be expected to express such concerns, pressing our political leaders to respond positively and intelligently to global trends, if university educators—the presidents, professors, and advisors—have not taught them about these matters? I hope fellow-educators won’t get me wrong here. It is, I agree, silly to present one vision of what university education entails. Of course, universities and colleges should pursue knowledge for its own sake. But that is not their single purpose, otherwise we should all be like All Souls College, Oxford, where there are neither undergraduates nor graduates, only professors, pursuing research. Of course, universities should seek to prepare students in practical ways for future jobs; but that is not their sole purpose either. Otherwise we might all be better off being converted to trade schools. Of course, we should strive to produce the idealized “well-rounded human being,” but that doesn’t mean we should all convert to small liberal-arts colleges. Pursuing knowledge for its own sake, preparing for a career, producing well-rounded human beings, each describe part of a university’s purpose. But there is, I think, another part and another purpose, namely, educating...
students to be world citizens who are aware of, interested in, and informed about what is happening both to the nation and to our larger global society.

I feel that at Yale and other universities I’ve visited, we are only now beginning to respond to the challenge. We have not, for example, seriously reconsidered our curriculum, with its heavy emphasis upon traditional disciplinary boundaries and ever-greater specialization, to achieve that larger purpose. By all means, if you wish, insist that every student takes a course in Western Civilization or, if your ideological taste is different, on non-Western Civilizations. But consider also what could be done if everyone studied courses on “Science, Technology and Society,” that is, if our students came to see and understand the interactions and the consequences of the ever-quickening pace of scientific and technological change upon our own society and upon our global society. How can we expect the next generation of citizens, voters, and political leaders to respond intelligently in the future if they haven’t even learned what is going on in this world of ours? Again, insist upon a compulsory survey course in your nation’s own history, if you will; but what about requiring the study of contemporary history, to allow students to make sense of the kaleidoscopic nature of the events that are going on all around us?

Then there is the important field of cultural studies, of literature, the arts, philosophy and associated disciplines. Has not the time come to encourage more the study of comparative cultures, religions, belief-systems, not to denigrate or marginalize our own but simply to obtain a better understanding of how other peoples, in other cultures, interpret the role of the individual, society, gender, authority, global issues? Surely these are more important in this fractured world of ours where strategic experts, including a distinguished Harvard professor, now predict that our biggest future challenge will be “the coming clash of civilizations.”

But I rather doubt that such changes in curricula could be taught—or taught well—by a single professor or by a single department. The type of courses I’ve just outlined reach across the
boundaries of history, political science, economics, the natural sciences, the environment, demography, anthropology, regional studies, the arts, culture, and religion. In the real world, all of those elements interact—which is why the real world, as in Bosnia or China or North Africa, is so devilishly difficult to comprehend, let alone deal with. In the world of academe, those elements are separated and very often isolated into specialized disciplines, which makes our subjects reassuring, controllable, and (all too often) inward-looking. I wonder if this is wise. In a significant speech a few years ago by the head of the Social Science Research Council, David Featherman, entitled “What Should Society Expect of Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century?” he observed that most colleges and universities still concentrated their teaching within departmental disciplines that were established in the seventeenth century—history, the classics, literature, mathematics, philosophy—at a time when today’s knowledge explosion is transcending all those boundaries, creating new connections, and pointing to the interacting, interdisciplinary dimensions of much of what we teach.

Regardless of how and to what extent higher education restructures itself over the next decade or more, we can all surely agree about the significance of this issue, precisely because knowledge, understanding, education is so important and because our institutions will play a role in deciding or neglecting the fate of affairs in the early part of the 21st century. Let us strive so that, in the course of that education, our students acquire an appreciation of the need to become world citizens, conscious that we share this spaceship Earth with another five billion human beings.

I began these remarks by reference to H. G. Wells. I should like to end by reference to a very different work, Hans Kung’s book Global Responsibility, in which he argues for people of all faiths to recognize their common humanity and to work towards establishing a global ethos which admitted that we were, all of us, responsible not only to God but to our neighbors, close and far. If we can transmit that global ethos to the present and future generations of our students, the results could be immense. The least we can do is try.
Notes


Jeffrey N. Decker
Donald W. Griesinger

Mainline Churches in Decline:
Turnaround Strategies for United Methodists

At a time when the percentage of North Americans who claim to be Christians is higher than ever, mainline Protestant denominations in the United States are in crisis. Since 1940, the proportion of Americans identifying themselves as Episcopalians has declined more than 30 percent, Presbyterians more than 40 percent, and United Methodists nearly 50 percent. From a high of over 11 million in the 1960s, the number of Americans who belong to the United Methodist Church, the second largest Protestant denomination, is now below 9 million and continues to fall. The loss has been steady and unrelenting. How are leaders to explain this decline? What can they do to reverse it?

Sociologists, church-growth experts, pastors, and lay leaders all have opinions but no clear consensus on the cause or remedy has yet emerged. Since empirical studies are scant, and virtually none has focused on United Methodists, we initiated a research program to examine the possible contribution of a variety of factors to the alarming decline and to identify strategies for reversing this trend. We

Donald Griesinger is Professor of Management at the Peter F. Drucker Graduate Management Center at the Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, California. This article is based on a statistical study by Jeffrey Decker, Assistant Professor at Whittier College in Whittier, California.
believe our results will interest and help all church leaders as they strive to fulfill the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples...”

Our study focuses on membership performance in more than 230 United Methodist congregations in southern California from 1980 through 1993, drawing on data from the church’s California-Pacific Annual Conference Journals and from census records. In addition, we considered responses from detailed questionnaires completed by more than 400 lay leaders from more than 80 congregations and personal interviews with numerous United Methodist church and conference leaders. Our first objective was to identify factors that are significantly associated with the percentage change in membership of individual congregations, which in this case includes United Methodist Churches with memberships from 200 to 3,000 people. We have considered circumstances external to the congregation, such as changes in community demographics, number of competing churches, economic conditions, and so forth, as well as elements over which church leaders might exercise greater influence, such as congregational attitudes and priorities, theological emphases, program characteristics, growth strategies, and managerial practices. To our knowledge, no previous empirical study has entertained such a diverse range of variables in attempting to identify factors that contribute to church growth and decline. In the following sections of this article, we shall summarize our findings and offer recommendations for improving membership performance.

Environmental Factors

The first set of findings is based on a statistical analysis of congregational demographic and membership data contained in census records and California-Pacific Annual Conference Journals. Among the many variables tested, we found three to be significantly related to the decline in church membership between 1980 and 1993: urban location, increasing ethnic diversity in the local neighborhood, and number of pastoral changes during the period studied. The first two factors are wholly in accord with expectations. Most writers on church growth and decline note that the changing nature of our cities presents unique challenges for established churches. For example, as their members move to the suburbs, urban churches often find their
metropolitan locations sufficiently inconvenient and too unsafe to continue to attract their traditional constituents.

**Demographic Changes.** As middle-class families escape to the suburbs, the changing socioeconomic and ethnic composition of urban centers often presents challenges that urban congregations and their leaders are ill-equipped to meet. For instance, in southern California, there has been a dramatic increase in the Hispanic and Asian populations. According to sociologists, less than 1 percent of Hispanics and 3 percent of the Asians worship in United Methodist churches countrywide. Thus, attracting and serving these new constituencies requires very substantial capacities for change that not all congregations or their leaders possess or welcome. We found the situation to be exacerbated by heightened competition from less-traditional nondenominational churches that abound in the inner city—urban Methodist congregations face more than twice the concentration of nondenominational competitors than their suburban counterparts. Although we also found evidence that membership decline is positively correlated with congregational age and size, these results are confounded by the fact that older and larger churches tend to be concentrated in metropolitan areas, places that are most impacted by the demographic changes and competitive pressures described above. Once the effects of location and demography are taken into account, the age and size of the church do not appear to play a significant role. Still these relationships are worth noting.

**Pastoral Turnover.** The third environmental factor related to membership decline is the number of pastoral changes, a variable that heretofore has received very little attention in church-growth research. Typically, pastoral change in United Methodist churches occurs for one of the following reasons: 1) death or retirement, 2) changes initiated by conference executives, 3) changes initiated by the pastor, or 4) changes initiated by the congregation. Although pastoral change is sometimes the result of congregational initiative, pastors and conference executives indicated that this is relatively infrequent compared to the first three, largely exogenous, factors. Whatever the cause, we found that between 1980 and 1993 United Methodist churches in the California-Pacific Conference on average experienced a change in senior pastor once every five years. It is alarming to discover that on average these churches lost about 8 percent of their 1980 membership in each transition! Of the environmental variables
tested, we found that pastoral turnover constituted the single most important correlate with membership decline, a finding that supports Bishop Wilke's contention that ministerial itinerancy may no longer be in the best interest of the United Methodist Church. Furthermore, the strength of this effect signals the important role of leadership in church growth.

Leadership Factors

Looking at external factors alone portrays a rather bleak situation. However, this is by no means the whole story. Despite an almost 50 percent reduction in the number of United Methodists in southern California since 1970, approximately 30 percent of the congregations included in the study had more members in 1993 than they did in 1980. Why are some of these congregations succeeding and others not? Are any of them responding successfully to the changing environmental realities? How might leaders and their congregations respond constructively in the current circumstances?

To answer these questions, we invited pastors of the conference churches to select several lay leaders from their congregations to participate in a detailed survey about their church, its values, priorities, and practices. Out of concern for the reliability of the results, we will only report here on the 77 churches for which we received completed questionnaires from at least three respondents. Using statistical methods, we first removed the portion of membership change attributable to the external factors discussed above and then evaluated the relationship between the residual changes in membership and the wide range of internal variables represented in the questionnaire.

The results are more complex than we expected, but they paint an interesting picture. Some questionnaire items were correlated with membership change and others were not; however, we discovered that certain variables interact with others, so that when acting together they are considerably more powerful in distinguishing between growing and declining churches than when acting alone. These interactions are analogous to a medical treatment in which one or another drug administered separately may have minimal effect; but, when two or more are combined they produce significant consequences, whether
for good or ill. The most important of these interaction effects are described below.

**Reaching Out to Newcomers.** The strongest effect was the interaction we call *reaching out to newcomers*. This variable comprises an interaction among the following variables: 1) offering interesting and attractive programs, 2) making membership easy and convenient, and 3) placing more emphasis on increasing the number of members in the church than on increasing the commitment of existing members. In the management literature, this might be described as creating a customer, which follows from Peter Drucker's now famous questions, “Who is the customer?” and “What does the customer value?”

Clearly, churches are competing for people's time and involvement not just with other churches but with a myriad of other activities. Focusing on the needs and concerns of newcomers, making inquiry convenient and non-threatening, and allowing folks to make connection at their own pace seems to be a winning combination, a formula that church-growth practitioners have called the “seeker-sensitive church.” We could have used the term *evangelism* rather than *reaching out to newcomers*; however, we elected the latter designation in order to avoid any unnecessarily narrow connotations adhering to the word *evangelism*, particularly among conservatives. Contrary to the thinking of some church-growth scholars, we found no significant difference between theologically more conservative congregations and other churches in how they scored in this important component of church outreach.

**Building Member Commitment.** Although the primary emphasis in growing congregations was on attracting and serving newcomers, *building member commitment* was also important. This factor consists of an interaction between two variables: member commitment and tolerance of differences. Our data indicated that in growing churches much is expected of members, and everyone is encouraged to be actively involved. At the same time, however, effective leaders appear to be tolerant of individual differences and do not insist on reaching consensus when differences arise. Leaders apparently must juggle a number of concerns as they attempt to set high expectations for member commitment and involvement while also assuring a climate of openness to newcomers and acceptance of individual differences. While the first interaction emphasizes a “light” relationship with
newcomers, this interaction indicates that membership growth also requires commitment and involvement among those who freely choose to connect.

One United Methodist pastor noted the success of certain rapidly growing nondenominational churches in simultaneously building member commitment and reaching out to newcomers. For instance, several successful seeker-sensitive churches devote Sunday services to the needs of newcomers but also hold worship services designed for “believers” on weeknights. This enables committed members to meet their own worship and fellowship needs, while at the same time freeing them to reach out to newcomers on Sundays. The large variety of activities and multiple venues for involvement that attract newcomers also provides members with diverse opportunities to reach out and serve others. Apparently this too is a winning combination, if leaders can pull it off.

**Equipping the Laity for Ministry.** One secret to member involvement and commitment seems to be the presence of a clear, inspiring vision of the congregation’s future. This provides the impetus and focus for recruiting, equipping, and motivating members for participation in the various ministries and activities of the church. Referring to the biblical admonition to equip God’s people for works of service (Eph. 4:12), Peter Wagner describes an “equipper” as a leader who possesses a vision for the entire church, instills the vision in the people, and actively recruits and develops participants to help achieve it.7

Wagner’s argument for a relationship between visionary leadership and membership growth is clearly supported by our data. We found a third factor associated with growing churches, which we call equipping the laity for ministry, that consists of an interaction between the presence of a bold collective vision of the future and equally bold efforts to equip and deploy the laity to bring it about. Vision alone is not enough—it is also the enabling role of leadership that is captured by this finding.

**Bold Plans for Growth.** Both vision and a plan to achieve it are embodied in Wagner’s notion of an equipper-leader. Accordingly, we examined the extent to which formal planning processes for coordinating church activities and finances might affect church growth. While we found no simple connection between membership change and formal planning, we did find a more complex relationship,
which we call **bold plans for growth**, involving the interaction between planning and the degree of stretch required to reach the church's goals and aspirations. Churches that employed formal planning processes directed toward achieving goals and dreams that dramatically exceed their current ministries and resources were more likely to grow than other churches, all other things being equal. This not only provides further support for Wagner's position, but it is wholly in line with the management literature, which states that strategic thinking (i.e., visioning) and strategic programming (i.e., planning) are important interconnected activities.

**Conflicting Cultures.** Lest we conclude that vision, planning, and equipping constitute the whole of leadership, we found that conflict over the implementation of bold innovative plans was one significant cause of membership decline. Evidently, the degree of buy-in to the plans advanced by the church's leadership is tested in implementation. This was particularly apparent in some of the churches we studied that experienced overwhelming conflict when offering both "traditional" and "alternative" worship services (e.g., a non-English speaking or contemporary service). Accordingly, we have called this variable **conflicting cultures**, although we recognize there may be other bases of conflict that may be equally debilitating. As times and constituencies change, attempts to accommodate differences are bound to tax the cultural "comfort zone" of some members, causing resistance and conflict and limiting the capacity of the congregation to reach out to new constituencies. Under these circumstances, it may be difficult for leaders to reach the necessary consensus to fulfill their plans or even to achieve a sufficient level of tolerance among distressed parties to maintain a fit level of diversity. One can also imagine the additional negative effect of a pastoral change, whether voluntary or imposed, on the ability of a divided congregation to reach sufficient agreement to accommodate demographic and other changes imposed by the environment.

**Negative View of the Laity.** Like the previous interaction, our sixth and last composite variable—leadership's negative view of the laity—is also correlated with membership decline. This variable is comprised of the interaction between 1) the leadership clique's own internal solidarity and trust, 2) their emphasis on stewardship over evangelism, and 3) their shared negative view of the average church
Our data indicate that membership decline is associated with
the degree to which these three factors are simultaneously in play.

There is more than one way to interpret this result. First, the
interaction of these factors describes a "we-they" relationship between
leaders and members, a defensive posture that is inhospitable to lay
ministry and outreach. There is evidence here not only of a fortress
mentality with respect to newcomers but of leadership's alienation
from the average member, failing to recognize the potential for greater
lay involvement and contribution to ministry.

Another interpretation, not necessarily at odds with the first, is
conditioned by the cultural shift in attitudes toward authority
widespread in society today, particularly among younger people. The
older, more hierarchical view of authority is based on a
command-and-control mind set. From this perspective, leaders are
expected to have "the right answers," and members are called upon
simply to follow instructions and be loyal. Wisdom, creativity, and
decision-making are centralized in the leadership core, and other
members of the organization are duty-bound to comply with the
leader's directives. Neglecting to do so is seen as moral failure, which
in the church might be taken as confirmation of the fallen state of
humankind. This point of view is hardly conducive to hearty lay
participation in church growth, nor is it likely to attract and hold
creative, service-minded members—particularly young people.

McGregor has observed that the command-and-control perspective is
premised on the view that the average person shuns responsibility and
will avoid work whenever possible, and therefore must be coerced,
controlled, coaxed, or shamed into action. Organizational participants
who are treated as if this were so often react to such treatment in ways
that affirm the underlying beliefs. Our research confirms a relationship
between a decline of membership and the extent to which leaders both
lack confidence in their members and neglect evangelism.

In contrast to the old paradigm, most organizational scholars today
hold the view that organizational performance is improved when
leaders energize participants with a compelling vision, involve them in
the planning process, and release rather than constrain their individual
initiative and creativity. This, of course, is the thinking behind
Wagner's pastor-equipper. Accordingly, the new organizational logic
recommends that a leader wishing to build a high-performance
organization should create a supportive, yet challenging context for
individual initiative and involvement that emphasizes personal
responsibility and cooperation in the achievement of shared goals. This assumes a more positive view of human nature, namely that people are naturally motivated to invest their physical and mental energies to achieve organizational purposes and welcome increased responsibility for activities under their control. It also assumes that participants' imaginative and creative capacities constitute significant organizational resources. Again, McGregor points out that leaders whose expectations are in accord with this view of their people are likely to create the opportunities necessary to energize the positive behavior they believe possible and produce outcomes that confirm their positive motivational assumptions. The contrast between the effects on church growth of the two variables leadership's negative view of the laity and equipping the laity for ministry clearly supports the distinction between these two leadership attitudes.

Some scholars hold that conservative theology is also an important factor in church growth. Given the impressive growth of conservative nondenominational churches, possibly at the expense of mainline churches, we expected our research to confirm this effect; however, we found no such evidence in our data set. The reasons are not altogether clear. One explanation may be associated with conservative theology's alleged bias toward a negative view of humankind. We found a significant difference between conservative churches and the others on this dimension, possibly stemming from an emphasis by conservatives on the doctrine of original sin and the fallen state of human nature. If such a bias exists, it may not only affect membership decline for reasons suggested above but may also account for the previously mentioned finding that despite their "evangelical" doctrine, conservative congregations in our sample were not significantly more effective in reaching out to newcomers than other congregations.

There is an interesting tension here worth pondering. Could it be that despite their avowed commitment to the Great Commission, some
conservative churches are impeded by a low view of human potential? Might the bad news about sin sometimes obscure the good news that in Christ we are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)? Although counter-examples abound, particularly in the renewal movements, we found indications that some forms of conservatism may set cultural and attitudinal boundaries that are not easily penetrated by newcomers, and, perhaps unintentionally, hinder ordinary believers from assuming responsibility for reaching out to others. This negative mind-set is the clear antithesis of the view of evangelical church-growth advocate Wagner, who emphasizes "an attitude of optimism and faith" and highlights the importance of spiritual gifts and human work in advancing the kingdom of God.10 "Church growth leaders are not intimidated by the charge that they are 'triumphalists,' " he writes. "They are convinced that Christ is building His church as He said He would (see Matt. 16:18), and they are confident that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.... Their paradigm for evangelism is ..., the day of Pentecost where three thousand came to Christ, ... " People of all nations, we might add!

Strategies for Change

The separation of environmental factors from leadership factors implies that leaders exercise influence over the latter but not the former, which is not necessarily the case. Whether by their action or inaction, leaders choose, shape, or at least color the environment in which their organizations function. For instance, some years ago, an Anglican bishop assigned several dwindling inner city churches in Bristol to one lone priest, since none of these churches could support its own cleric. After studying the situation, the young priest gained the bishop's permission to consolidate the churches into one, close the rest, dispose of their property, and build a new congregation in a new multipurpose facility focused directly on inner-city needs. The result was a vigorous Christ-centered witness in the heart of the city, serving the poor, the addicted, and the disenfranchised in unprecedented ways. In this case, the same environment that accounted for the decline of the original churches, when revisioned, presented the impetus for a new expanded work. Halfway around the world, another church in a deteriorating neighborhood near Folsom Prison, in an attempt to arrest their decline, sold their building and moved to the suburbs where
many existing members and others of their kind lived—people who were responsive to the church's offerings. Their original facility was purchased by a newly established nondenominational group with a heart to serve the troubled families of prison inmates. Today, the innovative new congregation is thriving where the former congregation had struggled. In fact, both churches are doing well, each having chosen an environment more congruent with its vision.

Physical relocation is only one strategic response to environmental change. Alternatively, a church might adapt its vision to the changing conditions, transforming threats into opportunities. Several years ago, management scholars Raymond Miles and Charles Snow introduced the concept of "strategic orientation" to characterize alternative approaches organizations might take to changing environmental conditions. They noted that at least three viable strategies were identifiable—prospectors, analyzers, and defenders—each playing a somewhat different role within any given industry. Prospectors are the innovators. They are the first to try new approaches to their markets, differentiating themselves from their competitors by their innovative products or services. Analyzers are seldom the innovators, but they adopt, tailor, and perfect the innovations of others in ways that enable them to reach wider markets than their competitors. Both prospectors and analyzers are intent on creating new customers and serving new markets. They are externally oriented and adaptive to change—lumped together we will call them adaptors. In contrast, defenders are more internally focused. They change very slowly, preferring instead to stick with a reliable, well-established product line, efficiently delivered to an established customer base. Miles and Snow also note that certain organizational forms and management processes are better suited to one orientation than another. For instance, adaptors function best with more flexible, organic, and decentralized structures and processes, compared to defenders, whose processes and structures are typically more centralized, hierarchical, and bureaucratic.

It is not hard to see how these orientations might also apply to churches. Any particular denomination or movement may be characterized to some extent by one or another of these orientations (e.g., historical mainline denominations like the Methodists as defenders versus newer nondenominational movements like the Vineyard as prospectors). Within a denomination, such as the United Methodist Church, the strategic orientations of individual
congregations may be similarly characterized. What one church may define as a hostile environment requiring defensive action another church may see as an opportunity for growth. To some degree, a congregation, as an interpretive community, constructs its own environment. Though it is a blunt instrument, “strategic orientation” gives some indication of how a local church and its leaders see the environment and their relationship to it.

We reasoned that as part of a historic mainline denomination, more United Methodist churches would be defenders than adaptors. To examine this hypothesis, we asked church leaders to characterize their churches according to one of several vignettes we prepared based on Miles and Snow’s categories. As expected, over half of the churches categorized themselves as defenders, while the remainder were distributed among the other orientations. We then compared the membership performance of the defenders versus the others and found that membership performance was significantly better for adaptors than for defenders.

These findings prompted us to ask whether the factors affecting membership performance were any different for defenders than for adaptors. To answer this question, we examined again the full range of internal and external variables extant in our data base, first for defenders and then for adaptors. The differences are intriguing. For defenders, only two variables were identified as significantly related to membership growth. The first was the internal interaction variable equipping the laity for ministry, described above, which was positively related to membership growth. The second was the environmental variable urban location, which was negatively related to growth. In contrast, for adaptors, each of the variables that significantly affected membership performance involved effective leadership. The first two variables, reaching out for new members and bold plans for growth, were positively related to membership growth, and the third, leadership’s negative view of the laity, was negatively related.

The absence of environmental factors for adaptors is particularly noteworthy, because there was no significant difference in the fraction of urban churches among those classifying themselves as adaptors than for defenders. That urban forces were associated with decline for defenders but not for adaptors is consistent with the view that the defender strategy is not working for urban churches. Apparently, defenders experience their urban environment as a threat to growth, whereas for adaptors, the enemy, if there is one, is within. It is also
Ironically, reaching out for new members, the most significant variable for adaptors, was not significant for defenders, particularly since our data shows that defenders faced significantly more competition from other churches within their service areas than adaptors. We may speculate that the failure of defender churches to reach out to their neighborhoods has created a vacuum that other churches have been willing to fill, creating competitive pressures that accelerate decline. Simply stated, adaptors demonstrate a greater willingness to "go and make disciples" than defenders, which has obvious consequence for church growth.

Given the decline of membership in mainline churches, it is interesting to consider where the departing members are going. No doubt some are defecting to the growing independent, nondenominational, evangelical, and charismatic sectors of the Christian church. To the extent this is so, one must ask whether those who are leaving mainline churches are more likely to be the young, the independent, and the innovative—that is, prospectors and analyzers rather than defenders. If so, the decline is likely to accelerate as adaptive resources shift within Christendom from the mainline denominations to other more adaptive church groups—bad news for mainline denominations, but good news for the expanding segments of the Christian church.

To use a biblical metaphor, it seems to us that a productive winery processes both new and old wine and accordingly employs both new and old wineskins. The question for denominational leaders is whether they see their denomination as a wineskin or a winery. If a wineskin, the future lies with the defenders, those for whom the old wine is better; but this is a severely diminished future. If a winery, there is hope for renewal, a place for both the old and the new—traditional congregations preserving their rich heritage and timeless truths, as well as innovative congregations boldly reaching out to new constituencies in creative, regenerative, nontraditional ways.

Apparently, defenders experience their urban environment as a threat to growth, whereas for adaptors, the enemy, if there is one, is within.
Recommendations

Today institutions everywhere, both secular and religious, are challenged by unprecedented rates of societal change. For churches in mainline denominations, business as usual is no longer a credible alternative. But what are the options? We think there are two. The church can batten down the hatches, insulate itself from a changing society, and focus inward, providing sanctuary for the faithful, denying its missionary call and becoming instead a community for itself. We call this the “Dead Sea” model. Alternatively, the church can engage in a creative struggle with change, insist on remaining a broad-based player in the advance of Christ’s kingdom, and become what Karl Barth has called “a community for the world.” For the world, not of it. We call this the “River of Life” model.

Though there are numerous signs of life among some of the churches we studied, on the whole, the United Methodists are in a steep slide toward the Dead Sea. Defensiveness, inward focus, resistance to change, malaise, denial, and despair are sufficiently widespread to seriously hamper significant transformation. High-energy young people, frustrated parishioners, and burned-out leaders are leaving their denominational homes and casting their lot with independent, evangelical, and charismatic groups that are committed to the spread of the gospel but who are less encumbered by bureaucracy and change-resistant attitudes. Unless there is massive intervention, this is a formula for a reinforcing cycle of decline. Not good news for mainline churches. Not good at all.

On the other hand, at least 30 percent of the churches we studied were growing despite the larger downward trends. And nearly half of the congregations participating in our survey were adaptors whose leadership was seriously addressing the task of reaching out to newcomers and bringing about the internal transformations necessary to accommodate change. This is good news. But is it good enough? We believe our research identifies some clear and pragmatic actions, summarized below, that leaders can take to reverse the decline and transform their churches into Rivers of Life.

1. Threats from outside are often opportunities for Christian service. A leader’s ability to recognize the veiled opportunities hidden in our turbulent urban centers can provide the vision without which today’s church will perish. The transformation of a church from a defender strategy to an adaptor strategy is a transformation of vision and
attitude, not situation and circumstances. This is less about
demographic change than about attitude change. As Judith Bardwick
warns, there is “danger in the comfort zone.”

2. **Churches must focus on newcomers.** Who are they? What are
their needs? How can they be served? How can the barriers to entry
into the church community be lowered? How can the church
demonstrate love and grace, offer healing and help, present the good
news, not the bad. Seeker-sensitive models abound among
independent nondenominational churches, such as Willow Creek
Community Church in suburban Chicago. These models can be
adapted to denominational norms and widely emulated.
Denominational engines have the potential to identify and proliferate
effective ideas pioneered by other churches wherever they may be
found; but sadly, our data indicate a great reluctance to do so. We
wonder why.

3. **Within the context of a renewed vision to aggressively pursue**
and serve newcomers, **leaders must set high expectations for member
commitment and involvement.** As newcomers hook into the church,
there must be paths into deeper commitment and service that enable
them to grow in faith and responsibility. Discipling is a process that
bears fruit.

4. **A clear, inspiring vision provides the impetus for recruiting,**
equipping, and motivating members to serve others. Innovative
programs and services generated to attract newcomers are some of the
most important vehicles of service for an equipped and committed
laity. Leaders who provide challenging paths for growth and service,
while allowing members to advance at their own pace will experience
the greatest success.

5. **A visionary leader who lacks planning and implementation skills**
will not likely be able to accomplish the needed change without help
in these areas. Both faith-stretching goals and practical planning are
necessary to mobilize the potential of a growing church. Planning
skills can be learned. But planning is also a discipline, a discipline too
often in short supply. The importance of these basic management
practices cannot be overemphasized.

6. **We are keenly aware that vision and planning alone are**
**insufficient for organizational transformation.** Deep cultural change
does not come easily, and in many instances the kind of
transformation that is called for today goes deep indeed. Many leaders
try to impose change without investing in a process to sensitize their
people to cross-cultural differences and the need to bridge them. One pastor periodically arranges special occasions to introduce his congregation to new forms of worship and to ethnic leaders from other churches, calling these occasions "gifts of strangeness" that the church can learn to welcome.

7. The evidence is very strong: leaders of churches in transformation must invest in, develop, and bet on people—ordinary people. Negative attitudes toward the laity, sometimes warranted to be sure, will do more to sap motivation and curtail initiative than most leaders fully appreciate. The command-and-control model of the clergy-lay relationship is passé and simply must give way to more connective, enabling, and high-involvement styles whereby leaders encourage, equip, coordinate, and facilitate the work of the laity.

8. Finally, we have found that continuity of leadership in the church is very important. When clergy advance in their careers by frequent job changes, their churches suffer setbacks that sometimes take years to overcome. This is a much stronger effect in United Methodist churches than we had reason to expect and certainly calls into question their centralized policies of career management. For the local church, leadership involves long-term investments in people and enduring relationships of trust and respect. It also requires an intimate knowledge and love of the community being served and the kind of perseverance and enduring faith that moves mountains.

Though mainline denominations are in trouble, we are bullish on the future of the church. Evidence abounds that times are changing, and numerous responses to the gospel call are emerging, though not always where most expected. Dennis Campbell describes the 1784 advent of the Methodist Church in North America as a "new creation." From its founding, the relation between the church and culture was fundamentally different from Methodism in England. It was a new church with indigenous leadership. It was aggressively evangelistic, with a style of ministry crafted to suit the frontier
realities of the New World. According to Campbell, "Methodism was popular because it met the needs of men and women where they were; and it had the itinerant ministry to reach them. . . . Methodism enthusiastically embraced its context, even as it sought to make it Christian." Today's realities call for new adjustments to a changing world. In the face of change, the question remains: Which institutional forms will carry the Christian church into the next century? Which will successfully impact our neighborhoods, communities, and world for the cause of Christ? What will release the River of Life? By what course will the River flow?

Notes

4. Multiple regression techniques were used. Reported results are statistically significant unless otherwise noted.
7. Wagner, Leading Your Church.
10. Wagner, Leading Your Church, 32-34.
11. Stepwise multiple regression techniques were used.
14. Campbell, I.
Ken Carter

What I'm Learning about the Ministry from Thomas Merton

How does a mainline denomination tap into the spiritual hunger that seems to be present in our culture? Where does an annual conference go to find resources for renewal? Where does a pastor find help when the wells run dry? These questions have been woven into my experiences as a United Methodist pastor serving in a variety of roles within the church. Four years ago I was asked to get involved with our annual conference in the area of spiritual formation. In the process, which was led by Janice Grana, Rueben Job, David Watson, Susan Ruach, and others, I was sent to a consultation at the Upper Room. One of the recurring themes out of that event was the conviction that congregations would go no further spiritually than their pastors. A task force on spiritual formation was formed, with the hope of creating a climate where pastors can focus on their own spiritual journeys, as diverse as they are. A couple of years later I was given the opportunity to form a new congregation, work that is very demanding, stimulating, rewarding, chaotic, and draining. The spiritual life of the pastor, I quickly discovered, is essential to the growth and health of a new church.1

Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., is pastor of Saint Timothy's United Methodist Church, Greensboro, North Carolina. His previous essays in Quarterly Review have been “The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas: Christian Ethics and the Community of the Church” (Winter, 1986) and “Action, Contemplation and Living in Between: A Meditation on Christian Living” (Fall, 1989).
The Importance of Working on Our Own Spiritual Lives

I return to my foundational questions: How do we find spiritual renewal, regardless of our role or context? In the midst of these responsibilities I heard a lecture on the art and poetry of Thomas Merton given by Michael Mott, who has written what is almost universally considered to be the definitive biography of Merton. One statement he made caught my attention: "Merton was never interested in giving other people spiritual advice. He simply wanted to work on his own spiritual life." There was, for me, a connection (an appropriate word for United Methodists), and I became convinced that others would be the beneficiaries if pastors, like Merton, engaged in the task of personal spiritual renewal.

This realization led me to a renewed engagement with the life and works of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, peace activist, celebrity, artist, poet, and best-selling author. What follows is an attempt to draw together his own reflections on subjects that I believe have a great deal of importance and relevance for us as United Methodist pastors.

First, I am convinced that the crisis in the pastoral ministry is a spiritual crisis. In *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Merton reflects on the movement of the monks who went into the desert to pray. He writes:

...to leave the world, is, in fact, to help save it in saving oneself. ... The Coptic hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered around in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them. (p. 23)

The most important reality in our congregational life is the relationship between the pastor and God. If this relationship is then attended to and nurtured other relationships have the potential to be strong and healthy. I am not being escapist. I am simply noting the dangers that are present within and outside our congregations, and indeed the dangers within us. If we flounder, our churches either self-destruct or spend their energies parenting us. Either outcome is dysfunctional.

Reading Merton has helped me to reflect on a variety of issues: my relationship to God, my relationship to the congregation, the
relationship between parents and children. One of the best things we can do for ourselves as pastors is to work on our own spiritual lives. In so doing we will be giving others permission to do the same thing. Practically, this means continuing to be present to God in a variety of ways, such as those events offered in the area of spiritual formation: days apart, spiritual direction, silent retreat, tools for self-awareness, Bible study, accountability, and support in groups. But the availability of these experiences leads to two questions: How can these experiences become the norm for pastors? And how can attending to our spiritual lives become a matter of course for our life “in conference”?

The Meaning of Journey

At the Upper Room event I heard a presentation by Bruce Ough from the Iowa Conference; at that time Reuben Job was serving as bishop of that conference. He described four criteria for appointment-making in the Iowa Conference:

1. Does this person have skills in proclamation?
2. Does this person have relational skills?
3. Does this person have administrative skills?
4. Is this person on a spiritual journey?

In reading Merton one comes to know a person who is on a spiritual journey. This was evident in the evolution of his thought, in his relationship with his peers and his superiors, in the depth of his writing, and in his orientation toward the world. For Merton life itself was a pilgrimage, a journey. This is perhaps best expressed in the well-known prayer found in Thoughts in Solitude:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always.
though I may seem lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (p. 83)

This statement surely has much to say about the experience of itineracy: the unknown outcomes, the necessity of faith, the willingness to risk, the knowledge that God is always with us, echoing the Twenty-third Psalm. The attempt to see the itineracy as a spiritual journey has been a part of the rationale for our Annual Conference's "Day Apart": to offer a time and place for prayer in the midst of life's changing patterns, to see the annual gathering of pastors and lay leaders as something more than an extended business session. Our life together as pastors will be strengthened as we are given opportunities to talk about appointments and ministries in the ways similar to Merton's prayer. Surely we have experienced the emotions present in the above prayer as we have entered new appointments; surely we have questioned our own motives; surely we have looked back and known that God has walked beside us. Ministry, as is life, is an unfolding journey: we are unsure about the future, but we know that the Lord will be with us.

Stability and Intineracy

Merton's sense of pilgrimage coexisted uneasily with his sense of place, in the vow of stability. He once wrote: "As soon as God gets you in one monastery you want to be in another one." A good deal of the early part of The Sign of Jonas deals with a fundamental struggle: should Merton be a Cistercian or a Carthusian. Gradually this question becomes unimportant, as Merton works on other, more important issues.

What does stability mean to us as United Methodists? I sense that frequent mobility might, in some cases, prevent us from working at a significant level with people and their spiritual lives. We simply are not on the scene long enough to develop relationships of trust. In addition, we ourselves do not serve long enough to endure the chaos within a congregation that often precedes new creation. I can think of two particular appointments in my own journey. In one I left after three years; in another I stayed six. In the first I departed just prior to what might have been meaningful ministry; in the second I stayed for
what seemed, at the time, to be too long a time—and yet some significant things happened in the sixth year.

Stability has to do with making peace with where we are and focusing on the God who is everywhere. The temptation, and Merton would have called it a temptation, is to see the next place as a spiritual utopia; it never is. The spiritual life happens where we are, in the present. Merton once wrote the following about prayer:

\[
\text{In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it, and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.} \quad (p. 80)
\]

Do we miss the real meaning of ministry in the places where we are serving because we are always looking to move to another place? What if there is no “greener pasture” anywhere else, only the same issues (self and others) to be dealt with in a new environment? What can we learn from the monastic vow of stability within a polity of itineracy? Merton’s words about being at Gethsemani might be helpful ones for us to ponder in our own settings:

\[
\text{[God] has put me in this place because he wants me to be in this place, and if He ever wants to put me anywhere else, He will do so in a way that will leave no doubt as to who is doing it.} \quad (SJ, \ p. 23)\]

Being Ourselves: What Is False and What Is True

In Merton’s Palace of Nowhere, James Finley describes Merton’s thought in light of a key image: the concept of the false and true self. The false self is denial of who we are, the rejection of our identity and thus the rejection of God. The expression of the false self leads to lies and illusions. The true self, on the other hand, is our whole self before God, the self in communion with God. We are called to the “forward journey back to our original identity in God” (p. 38).

For Wesleyans this is the process of sanctification: the renewal of the image of God in us. The long shadow of the false self leads us to
pretense, concealment, hiding, blaming—all characteristics of the experience of Adam (Genesis 3). The true self is embraced as we live in communion with God in the world and is discovered through the disciplines of silence and solitude.5

How does this relate to ministry? Our conference, our connection, has been deeply affected by experiences over the past few years, experiences of hiding, concealment, blaming, falsehood, and deception. These experiences have been with us since the beginning of time, to be sure, but in our present context they are more likely to become public. There is, in society, a greater demand for integrity among public servants, and this includes pastors who have representative ministries. The implications of the “false self” live themselves out in our relationships with each other, and, as pastors have access to the intimate lives of individuals, the potential danger is obvious. This leads to the necessity for spiritual renewal, accountability, and evaluation. I am convinced that Merton would have been quite comfortable with such practices and systems; indeed, he would have been the first to note our capacity to deceive ourselves. And yet we are given a great deal of freedom, as human beings and as United Methodist pastors, a freedom Merton interprets in the following way:

*God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves, or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face.*

*To work out our own identity in God, which the Bible calls "working out our salvation," is a labor that requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears. (NSOC, p. 31f)*

We are called to work out our own identity in God, to work out our own salvation, to come to the discovery of our own gifts for ministry. And yet this interior calling is always lived out in community. Have we, as United Methodists, valued freedom but not community? Merton valued community, even as he saw that community for what it was:

*I am part of Gethsemani. I belong to the family. It is a family about which I have no illusions. And the most satisfying thing about this sense of incorporation is that I am glad to belong to*
this community, not another, and to be bred flesh and bone into the same body as these brothers and not other ones. Their imperfections and my own remain as obvious as ever, but they no longer seem to make any difference. (SJ, p. 32)

When Merton recognized the truth about himself, he seemed to be able to see his community and to participate in that community without illusions. That, it seems to me, is the process by which people are empowered to take off their masks. Neill Hamilton in *Maturing in the Christian Life* describes the fundamental transition in the pastoral ministry as movement from “the discipleship phase” to “life in the Spirit.” The discipleship phase mirrors the illusion of the disciples of Jesus that he would reestablish the golden age of the Davidic kingdom. “This misperception of the kingdom of God and of Jesus’ role in it,” Hamilton suggests, “is the grand illusion of discipleship.” Hamilton’s description of the implications of this illusion for pastors is striking:

Most of us respond to a call to ministry with particular, beloved and effective clergypersons in mind. As we observe their ministry we see God challenging human life with the transforming power of the gospel. Since we long for such challenge and transformation, we suppose that people in those congregations do also. . . prospective ministers are able to sustain their dream of ministry until their first call or appointment to parish leadership after graduation and full ordination. Then the reality of the profession tumbles in on them. The reality is that the vast majority of persons in a typical congregation do not want themselves or their world to be transformed by the gospel.

Like the disciples, we can overcome our illusions only as we honestly face them through our emptiness. Paradoxically, at this moment we are open to the indwelling spirit. As Hamilton summarizes it, we trade the “eschatology of career” (or, I would add, “institutional survival”) for “readiness for ministry in the Spirit.” Again, Merton can be a wonderful example, having given up prestige and opportunity in order to attain silence and, ultimately, God.
Struggle with Vocation and Gifts

Merton was engaged in a lifelong struggle with his own identity. His particular question was, can I be a writer and be a monk? Merton had a strong desire for solitude and yet he had a gift for writing, a gift that would make solitude difficult if not impossible. In entering the monastery Merton had considered writing to be in his past; then, by God's providence perhaps, he was given a superior who commanded that he do just that: write. For this reason Merton would comment in the following way; an author in a Trappist monastery is like a duck in a chicken coop (SJ, p. 89).

This question is one that is often posed, verbally or nonverbally, by United Methodist pastors: Do I fit here? Can I be myself and be a part of the system? Do I have to give up a core part of myself in order to serve the church and God?

The answers to those questions, for Merton and for us, have a way of working themselves out. Merton made peace with the call to write, indeed flourished in that vocation. Many of us find that if we are open to a process of discernment, God will also use our gifts, the essence of who we are, in our service to the church and the world. Indeed, that is our primary calling as pastors!

God

Do you suppose that I have a spiritual life? I have none . . . for I have renounced spirituality to find God (SJ, p. 334).

Appropriating the work of Thomas Merton for United Methodist pastors, indeed for mainline church leaders at the end of the twentieth century, is a risky endeavor. Spiritual formation is a "hot" topic, and an interest of almost any institutional grouping that has its ear to the ground. To get in on this trend, we may assume that we can simply take Merton and his life and thought and impose him onto our structures, systems, and agendas.

Yielding to this temptation would neither be helpful to us nor true to Merton. Merton was most insightful in pointing us toward those areas of life that were most susceptible to self-deception. He was keenly insistent that schedules, agendas, and analyses often got in the way of a relationship with God.

166 QUARTERLY REVIEW / SUMMER 1997
In Merton we see a human being who lived in the midst of an elaborate system, one designed to nourish the spiritual life. His participation in that system, and his critique of it, can help us as we seek to know, love, and bear witness to God as United Methodist pastors. Merton had no illusions about himself or his tradition; we should have none about ourselves or our own tradition. As a young monk Merton wrote: "Gethsemani is the spring where I am to drink of the waters of life, and, if I look elsewhere, it is to a broken cistern. . . " Other spiritual options have led our culture at times to broken cisterns; there are rich resources from within our own traditions (denominational and ecumenical) from which to draw. A trappist monastery was, for Merton, a conducive setting to engage in the life of the spirit, even with its imperfections. And the United Methodist Church is an appropriate context to work on our own spiritual lives. Merton did not intend to renew the church or to inspire those outside the walls of Gethsemani. He simply worked on his own spiritual life. And as we engage in that task, God will bring renewal to the church and to the world.

Notes

1. For an insightful and hilarious account of spirituality and new church development see Eugene Peterson, Under the Unpredictable Plant (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).
2. The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1984).
3. I should also mention the work of Edwin Friedman, especially Generation to Generation. Friedman’s concept of self-differentiation is embodied in Merton’s statement above.
4. And yet Merton could be ambivalent about this issue. Six weeks later he wrote in his journal: “I went and talked over the whole business of my vocation with Father Abbot and he assured me once again, patiently, everything was quite all right and that this was where I belonged… .” (Sign of Jonas, p. 26).
5. I find the work of Henri Nouwen in Life of the Beloved to echo this point of Merton’s. Of course Merton was probably the primary influence on Nouwen. See his forwards to Merton’s Palace of Nowhere by James Finley and A Seven Day Retreat With Thomas Merton by Esther de Waal, and his brief volume Pray to Live Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic.
7. Ibid., 68-69.
8. Ibid., 106.
9. *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 2*, ed. by Jonathon Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 71-72. The conditions of the Merton Legacy Trust, drawn a year prior to his death, were that his complete journals could not be published until twenty-five years after his death and upon completion of the authorized biography (Michael Mott’s *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*). As these two conditions have been met (Merton died in 1968), the first two of seven volumes have now been published.
Robert Martin Walker

The Mysterious and Moralizing James: Preaching on the Letter of James

While preparing to write this lectionary study on James, I did some field research with two groups of pastors, one ecumenical and one United Methodist. My question to them was, "What do you know about the Letter of James?" Their answers were surprisingly consistent. First, nearly everyone knew that Martin Luther called James a "strawy epistle." Secondly, all but two could quote the most famous saying from James: "Faith without works is dead." Beyond these two items, however, there was a dearth of knowledge about this first of the "Catholic Epistles."

The Letter of James reminds me of a United Methodist church I once pastored: almost every major issue is in dispute. There is no unanimity among New Testament scholars on such basic issues as who wrote James, when he wrote it, to whom he was writing, his relationship to Paul, what literary genre the letter belongs to, and whether James has any thematic or theological unity. Of course, there's little unanimity among scholars on anything these days.

But lack of agreement on these issues hasn't hurt the popularity of this brief (108 verses), moralistic tract. Almost every heavy-hitter in Christian history has weighed in on James: Origen, Cyril, Gregory of

Robert Martin Walker is a full-time writer and a clergy member of the New York Annual Conference. He is author of Politically Correct Old Testament Stories (Andrews & McMeel), Politically Correct Parables, and The Jesus I Knew: Creative Portrayals of Gospel Characters (Abingdon).

THE MYSTERIOUS AND MORALIZING JAMES 169
Nyssa, Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Kierkegaard, and a host of biblical scholars from our own century.

During a research visit to the Yale Divinity School library I was amazed to find over fifty commentaries on James. The prize for the longest goes to a three-volume work by Spiros Zodhiates. The best-known commentary from the twentieth century was published in 1920 by Martin Dibelius, now in its eleventh edition in the Hermeneia series. More recently (1995), Luke Timothy Johnson authored a wonderfully comprehensive commentary on James in the Anchor Bible series, complete with a 164-page introduction (including 617 footnotes!).

With all of the comment and reflection James has inspired over the centuries, you would think a consensus on at least some of the major issues of this book would have emerged. It hasn't. Winston Churchill's observation about Russia, made in 1939, is just as apropos to the Letter of James: It is "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

An Interview with "James"

Fortunately for the readers of Quarterly Review, I have some inside information on the mysterious and moralizing James. While surfing the Internet, I met "James" in an IRC chat room. He or she (it's difficult to discern gender on the Internet) claimed to be the author of the Letter of James. He said he was communicating via the E-Net (Eternal Network). Due to my natural gullibility, I saw no reason to doubt his authenticity. So I took advantage of this unique opportunity to interview James and resolve the questions surrounding him and his book.

QR: Do you realize how many "Jameses" there were in the first two centuries? Who are you really?

James: The debate among scholars over who I am is a constant source of amusement to me. Why would I want to resolve it? If my true identity were known, I would cease to be an object of fascination. I prefer to remain a mystery. I will, however, be happy to make a few comments about the identity issue. If I am James the Lord's Brother (a.k.a. James of Jerusalem, James the Just, James the Lesser), it would explain my knowledge of Jesus' sayings. This would also mean an early date for my "letter," say, around 45 A.D. I'm a little hurt that several commentators dismiss this possibility because the Greek I use...
is too sophisticated for a Galilean peasant. Just because we're poor
doesn't mean we're uneducated. However, if I am a disciple of James
writing in his name (I believe this is called pseudonymity), then I
would have been writing in the second century. This is Martin
Dibelius's position. The issue of who I am will have to be resolved by
looking carefully at what I wrote.

QR: Why did you write your letter?

James: Actually, what I wrote isn't really a letter, even though it
has a greeting. However, you can refer to it as a letter, if you like.
What I was trying to do was to offer practical instruction to Christians
in faithful and righteous living. I'm not as interested in theology, like
Paul, as in practical piety. I don't know about the twentieth century,
but the first century was a dangerous time for Christians. As the
church became more popular, its moral rigor was diluted. As more
Gentiles joined the church, the church became more secular. At first,
only the poor were attracted to our community of faithfulness to the
Lord. After a time, some of the wealthier merchants became a part of
the Christian community. These rich persons brought with them the
temptation to worldliness. I summed this up pretty well when I wrote
that friendship with the world was enmity toward God.

QR: Did you know Paul? If so, what were your impressions of him?

James: I know a trick question when I hear one. You're trying to
discover my identity by finding out when I wrote my tract. Let's say I
knew Paul, either personally or through his letters. I liked him, even
though he could be a little hardheaded at times. Paul and I agreed on
the necessity of Christians to be righteous in their living. The
requirement to keep the Law wasn't washed away by baptism. We also
saw eye-to-eye on following the "love commandment" (I call it the
"royal law"). Like Paul, I believe that faith and its works are
inseparable.

QR: What is your reaction to Luther calling your letter "a right
strawy epistle"?

James: I think Luther was a pretty "strawy" reformer. I'll stack my
work up against the "Ninety-Five Theses" any day, I write as a
Christian. Just because I don't mention "Jesus Christ" every other
sentence doesn't mean I don't believe in him. It's not how often the
Lord's name is cited (however, for the record I use Lord eleven times
in my book); it's whether the message is Christian. In fact, I believe
that the popularity of my book over the centuries has something to do
with how universal its message is.
QR: Martin Dibelius says that your letter has no structure, no unifying theme, and no theology. What do you say to that?

James: What do the Germans have against me? I detect a Teutonic obsession with order here. My book is structured like the moral exhortations you find in 1 Clement and The Shepherd of Hermas. I cover a wide variety of topics in a small space. My overall theme is living faithfully and righteously. To say I have no theology really hurts. Maybe I don’t have a systematic theology, but my moral teachings are grounded in a firm faith in God. After I sign off, I’m going to find Dibelius and give him a piece of my soul.

QR: Whom were you writing to? What does “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” mean?

James: Let me answer your second question first. I was referring to Christians, who saw themselves as the true Israel, who were scattered throughout the world. More specifically, because I was a teacher, I had the communities of my students in mind when I wrote my short book. As I said earlier, these communities were threatened by a lack of moral rigor. Since faith without its accompanying works is lifeless, these communities were in danger of dying spiritually. Any church worth its salt must resist the temptation to become too worldly. Being faithful to God means standing against the wickedness of the world.

QR: Would you mind staying on-line and answering some questions about specific passages in your book?

James: I’d be delighted.

August 31, 1997—The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

James 1:17-27

Ps. 45:1-2, 6-9 or Ps. 72
Song of Sol. 2:8-13
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

QR: What do you mean by “Father of lights” in 1:17?

You really can’t make sense of this phrase outside of its context. One of my problems with the lectionary is how it sometimes begins in mid-argument. My argument begins in 1:2, where I contend that trials are opportunities for faith to grow stronger and purer. In 1:12-16, I argue that God doesn’t tempt/test (the Greek word can mean either) us by sending trials. Rather, we are tempted to sin by our own desires. In vv. 17-18 I support this contention by showing how God is a Giver of
gifts, not a giver of tests. "Father of lights" refers to God's act of creation: "Let there be light." I go on to contrast God's perfect light with the changeability of worldly shadows. God's nature is that of generosity and goodness, not that of tempting us to do what is wrong.

Notice in 1:18 that I use a female image for God: giving birth. Some commentators have pointed to the similarity of my phrase "gave us birth by the word of truth" with the "word" in the prologue of John. What I'm getting at here is this: Because we have been given a new life through faith, we are to live as the "first fruits" of faith. I'll say much more about what I mean by faith and its relation to faithful living as we go along.

QR: You seem to be down on anger in 1:19-21.

You're darn right. Anger is the enemy of a faithful life. Rather than leading toward God and a righteous life, anger propels us in the opposite direction. Think about how many churches and relationships are hurt, even destroyed, by angry words spoken in haste. Love unites; anger divides. Those who have been born of the word of truth ought to listen first, then pause and think about how to respond and finally speak in love and kindness.

The attitude of faith is that of meekness, like the Lord said in the Beatitudes. When we're meek, we're not only more receptive to what others say to us, we're more open to God. In meekness we receive the word of truth.

QR: How are you using the "mirror" image in verses 22-25?

I'm trying to give a down-to-earth illustration of the difference between "hearers" and "doers" of the word. It's not enough to receive the faith through hearing. It's not enough to talk the talk; we've got to walk the walk. Here's where the mirror analogy comes in. To hear God's word without doing it is like seeing your reflection in a mirror and forgetting what you look like once you turn away. Putting faith into action means remembering what we heard. I've known too many Christians who sing praises to the Lord on Sunday and forget who they are on Monday. That's why I replace the mirror with the "perfect law" in the next sentence (v. 25). The Law, as one of God's "perfect" gifts, places a demand of obedience on its receiver. If we hear the Law and remember to do it, we are twice blessed. Remember that our Lord said, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28).

QR: What do you mean by "worthless religion" and "pure religion" in 1:26-27?

The answer is as obvious as a centurion's sword. Worthless religion is giving lip service to meekness and then yelling in anger at the first
person who irritates you. It's indulging your own desires without a thought for widows and orphans. It's enjoying the fruits of your success without sharing with the needy. Pure religion is practicing what you preach. It's treating others as you want to be treated. It's not being caught up in worldly pleasures and loving wealth more than the Lord. You can bet I'll be saying more about pure religion.

QR: If you were preaching on 1:17-27, what would you say?

Actually, I have preached on these ideas many times. What I've written in my “letter” is a distillation of my best preaching over many years—kind of a “Greatest Hits of James.”

The first theme I would highlight is the Lord as Gift Giver. We have received gift upon gift from God's bountiful goodness, not the least of which is the gift of the word. Just think about how much we have received! The Lord has bestowed on us the gift of life and all that is needed to sustain it. The Lord has granted us the gift of faith, the capacity to believe. The Lord has given us the gift of the Law, a guide to right living. Everything we need for a full and rich life has been provided.

How should we respond to the Lord’s marvelous generosity? By honoring the intention of these perfect gifts. The Lord gave us these gifts that we might live good and true lives. Goodness is not some abstract theological concept but a daily commitment to moral purity.

A second theme I would emphasize is the connection between hearing God's word and doing it. There must be a consistency between hearing and doing, faith and practice. I've seen too many so-called Christians who profess faith in the Lord but live as if their faith is in the world. True hearing is not “in one ear and out the other” but “deep understanding.” When we truly understand the word of truth that comes to us as a gift, then we see the necessity of living in light of that word. Faith engenders faithful living.

A third theme I would focus upon in preaching is the need for authentic religion. You might call this a consistency between saying and doing. If we say that we are followers of the Lord, then we had better live as though we are. If you want to know what a person truly believes, look at how he or she lives. Everyday life is where the spiritual rubber meets the road. What is your stance toward the needy whom you encounter? How do you respond to those in distress? Are you willing to share your abundance with the impoverished, the widows and orphans who are powerless to care for themselves? Pure religion is putting faith into daily acts of love and kindness.
September 7, 1997—The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17
Ps. 125 or Ps. 124
Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
Mark 7:24-37

QR: Your first sentence in this passage seems awkward.
I can't be held responsible for what the translators do with my writing. What I'm saying in 2:1 is perfectly clear to me: to show favoritism on the basis of appearance is not consistent with faith in Jesus Christ.

QR: Did you actually witness the event you describe in verses 2-4?
Do you think I'm making this up? With my own eyes I have seen such travesties of the faith occur in church. This particular event took place during a Christian worship service in a synagogue. A person of obvious wealth and high station was offered an excellent seat near the front, while a poor person was asked to stand at the back or sit on the floor. Such an action is a direct violation of the Law, which prohibits partiality on the basis of wealth (Lev. 19:15). Since it's clear from the scriptures that the Lord doesn't judge on the basis of outward appearances, neither should we. Whenever we make such distinctions we are setting ourselves up as judges motivated by evil thoughts rather than good. Remember the parable that our Lord told about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich will have to answer for their neglect of the poor.

QR: You seem pretty hard on the rich.
The Lord is harder on them than I. Remember that God chose the least powerful people, the Hebrews, to become a great nation. Through Jesus Christ, a poor and humble carpenter's son, God made the word into flesh. It was our Lord who said, "Blessed are the poor." Think of the irony of God's choice! The poor, who are regarded as inferior in the world's eyes, are chosen to fulfill God's purposes in the world. In the church the poor who have faith are regarded as the richest of all. In God's kingdom, everything gets turned upside down.

To dishonor the poor by giving them a subordinate place in the church is to sin. Remember Prov. 14:31: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him." Besides, it is the rich who oppress the poor, both economically and legally. It is the rich who send the poor to debtor's prison. To oppress the poor in the church is a disgrace to the Lord's name in whom the church gathers.

THE MYSTERIOUS AND MORALIZING JAMES
QR: I think you've made your point...

I'm not finished! Not only is partiality a violation of Torah, it is condemned by the royal law in Lev. 19:18 affirmed by our Lord: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." I think it's pretty clear that the poor are our neighbors just as much as the rich are. If we claim to be followers of the Lord, then we should obey all the law. We are called to keep the whole law, not just the parts of it that suit us. Paul and I see eye-to-eye on the issue of obeying the law. If we fail in just one point, we are guilty of failing the whole. Obedience to the Lord is an all-or-nothing proposition. And favoritism on the basis of appearance is disobedience. We are called to live as those who are judged by the "law of liberty," which is my way of referring to the freedom that obedience to the law offers. As our Lord reminded us, Christians aren't exempt from the law; rather, we are called to a "higher righteousness."

QR: Your discussion of "faith and works" in 2:14-17 sounds like you're correcting a misunderstanding of Paul's sola fide.

I just wish folks would forget Paul when they read this passage and hear what I'm saying. I'm not trying to correct a misunderstanding of Paul; I'm continuing my argument that Christian faith should manifest itself in Christian living. I begin by asking a question about faith that any moralist worth his salt would ask: What difference does it make? If Christians profess their faith in the Lord and it ends there, that's not genuine faith. Remember in 1:27 when I said that pure religion is helping those in great need, the widows and orphans? I'm saying the same thing using an extreme case in 2:15-16. To be naked and hungry is to be in profound need. Clothing and food are so basic to human existence that without them, we can't survive. Remember the words of our Lord, "I was hungry and you gave me food... I was naked and you gave me clothing" (Matt. 25:35-36). Can you imagine denying these staples of human life to anyone without them? I can't. I'll admit it's an extreme example, but it makes my point.

Imagine a situation where a Christian encounters a person who is naked and hungry. Instead of offering clothing and food, they offer a pious phrase, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill." A hungry person can't eat words or wear them. What good are pious sentiments without the accompanying actions? There are two kinds of faith: alive and dead. Lively faith shows itself in works of love and generosity. Dead faith remains dormant and, therefore, deadly. I hope my modern readers are starting to comprehend my message. I'm saying it several
different ways. Live faith means hearing and doing, professing and practicing, word and deed.

QR: Could you give us preachers a few sermon directions?

A few?! There are more sermons in this passage than fleas on a camel. However, since I realize that preachers aren’t going to sermonize on my writings every week, I’ll try to limit myself.

First of all, I realize that the situation of modern first-world churches has changed dramatically since my own time. Back in the first two centuries, we were primarily a church of the poor. It was rare that a person of wealth would enter our assembly, the situation I just described. I understand that the twentieth-century church, especially in the United States, is affluent by worldwide standards. However, my point about partiality is still valid. Even among the affluent, there are distinctions: who has the more expensive home, the nicer car, or finer clothing and jewelry. An affluent church can still be guilty of catering to the more affluent. The question is whether we treat people on the basis of their appearances.

The challenge facing the modern church is where you stand in relation to the poor. Do you stand with them or against them? Poverty boils down to powerlessness, just as wealth engenders power. Will you help empower those who have none? Will you make it possible for the hungry to feed themselves and the naked to clothe themselves? Christian faith calls us to go beyond meeting the emergency needs of the poor; we need to consider their long-term situation as well. Any church seeking to live out its faith will look carefully at its stance toward the poor in its midst.

Another sermon could go in the direction of the love commandment, what I call the royal law. Too often, love is understood as a kind sentiment or a warm feeling toward others. Christian love is so much broader and deeper than that. As a “law,” loving your neighbor is an obligation to fulfill regardless of how you feel at that moment. I am often amused at the modern emphasis on feelings when it comes to love. I notice that love is something you “fall into” and just as quickly “fall out of.” This is the love the world practices. As Christians, we obey the command to love our neighbors no matter how we feel about them. Love, as I understand it, is a commitment to acting in our neighbor’s best interests rather than simply a feeling of good will.

A third sermon direction is the obvious one: the difference between live faith and dead faith. A faith that is only words and no works is worthless. I’ve noticed that modern preaching avoids moralizing. I’ve heard preachers say, “I don’t want to motivate my people by guilt.”
What's wrong with a little guilt now and then? Guilt is a powerful motivator. Unless I'm wrong, it is guilt that drives us to confess our sins and receive the Lord's forgiveness. If your church members feel guilty because their faith is dead, maybe they'll do something about it.

When speaking of live faith, it's good to be as specific as possible. Give them plenty of examples of how faith shows itself in actions: donating blood, volunteering in a literacy program, teaching a church school class, giving a tithe to the church, donating clothes you don't wear anymore to the Salvation Army, helping a person coming off welfare to find a job. The key is to not let people off the hook for putting love into action.

September 14, 1997—The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

James 3:1-12

Ps. 19
Prov. 1:20-33
Mark 8:27-38

QR: I'd like you to focus your attention on what you wrote about the tongue. To whom are you directing your words?

First of all, I'm speaking to teachers and preachers. The word I use for teachers, didaskalos, can also be translated as "ministers" (it's used this way by Paul in 1 Cor. 12:28). This word is also used of our Lord in the Gospels. To teach God's children, by lesson or sermon, is an awesome responsibility. We need to pay attention not only to what we say but to how we say it. I've seen too many teachers spout out the first thing that comes into their head, without considering whether it is true or enlightening. We who are in positions of authority in the church (I'm including myself) must think before we speak. Otherwise, we'll end up hurting those we're trying to help. This means eliminating the practice of throwing together a church school lesson or sermon at the last minute.

QR: In 3:2 you say that we all make mistakes but then go on to imply that some speakers can be perfect.

By perfect I don't mean flawless. I'm using telios in the sense of "mature" or "whole." Mature speech is the sign of a mature Christian. I'm surprised you didn't pick up on the apparent conflict of 3:2 with what I say about "saying and doing," earlier. There, I'm using saying
in the sense of “claiming” to follow the Lord. Here, I’m referring to speech as an act. If we claim to be Christians, then our speech will be consistent with that fact.

QR: What’s all this talk about horses and ships?

Somehow, reflecting on the promise and danger of speech brings out the poet in me. These moralistic diatribes can get pretty dull without a little spice. Just as I compare the tongue to a bridle, able to control the entire body, in 3:2, I go on to compare the tongue to a bit in a horse’s mouth. With that small piece of metal a huge animal can be guided. The ship image is more complex. A pilot (which corresponds to human will) guides the ship (a metaphor for the body) by a small rudder (an analogy for the tongue). What this comes down to is that the tongue has great power over ourselves and others.

QR: In verse 5 you turn to the negative side of the tongue. Do you realize that verse 6 gives commentators fits?

The key to understanding what I’m saying here is found in the “fire” image I use in verse 5. Just as a forest can be burned down with a spark, the tongue can wreak havoc in human relationships. You see, the destructive power of the tongue is part of the unrighteous world. The tongue can contaminate what is good by speaking evil; this is what I mean by “a world of iniquity.” The fiery tongue can inflict damage on all of life, which I refer to as the “cycle of nature.” The genesis of the tongue’s deadly power is nothing less than Gehenna, the fiery place of evil. When I talk about the tongue as a fire, I’m not only thinking about the public speech in worship and other gatherings; I’m thinking of the spreading of rumors and gossip in the community of faith. More than a few righteous teachers’ reputations have been destroyed by malicious gossip. There is no place for such speech in the church.

QR: You seem skeptical in verses 7-8 about the possibility of controlling the tongue.

I am amazed at how even the most savage beasts can be tamed. Even a ferocious lion or massive whale can be subjugated. The Lord gave us sovereignty over every species, no matter how wild. Yet, we seem incapable of controlling what we say and how we say it. It’s as if the tongue has a mind of its own. Like a snake, the tongue can dispense deadly poison. As the psalmist said, “They make their tongue sharp as a snake’s, and under their lips is the venom of vipers” (140:3).

QR: In verses 9-12 you seem surprised at the best and worst the tongue can accomplish.

I’m really outraged that such good and evil speech can come out of
a single mouth. We can sing praises to the Lord and in the next moment make a snide comment about our neighbor's hair. We can change from offering words of kindness to hateful speech in the twinkling of an eye. I can't understand how such beauty and filth can come out of a single mouth. Such a contradiction doesn't occur in nature. Sweet and bitter water doesn't come from the same spring; it's either one or the other. Water is either undrinkable saltwater or refreshing fresh water—it can't be both at the same time. Neither can a tree yield two different kinds of fruit. I summed up my view on the tongue succinctly when I wrote, "This ought not to be so."

QR: Is there any hope for us to tame our tongues?

Of course there is! Our hope is in the Lord, who made all of us, including our tongues. With God's help, and our own faithful dedication, we can become of one heart, mind, and tongue. I wrote of being "double minded" earlier. To be "double-tongued" is a symptom of choosing the way of the world over the Lord's way. A tongue that is undefiled comes from a life that is pure. Conversely, purifying one's speech helps cleanse the whole person.

QR: Can you give any guidance to those of us who teach and preach on the peril and promise of the tongue?

First, it is important to become aware of what you say to and about others. The deterioration of language is a symptom of a deeper problem. When you use language that is abusive or harmful, you are showing people how you truly feel about them. Respect the power of words to hurt and to heal. A kind word spoken at the right time can show a friend or a child how much you truly love them. A harsh word spoken in anger can place a wedge between you and the object of your wrath. Do not underestimate the influence of your words on others, especially if you are in a position of authority. Remember that the tongue is a fire. A fire can be harnessed for good (as in cooking) or for destruction (as in arson).

You should be careful not only about what you say but about how you say it. Humans have the amazing capacity to say, "I love you," in a hateful way, or to say, "I hate you," in a playful, loving way. Note the tone of your speech. Are you giving others a double message? Are you saying one thing while meaning another? Christians should speak plainly and directly, not with sarcasm or innuendo.

A second word of guidance I can offer is this: God's word informs our words. We were created by the Lord's speech, and our faith has been given birth by this creative word. It is no accident that Jesus is
called the “word made flesh.” God’s word can shape, form, and mold us into faithful followers, if we will allow it. As I said in 1:18, when we receive the word of truth, we become bound to live by this word. This is a word to be heard (received) and done (practiced).

When the Lord’s word informs our speech, our words build up rather than tear down. We take on the language of love, reconciliation, hope, praise, and forgiveness. We put away destructive talk such as gossip, put-downs, conceit, lies, threats, arrogance, and intimidation. Most of all, we speak the truth in love.

September 21, 1997—The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
James 3:13–4:3, 7-8a

Ps. 1
Prov. 31:10-31
Mark 9:30-37

QR: Is this section a series of independent sayings loosely grouped under a theme, or is it a carefully reasoned argument?

Too many commentators don’t give me credit for writing coherently. What I’m doing here is continuing the argument of my entire “letter”: living faithfully to God means rejecting the unrighteous values espoused by the world. In 3:13-18, I contrast God’s wisdom with worldly wisdom. In 4:1-10, I show the consequences of worldly wisdom and contrast it with friendship with God. If this isn’t a reasoned argument, I don’t know what is.

QR: Sorry, I wasn’t trying to offend you. Can you say more about the two kinds of wisdom?

You are forgiven. True wisdom, like pure religion, is not simply a matter of perceiving the world in a certain way. Wisdom from above is a way of living rightly. It’s not enough to say or think wise thoughts. If wisdom is to mean anything, it must be put into daily practice—just like faith.

The result of the “wisdom” of the world is painfully clear: envy, strife, and selfishness. I like the NRSV translation of zēlos as “bitter envy.” In my time this word was used for both jealousy and envy. It means to desire to take something away from another and is at the heart of another evil: coveting. The wisdom of the world also shows itself in selfish ambition, boasting, and falseness. “Falseness” to God’s word is especially destructive to self and community. Such wisdom is unspiritual and evil. It leads to social disorder, community conflict,
and every kind of lowdown, mean practice. When such worldly wisdom enters the church, watch out!

QR: I think you just stortchanged wisdom "from above."

You’re right. Sometimes I get so caught up in condemning wickedness, I forget to recommend its opposite. Godly wisdom is in opposition to worldly wisdom. It comes as a gift to those who would receive it (remember 1:17) and transforms the way we live. I list the qualities that this wisdom produces in 3:17-18. They are polar opposites to the results of worldly wisdom I list just before. As you might guess, I focus more on action than attitude in my list, although these are interrelated. My reference to peacemakers goes back to one of the Lord’s beatitudes. What I’m aiming at is “pure religion,” religion that is manifested in daily living.

QR: Your tone seems to change in 4:1. Are you condemning specific incidents or giving extreme examples?

I’m doing some of both. And my tone does change. Whenever I think of how Christians so easily buy into the values of the world, I get angry. Just as Godly wisdom results in peace, worldly wisdom leads to strife. The word I use for craving, epithymia, also means “desire.” I used this same word in 1:14-15 to show how selfish desire leads to sin. Desire and craving are natural consequences of envy. And envy can lead to the more serious consequences of fights and even murder. When we don’t get what we desire, there’s a natural progression (or regression) from envy to anger to rage to violence.

QR: What do you mean by “you ask wrongly” in 4:3?

Following the wisdom of the world leads us to selfishly ask God for the objects of our desire. This is a misuse, an abuse, of prayer. To ask God for the things we covet for our own pleasure is really idolatry. I say more about the proper role of prayer in chapter 5.

To pray selfishly is a sign of "friendship with the world." I’m sorry that those who constructed the lectionary left out 4:4-6, where I make my main point: to be too friendly with the world is to become an enemy to God. Maybe they thought the language I use to make my case was a little too strong. I address my readers as “adulterers” because they have been unfaithful to the covenant. I realize that using the categories of “friend” and “enemy” sounds inflexible. But what else would you expect from a Christian moralist? Living by the world’s values causes us to compromise the values that come from our Christian faith. It’s as simple as that.
QR: In 4:7-8, it sounds as if you’re calling us to repentance.

How perceptive of you to notice. Indeed, I am calling for a recommitment to live by pure, authentic religion. I want Christians to reject the evil values of the world and to humbly rededicate themselves to faithful living. To “submit” to God is nothing less than obeying God’s perfect will. To “draw near” to God is to approach God in meekness and humility, as did Moses and the priests during the Exodus.

QR: The rigid moralism you display in this section doesn’t play well in the modern church. How can we preach this in a way that people can hear it and not become alienated?

Maybe the reason morality doesn’t “play well” in the church of the twentieth century is that Christians have become too worldly, what you call “secular.” Maybe you’ve allowed the values of the world to seep into your individual and collective life. Envy, strife, and selfishness have no place in our religious life. When Christians fight with each other in the church, usually it’s over power: over who gets to call the shots. If condemning such attitudes and practices doesn’t “play well,” then too bad. The alternative is to baptize the world’s values and make them the operating principles of church life.

Too many modern churches are more concerned with success, as measured by the world, than with faithfulness. I see many similarities between churches in my time and yours. Both face the temptation of living more by the world’s values than by God’s will. Both resist the call to faithfulness. Both struggle with living in the world but not being “of” the world.

There are times when the pulpit must become a “bully pulpit” and the preacher becomes prophet. If you condemn jealousy, conflict, and arrogance as general concepts, you will have every head in the congregation nodding in agreement. But if you become more specific and concrete in your condemnation by citing examples within a community, you’re going to step on toes. Sometimes toes need to be stepped on to wake people up and get them moving in the right direction. I realize that this sounds risky and harsh, but if the truth can’t be spoken in church, where can it be heard? If you want an example of my own prophetic preaching, read 4:11–5:6. That will make any affluent congregation squirm.

As Christians, the context for condemnation of evil is always love. God’s judgment of us is really an act of love. What parent would allow a child to do what is dangerous and harmful without taking firm action? The question is: Do we love people enough to tell them the
truth? Remember that the word of truth is good news! The prophetic word can lead to repentance and new life, if we will allow it.

September 28, 1997—The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

James 5:13-20

Ps. 124
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
Mark 9:38-50

QR: It seems that you shift gears in this section on prayer. How is it related to the rest of your letter?

I’m not familiar with the phrase shift gears because we had chariots in my time. I assume you mean that I change to a more positive tone. That’s right, in a way, although I wouldn’t characterize speaking out against evil speech as negative. One of the major points I’ve been hammering on is the use and abuse of speech. I’ve mentioned many destructive kinds of speech: slandering, judging, boasting, and grumbling. But the worst abuse of speech is swearing oaths (5:12). To invoke the name of the Lord on one’s own behalf is manipulative. We should be simple and truthful in our answers, leaving the Lord out of them. What I’m getting at is this: My advice on prayer should be seen as part of my concern with true speech.

QR: You list several kinds of prayer in 5:13-16. Can you elaborate upon the difference between them?

I’m not as interested in kinds of prayer as I am in encouraging people to pray. I’ve seen too many “foul weather” prayers in my time. Everyone prays when they’re sick. I believe that prayer is appropriate in all circumstances. When life is going well, we should praise God, who is the source of all good gifts. When we have sinned, we should confess our sins. When someone is sick, we should intercede for them. Prayer is a form of speech that heals the individual and community.

QR: Could you tell us more about prayer and illness?

When someone is sick, worldly wisdom tells us to isolate that person from the community. However, Christians are to treat the illness of a member differently. Sick persons have the right to call the elders of the church to pray with them. The word I use for “elder” is presbyteros, which means both “official leader” and “minister.” Rather than being separated from the community, the sick person should engage the church’s leaders for prayer and anointing. Anointing with
oil isn’t some magic trick; we used common olive oil. In my time, it was a practice associated with healing. Our Lord is remembered to have anointed sick people and healed them (Mark 6:13).

QR: What do you mean in 5:15 by “the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up…”?

I mean to pray without double-minded doubt. Earlier, I said to ask in faith for wisdom (1:6). The same principle is expressed here. When we pray sincerely, good things happen—within us and the church. I realize that healing prayer is more controversial in your time than in mine. All I can say is that healing doesn’t equal curing. What prayer really does is “save” the person prayed for. This means that the sick person is made whole within. Sometimes this results in physical healing; sometimes it doesn’t. Remember the story of our Lord healing the paralyzed man? He said, “Your sins are forgiven.” Just as in that story, I use “raise up” to include both the physical and spiritual dimensions of healing. What I’m not doing is saying illness is caused by sin. To have one’s sins forgiven is to receive healing in one’s relationship with the Lord. This is the healing we most deeply need.

QR: I don’t think I’ve ever heard about the practice of mutual confession of sins that you advocate in 5:16.

In all modesty, this idea isn’t original with me. Community prayers of confession were recited for centuries before I wrote this. My contribution to this form of prayer is to encourage individuals to confess their sins to each other. In this kind of confessing prayer, the qualities of humility and truthfulness come together. Mutual confession of sins not only puts us all on the same level, it encourages forgiveness between persons. I understand that such a practice is common in your time in different kinds of “covenant discipleship” groups who meet for mutual encouragement in Christian living. Confession opens us up to receive forgiveness from the Lord and from those whom we have sinned against.

QR: What is the purpose of the Elijah example in 5:17-18?

Elijah is a perfect illustration of the prayer of a righteous person. He prays for no rain and a drought occurs. He prays for rain and it rains. I realize that the story in 1 Kings doesn’t mention his praying for a drought, but I think it’s a reasonable assumption. I use Elijah for another reason: He exemplifies godly wisdom over worldly wisdom. As a prophet, he stood against the evil values of the rich and powerful, namely Ahab and Jezebel. The kind of single-minded faith I see in Elijah is what I would like Christians to imitate.
QR: Do you really expect Christians to bring back those who have "wandered from the truth"?

I most certainly do. This is another place where the church differs from the world. The world tolerates every way of living, no matter how immoral. The world cares nothing for poor lost souls. But the church seeks those who have strayed from the truth (right living) and tries to reconcile them with the community. Everyone is important in the community of faith, and one lost soul diminishes it. The message of our Lord's parable of the lost sheep is clear: We are to seek the lost in order to reconcile them with the community they have left. What's at stake is the wanderer's very soul. To bring back strays from true religion is also to save them from future sinning. That's what I mean when I write, "[It] will cover a multitude of sins."

QR: Do you have any help for those of us preaching on or teaching this passage?

Obviously, the focus of this passage is prayer in its various forms. My point is that prayer not only addresses God; it is a way of addressing others. When we pray for those who are sick, we connect ourselves to them. They know of our concern for them and are strengthened by it. Anointing with oil is not magic but a ritual of touching in compassion. Mutual confession of sins is also a way of being connected with one another in our common, sinful humanity.

My concern is that we see prayer in a community context. Prayer is not a way to advance our individual agendas before God. I condemned such selfish prayer in 4:3. We pray as part of a community of faith. Even when we pray alone, prayer is a way of being in community with those for whom we pray.

We must pay attention to all forms of speech, but especially to the form of religious speech called "prayer." While prayer involves words, its power lies in deeds. Prayer moves us to be present with those who are sick. Prayer sends us after those who have strayed from the way of right living to bring them back. Prayer, like faith, shows itself in works. When we pray, we are moved to do what is right and true.

QR: Any final word for us?

My purpose in writing has been to exhort, encourage, and edify. I have tried to remind Christians that genuine faith leads to a righteous way of living that is loving, peaceful, gentle, and full of mercy. Not only should our speech be pure, so also should our deeds be loving. We have received the gift of the word of truth and ought to live in concert with this great gift. Hypocrisy has no place in the church, nor does partiality. The church
is a community that follows God’s wisdom rather than worldly wisdom. Above all, faith must be practiced in daily life if it is to be alive.

Notes

5. Dibelius, James, 5-11.
Quarterly Review is a publication of The United Methodist Publishing House and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.