To Live or to Die in Battle: Clergy Self-Care
Gary E. Peluso

Travail and Triumph in the "Parsonage Family"
Leroy T. Have

The Life of the Preacher and Knowledge of God
Ronald J. Allen
Editorial Board

Ted A. Campbell
Wesley Theological Seminary

Jimmy Carr
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church

Rebecca Chopp
Candler School of Theology
Emory University

Duane A. Ewers
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church

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. Irason, Chair
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church

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

Thomas W. Oglestree
The Divinity School
Yale University

Harriet Jane Olson
The United Methodist Publishing House

Russell E. Richey
Duke Divinity School

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki
Claremont School of Theology

Linda Thomas
Hitt School of Theology

Traci West
Theological School
Drew University

Sharon J. Hels, Editor
Sylvia Street, Production Manager
Tracey Evans, Production Coordinator
Quarterly Review (ISSN 0270-9287) provides continuing education resources for scholars, Christian educators, and lay and professional ministers in The United Methodist Church and other churches. QR intends to be a forum in which theological issues of significance to Christian ministry can be raised and debated.

Editorial Offices: 1001 19th Avenue, South, Box 871, Nashville, TN 37202. Manuscripts should be in English and typed double-spaced, including notes.

QR is published four times a year, in March, June, September, and December, by the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry and The United Methodist Publishing House. Periodicals postage paid at Nashville, Tennessee.

Subscription rate: $24 for one year; $44 for two years; and $60 for three years. For all subscription orders, single-copy orders, and change-of-address information contact Cokesbury toll-free, (800) 672-1789, M-F 7:00 a.m.–6:30 p.m. CST and Saturday 8:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. CST. Inquiries may also be sent in writing to the Cokesbury Subscription Services, Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202.

Postmaster: Address changes should be sent to The United Methodist Publishing House, Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202.

QR is printed on acid-free paper.

Lections are taken from Revised Common Lectionary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

Scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are from the New Revised Standard Version Common Bible, copyrighted © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the US, and are used by permission.

Copyright © 1998 by The United Methodist Publishing House and The United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry
Contents

Introduction
Sharon J. Hels .......................................................... 209

Articles

Some Distinctive Characteristics of Methodist Theological Education
Allen J. Moore .......................................................... 211

To Live and to Die in Battle: A Nineteenth-Century Metaphor
and Clergy Self-Care
Gary E. Peluso .......................................................... 227

The Life of the Preacher as a Source of the Knowledge of God
Ronald J. Allen .......................................................... 247

"Casting Down Our Golden Crowns around the Glassy Sea":
Travail and Triumph in the "Parsonage Family"
Leroy T. Howe .......................................................... 261

"A Strong, Effective Remedy": Dealing Theologically with Clergy Misconduct
W. Paul Jones .......................................................... 275

On the Spirit of Bondage and Adoption: Toward More Wesleyan
Theology for the Bishops’ Initiative on Children and Poverty
Pamela D. Couture .......................................................... 287

QR Lectionary Study

What, Me Suffer? Women’s Suspicions and the Servant Songs:
Lectionary Readings for Epiphany, Year A
L. Susan Bond .......................................................... 299
Introduction

Age and Grace

For the past two years, I have been watching my father-in-law, 92, gradually succumb to dementia. It began with significant blockage in his carotid arteries, which couldn't be fixed because it was too dangerous to operate. After he had a few strokes, it accelerated. He needs nursing care around the clock now, and fortunately he has it. A gentleman to the core, he is as endures his infirmities with uncommon grace. But it's not easy for his family, and it may go on for a long time.

I suppose it was this situation that made me pay special attention to an announcement of a book called Successful Aging by John Rowe, M.D. and Robert Kahn, Ph.D. (New York; Pantheon Books). Successful Aging is a report based on the 10-year MacArthur Foundation Study of Aging in America. This study advises us to let go of our faulty assumption that the process of getting older is genetically programmed and inherently tragic. On the contrary, old age (broken down by gerontologists into two groups, the “young-old” from 65 to 74, and the “old-old” who are 75 or older) does have positive aspects, which can be reinforced through attention to diet and exercise, productive activity, and strong social support systems. The accent falls on action—moving that body around, doing something useful, and spending time with people we like and respect. Even church, the authors say, is a good thing for older people if they are actively involved in its activities, rather than simply identifying themselves as believers.

The strong element of choice in the quality of our aging is the best news we could have. It could be good news for our parents right now—or, if they are no longer alive, it could be good news for us. Our patterns of life may be well established, but the “abundant life” of the gospel is not just something for young people. We can all work toward and help each other with it.

The key here is a healthy combination of action and reflection. Our opening article, by Allen Moore, takes us all the way around the world, not as...
accidental tourists but as self-aware United Methodists recognizing and learning from seminaries. That emphasis on action is echoed in the article on
the Bishops’ Initiative on Children and Poverty by Pam Couture, who offers a
road map of activities to guide our churches. Next we have a set of articles on
reflection. Gary Peluso reminds us that we all operate from a dominant
metaphor that organizes our perceptions and has the power to dictate what we
do. In the nineteenth century, one potent metaphor was the “soldier for
Christ” adopted by many circuit riders. These preachers understood that they
had better protect their own souls, to go out and save others from Satan.
Nowadays, writes Peluso, that image no longer works for us. We need to
consider how not only our souls but ourselves can be protected for lifelong,
effective ministry.

Peluso sets the tone for Ron Allen’s challenging discussion on how a pastor
might go about searching her or his experience for traces of transcendence. By
putting our own experiences right in the center of our theological understanding
(checked by the other criteria of good theology—scripture, tradition, and reason)
we prevent ourselves from being an exception to all that we preach to others. In
fact we may find new ways to express the spiritual journey of the entire
community. Next, we might extend our insights to our family situations, as Leroy
Howe suggests. Projection, triangulation, and anxiety are familiar terms to many
of us. But it is hard work to apply them to ourselves, and because of this many of
us miss out on the rewards of a reflective life lived out in a parish setting. Finally,
we have a lesson in the repair of a deeply troubled ministry—that is, when there
are valid accusations of serious misconduct. With characteristic warmth and
theological vigor, Paul Jones reminds us that the church offers resources for
reconciliation that have deep roots in our historical practice. We round out our
cycle on reflection with a fine analysis of Isaiah from a feminist perspective,
asking a most troubling question: what do we make of suffering, whether our
own or that of others? Susan Bond lets us consider this up-to-the-minute issue in
the context of some of our most beloved texts.

A long time ago in one of Doris Lessing’s novels I read a good definition
of a friend: someone who tells you who you are, especially if you forget. So
here’s to those who remind us who we are and those who ask us to remember
for them—like Arthur Reed, my dear father-in-law, who has forgotten so
much, but to whom the words of Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses” still apply: “…
Though much is taken, much abides; and though/We are not now that strength
which in the old days/Moved heaven and earth, that which we are,/One equal temper of heroic hearts/
Made weak by time and fate, but strong
in will/To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Sharon Hels
Allen J. Moore

Some Distinctive Characteristics of Methodist Theological Education

We arrived in Auckland, New Zealand, in early June, the beginning of winter in the lower Pacific. The weather was cold and wet, but we were greeted warmly by Frank Hansen, the principal of the Methodist seminary in New Zealand, Trinity Theological College. Trinity is part of a larger campus that includes St. John’s College, an Anglican theological school, and Te Roa, a theological college for the Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand. These three seminaries share a curriculum, faculty, and administration. As our acquaintance with Trinity grew, we learned more about their common life: weekly worship was conducted in the Maori language and tradition (all students are expected to learn this language as a part of their theological education); a weekly luncheon enabled all students and faculty to share a pastoral concern and Wesley-style accountability for one another; and small groups met regularly for prayer and Bible study and to share a common life of service. There was a familiar pattern here—with its ecumenical spirit, its outreach to native people, and its emphasis on piety and the practices of ministry. Trinity Theological College reflected a distinct ethos of Methodism. Although we were on the other side of the world from North America, we felt right at home.

Allen Moore is Professor and Dean Emeritus of Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California.
Could this strong sense of kinship between ourselves and the New Zealand Methodists derive from the influence of our common theological ancestor, John Wesley? And if so, what aspects of his ministry are responsible? We will try to understand what sort of stamp Wesley put on education and how this has been expressed particularly in the ethos of theological education, both historically and in more recent times. We will rely on published historical sources as well as on the field notes we gathered in a visit in 1993-1994 to Methodist theological colleges or schools in several countries and cultural contexts. Some attention will also be given to schools within the North American and British context.

Wesley as Practical Theologian

We bring to this study a practical theological perspective as it has come to be understood and practiced in our time. Practical theologians today seek to articulate the theology that stands either in front of or behind an event. As David Tracy has suggested, every event grows out of a theory or theological assumption that may or may not have been articulated. On the other hand, reflection on the events can disclose a theory or a theology.

This practical approach will help us to understand the distinctive characteristics of Methodist theological education. To do this, we must begin with Wesley himself. As Maddox has argued, Wesley was not a typical theologian even for his time, and he certainly cannot be understood as a practical theologian in the same genre as the discipline is understood today. Wesley’s theology was formed by events and experimental practices; he was neither systematic nor consistent in his theological formulations. Rather than producing a dogmatic system, Wesley was eager to support a movement and lead persons to an experience of God’s saving grace.

We should orient ourselves to Wesley’s theory and practice of education in a similar fashion. John Wesley’s theology and educational theory were explicit in what he said. But a theology was also implicit in what he did, that is, his educational practices. Furthermore, the two were not always consistent. For example, one might conclude from Wesley’s writings on education that he was extremely harsh, especially in his attitudes toward children. But in practice Wesley was very compassionate toward his younger learners.
Despite the limitations of his educational psychology, he initiated educational reforms that were far ahead of his time.\(^4\)

**Wesley as Educator and Reformer**

Possibly no one in eighteenth-century England contributed more to the reform of popular education than John Wesley. He was especially sensitive to the plight of the poor and disadvantaged—children and youth who had little hope for a worthwhile life and few opportunities for education, as well as adults who had little awareness of their own humanity. His effort to promote education among these people has been well documented.\(^3\) In 1978 the City of London Museum developed a special exhibit on education featuring John Wesley as the leading educational reformer in the eighteenth century. The exhibit highlighted Wesley’s contribution to the establishment of state-funded education for the children of common people who could not afford public (private) schools and for children who did not have sponsors to support their attendance at the charity schools.\(^6\)

While Wesley accepted the common eighteenth-century view of the pervasiveness of original sin and the psychology that advocated “breaking the will” of the child, he also maintained that all persons are of equal worth before God. Education, he believed, is a means of grace by which God enables people to grow in awareness and receptivity to God’s love. Under Wesley’s leadership, the Methodists founded more Sunday schools than any other religious body in England. In founding Kingswood School, Wesley also sought to establish a school specifically for the children of miners and of pastors. Although Kingswood did not always serve poor children as originally intended, it did become a model for other Christian schools that accepted all children, regardless of class and economic ability. All told, British Methodism has founded more than 900 precollegiate schools; North and South American Methodism has established more than 1,000. Despite Wesley’s ideals, open enrollment was not always the case and certainly is not the case today.\(^7\)

Just as important as Wesley’s schools was his contribution to publishing and literacy. He believed that the ability to read and write were essential to a person’s sense of worth and accomplishment; thus, it, too, contributed to his or her growth in grace. Wesley established a system of publishing so that his followers could have books to
stimulate their minds and spirits, and he urged his pastors to distribute them free of charge. Sherwin writes about the impact that Wesley had with his book and tract ministry: "The desire of Methodists to read their Bibles and to improve their minds led to a restless search for knowledge and a profound reluctance to remain ignorant." Wesely's educational practices became a model adapted by Methodists as they spread to other countries around the world. Methodists in almost all branches of the Wesleyan movement have regarded the establishment of schools—primary and high schools, vocational schools, colleges and universities, and theological colleges—as opportunities not only to promote learning but also to spread the good news of God's grace. In almost every country (more than 63 distinct Methodist communions in more than 104 countries of the world), the Methodist impact on the educational system has been significant. In many instances, Methodists have provided the only educational opportunities available for the common people, including the poor and illiterate, based on Wesley's key insight that in God's eyes the disadvantaged are "precious," and their "souls worthy of salvation."

Several contemporary examples of the importance of education to the Methodist movements are seen in the new Africa University in Zimbabwe; the Methodist College in Men, Kenya, founded by the Methodist Church of Kenya; a theological college for French-speaking students in Lausanne, Switzerland; and the participation of Slovakian United Methodists in a cooperative theological college to educate the large number of persons wanting to be pastors in Slovakia. These examples illustrate 1) how deeply education is rooted in the evangelical spirit of Methodism and 2) the belief that education needs to be widely available to all people. For Methodism, education is a means of grace by which God's spirit grows within persons. For Wesley, and for Methodists in general, the "development of the mind was critical to faith." Here we are reminded of Charles Wesley's famous words that "knowledge and vital piety" are united and should never be separated.

The first Methodist theological school in North America was founded in 1839 by John Dempster at the urging of lay people who wanted their pastors to be better trained than themselves. Lay Methodists advocated that their pastors be well schooled in theology and Bible, as well as in the practical arts of ministry. This is very much within the spirit of Wesley, who insisted that his pastors be
deeply called of the Spirit, make the best possible use of their time, and spend at least five hours per day in diligent reading and study in order to be good preachers and teachers of the people.13

Methodist Theological Education

One of the earliest means of ministerial or theological education within the Methodist tradition was the study of Wesley’s published sermons, which Wesley designed especially for “the nurture and theological education of those within Methodist societies.”14 Although Wesley had a great concern for the training of pastors, he did not limit theological education to pastors; it was part of the discipline required of all Methodists, including lay members. This inclusive view of theological education remains a tradition in most Methodist theological colleges and schools today. Wesley encouraged wide reading by members of the societies by personally abridging many books, including the classics. It was also possible to pursue one’s training for ministry without formal attendance at a school. A tradition of home-based study emerged in Wesley’s time and is still a significant part of theological education in some places today. One example is the Wellspring program in the Methodist Church of New Zealand. It includes home-based study combined with courses and retreats for lay persons and lay professionals, as well as continuing education for pastors.15 Home study is also a significant part of the Course of Study for persons in North America who serve as local or lay pastors.

Maddox and others have observed that the Annual Conference meeting was, historically, not an administrative meeting but an educational event. In the early days, the sessions of the conference were more similar to a “catechetical school,” with Wesley (and later Asbury and Coke) as the teacher;16 the Annual Conference as a strategy session emerged much later in British and United States history. Because of the nature of this meeting, lay persons were not admitted to the Annual Conference until 1872, and this was a very controversial decision. In other churches, such as Tonga, the earlier Wesleyan style of the educational Annual Conference has been preserved.

In 1756, Wesley wrote what Bishop Herbert Welch called a "treatise" on ministerial education.17 In "An Address to Clergy,"
Wesley outlined the knowledge that an effective pastor needed. It is possibly his earliest vision of theological education. He first placed an emphasis on what he called "common sense" and practical skills. This involved a variety of skills and talents which today we would call the "arts of ministry," i.e., ministerial ethics and practical theology. Wesley's concern was with good manners and sound judgment. (Ironically, during Wesley's ministry in Georgia, he seemed to exercise neither good manners nor sound judgment, and he was forced to leave or face a civil suit.)

He also encouraged "classical learning" for Methodist preachers of all backgrounds. The ordinary parson in the Church of England had an extremely limited theological education and was trained primarily to read the liturgy and to conduct the services required for life events, such as, baptism, marriage, and burial. The situation was no different in the free church movements (e.g., pastors in the Baptist churches), where the emphasis was placed on the Sunday sermon and pastoral visitation. The standards Wesley set for his pastors greatly exceeded those of the clergy of other religious groups. In his treatise, Wesley insisted upon a knowledge of the scriptures, including the original languages of the Bible; church and world history; logic, including metaphysics; knowledge of science; and an awareness and practice of spiritual disciplines. In addition, he encouraged the study of sociology or what he called "knowledge of the world."

Wesley's view of theological education was largely shaped by his own experience. To his mother he gave the credit for instilling in him a love for learning and a desire to know. His own education at Oxford was classical in the best sense, although he had a lot to learn about human relationships and pastoral concern for others. Wesley knew he had received the best education to be had in England in his day, and he never hesitated to give advice or to counsel persons based upon his knowledge. Wesley read widely and did not restrict himself to religious literature. But the religious writings he did read included a broad, ecumenical range of thinkers, including Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Puritan scholars.

We shall return later to this "catholic spirit," but it does demonstrate why Methodists have usually not been known for their narrowness. Rather than being doctrinaire or ideological, Wesley and his followers can be characterized by their ecumenical spirit and efforts at reconciliation. In fact, Methodists have often been better known for their orthopraxy than for their orthodoxy. One hallmark of their
orthopraxy has been the practice of ecumenical education. From their earliest work in higher education and theological training, Methodists have sought a climate of learning which was nonsectarian and catholic, or universal, in spirit. For example, the first college founded by American Methodists enrolled students and employed faculty regardless of religious affiliation.21

Wesley's commitment to a learned ministry, combined with the limited opportunities for ministerial education in the eighteenth century, led to the founding of schools or colleges to promote learning and growth in faith for all followers within the Methodist movement. Many of these students later became lay pastors and circuit riders. Home study was also encouraged for Methodist pastors and preachers. Very early, Wesley established a fifty-volume collection in practical divinity for his preachers (the forerunner of the Course of Study for local pastors), and before 1756, he established the Book Room (foreunner of the Methodist Publishing House) for the publishing and distribution of books and tracts.22

Because of Wesley's belief that everyone should have an opportunity to experience their human worth and God's grace, Methodists have always understood that education was one of the most effective ways of bringing persons to Christ and of undergirding the Methodist movement. Education was essential for affirming the dignity of every person and leading people to awareness of their vocation in service to humankind and society.23 In my judgment, many of these beliefs, values, and educational practices of Wesley and the early Methodists have continued within the ethos of the Methodist churches and in the theological schools and colleges in a variety of national and cultural contexts.

Field Studies: Contemporary Methodist Theological Schools

In the 1994–95 academic year, I traveled with my family around the world, visiting theological schools and colleges for the purpose of preparing a study on comparative theological education. With the use of field notes, videotapes, publications of the institutions, and library research, we have formed some conclusions and generalizations.24 The purpose of my study was to identify similarities and differences in Methodist theological education, to note signs of a shared ethos, and to consider whether such ethos can be called distinctively Wesleyan. Our trip took us from Los Angeles to the United Kingdom, France,
Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Tonga, and back to Los Angeles, with a stop in Hawaii. We also gave attention to the ecumenical theological colleges in England, Scotland, and parts of Eastern Europe, particularly attending to the work of the United Methodist Church in Slovakia and the educational needs in that part of Eastern Europe. The theological education needs of pastors serving Polynesian churches and congregations were also noted. A more in-depth study was made of theological schools located in Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand and the churches located in Tonga and Hawaii. In most places, we visited sites and interviewed religious leaders in addition to reading.

We do not claim to have conclusive findings. Further research is needed by and with people in those diverse contexts. Our research was qualitative in approach, and we sought to look at practices and descriptive material in addition to historical and academic documents. We relied heavily on interviews and consultations with church leaders, faculty and students, and ecumenical leaders. We attended and observed classes, communal events in the schools, worship, external programs outside the formal school setting, and so forth. From this participant-observation study, we have made some broad generalizations that are applicable to most of the schools we visited.

Demographically, almost all of the schools report a shift in student enrollment or census. At the time of our visit, the average age of seminary students was higher than it was a decade before, and many students were beginning a second career. Many had been active lay persons in churches for some time before responding to the call to ordained ministry. In addition, the schools report an increase in the number of women entering ministry. Most schools are also involved in a larger role of educating the whole people for service in the church and the world. This means that a growing number of lay people are enrolled in theological college solely for the purpose of becoming theologically trained, without any plan to become ordained. They believe that theological training will help them serve more effectively as volunteers in churches or as providers of social and civil services.

Characteristics, Themes, and Ethos

We now turn to identify some distinctive elements and themes that are characteristic of Methodist theological colleges and schools within the world community.
I. Methodists are generally tolerant of diverse theological and social views and are ecumenical both in spirit and in practice. As we noted above, Methodists have not formed a creedal or confessional church in the sense of requiring adherence to a particular creed or set of doctrines. They have not been narrowly sectarian and have intentionally recruited and appointed non-Methodists to their theological faculties. These qualities are evident in the schools we studied, as well as in their active cooperation with other denominational schools in offering ministerial education. This spirit was especially strong with Anglicans and Roman Catholics. The Methodist Theological School in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is broadly ecumenical in the selection of its faculty and in its cooperation with other Christian groups.

History demonstrates that Methodists have often wavered between being a church and being a sect. In the ecumenical movement, they have served as a bridge between the “catholic” branch of Christianity and the “free-church” movement. Wesley never encouraged ideology or doctrine to eliminate people from the Methodist movements, and this ethos has transferred into theological education. The “catholic spirit” that Wesley writes about has influenced the spirit of these schools. This universal spirit which has spread with Methodism around the world can be illustrated by the following words from the graduation service of one of the theological schools in North America:

We are God's People—
All kinds and conditions
Many races, many creeds
Gathered today
In one spirit and joy.

Scholars debate the intent and implications of Wesley’s famous sermon on “The Catholic Spirit.” Most people interpret the content to fit their assumptions and biases, although he clearly advocates a “universal love” and clearly states his own concern that the beliefs of others should be tolerated. He acknowledges that beliefs to a large extent are the product of one’s birth. He writes, “Every wise man [sic], therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking, which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions, than he would them to insist on his embracing theirs.”
In the United States, religious historian Conrad Cherry suggests in his recent study of university divinity schools that the Methodist theological schools have always shown a high tolerance for diversity and theological pluralism and have been successful in providing a ministerial education that was "directed simultaneously to denominational specificity and Christian catholicity." The North American schools have tended to employ faculty regardless of denominational affiliation, and two or three schools have also included Jewish and Buddhist scholars on their faculty.

Almost every school we visited is currently engaged in developing an ecumenical base for theological education. In Slovakia, the superintendent/pastor in Bratislava drives weekly 175 miles each way to teach and support United Methodist students who are enrolled in a theological college composed of Reformed, Pentecostal, and several other Christian groups. In Sabah, Malaysia, the Sabah Theological School (near Kota Kinabalu in the Malaysian state of Sabah) was founded by the Basel Christian Mission, and it enjoys a relationship with the Lutheran Federation as well as a strong Methodist affiliation. The UMC Board of Global Ministry not only provides financial support but also provides and funds a full-time United Methodist faculty member. This institution is seen by many persons we interviewed as a pioneering school and one with significant influence in Southeast Asia. Although Chinese-speaking students are enrolled (Malaysia's majority group among the Christians), 60 percent of the students come from tribal lands and will return to their people as pastors with indigenous people. Instruction is offered both in Chinese and Bahasa Malaysian languages, and this is the only theological institution in Malaysia where teaching takes place in the common Bahasa language of the country.

Another example of an ecumenical and culturally inclusive approach to theological education is in New Zealand, where Anglicans and Methodists now share a common campus, a unified curriculum and faculty, and a shared Maori program in theological education. This cooperative relationship has been developed over a period of years and builds an ecumenical spirit in a country where churches once were more competitive, sometimes even bitter, in their denominational relationships.

2. Methodists have always given attention to practical concerns—field education, arts or practice of ministry, and social action. In one of his tracts, Wesley gives advice to ministers about...
preaching that shows as much concern with voice, diction, and delivery in preaching as with content and the study of history, theology, and philosophy. Methodists have traditionally been as dedicated to the deed as the word. Such is also the case in theological education. In Cherry’s study of divinity schools in the United States, he found that Methodist schools had led the way in developing programs in practical ministries, such as urban sociology (including “theological clinics”), and in field work in rural ministry.

The concern for the practical needs of people and their social welfare is also deeply embedded in Methodist history, and John Wesley himself set examples by his work on behalf of the poor, his direct and indirect efforts for reforms in education and prisons, and the fruits of his and others’ work among miners and laborers, thus cultivating the ground for the labor movement in Britain. Further, the Methodists in both Britain and the United States were leaders in the nineteenth-century Social Gospel movement. The Central Missions established by British Methodism and the leadership by American Methodism in establishing educational opportunities for ethnic minorities are only two examples.

Almost without exception, the schools we visited placed strong emphasis on social mission and the practice of ministry. Methodist schools and colleges have generally led the way in developing programs to serve the human needs of people and in developing a curriculum that attends seriously and creatively to the arts of ministry and the practice of preaching, worship, Christian Education, counseling, and church administration. The emphasis upon practical divinity can be illustrated by a special program for students at Sabah Theological School. Among the faculty is a professor whose expertise is agriculture. The school has a farm where students learn the science and skills of good farming. They also learn “handicrafts,” especially how to make essentials out of simple resources. We were told that most students will return to the villages where they and their people will have limited resources. It is important for the students to be self-supporting because the congregations will be able to pay only a little toward the support of their pastors. Also part of the pastor’s role is to help parishioners with farming methods in order for the village to survive.

3. Methodists have always had high regard for the place of the Bible and the role of scripture in theological education. Scholars and church leaders continue to debate what John Wesley and the Wesleyan
churches have really intended by speaking of scripture as having a primary role in theological thought, and they have sought to understand and articulate how the quadrilateral functions to stir interaction and bring balance among the sources of theological truth (scripture, reason, tradition, and experience). What is important to note, however, is that for Wesley, the Bible was an important source for both his preaching and teaching. This seems to be true also for much of the theological education in the Wesleyan tradition.

Methodists believe that scripture holds a central place in the education of pastors and other ministers. In most schools, Greek and Hebrew are taught as important tools for pastors in the study of the Bible. Wesley was a student of these biblical languages, and he encouraged and expected his pastors to have "a knowledge of the original tongues." In almost all of the schools we visited, the Bible was central to the theological curriculum. In most of the schools, Greek and Hebrew were taught as a requirement in the school. Especially in countries where the schools were related to a developing church or a mission situation and where Protestant Christians were a minority group, students had a strong sense of what Wesley meant when he called his pastors "to spread scriptural holiness over the land." A pastor is expected to have a good knowledge of the scriptures and to be educated in biblical preaching and teaching.

In our meeting with faculty at the Seminari Teologi Malaysia (Methodist Seminary in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) and with the bishop and other church and conference leaders, we learned that in a Muslim state (with an Islamic majority), Bible study is not an option; it is an essential if Methodist Christians are to form a Christian identity and if persons are to find a vocation in Christian leadership and ministry. Similar needs seem to exist in other areas, including the Methodist state of Tonga, where Methodism is the dominant church. The Bible is clearly understood and appreciated as the church's book. The Bible is more than a book for intellectual study; it is used by faculty and students in schools around the world for spiritual enrichment and formation.

4. Methodist theological schools and colleges also serve to promote a distinctively active Christian piety which is characteristic of the Methodist movement around the world. John Wesley highlighted this emphasis on piety in his tract called "A Plain Account of the People called Methodists." He stated that orthodoxy, or right belief, is a small part of being religious. Doing good, living in grace, and
practicing acts of devotion and charity are ways of describing the marks of a Methodist. Most important is to experience justification and to learn to live a "holy and happy" life. Wesley himself discovered that knowledge alone and orthodoxy in belief were not sufficient for justification. For him, a "heart-warming" experience at Aldersgate was the turning point.

Methodists have always placed as much emphasis on deed as on word. This is why Wesley formed classes and societies where persons could serve in mutual benefit to one another and where persons could be accountable to one another for a life of personal goodness and service. In our study, even the ecumenical schools (i.e., Sabah, Nungalinya in Darwin, Australia, United Theological Faculty in Melbourne, and St. John's/Te Roa/Trinity) have preserved the Methodist emphases on piety and the doing of good works. In these schools, spiritual formation, community worship, and a common life were expectations, not options, for students and faculty. In North America, and possibly in the United Kingdom, the formation of piety seems more optional, or at least more mechanical, less forthright, and a less visible priority. At least in the West, the attention to piety is somewhat compromised by modern demands of life and the location of theological education in relation to needs in the church and its mission. Many students commute, for example, and many divide their time among their families, churches, and theological studies, finding little time or encouragement to practice piety with intentionality. Similarly, the practice of piety is not necessarily common in students' families either; we can no longer assume, for example, that a husband and wife have a sense of shared calling or a common understanding of religious life.

In Sabah we participated in family groupings (a faculty member, students, and family members). These groupings were centers for recreation, study, worship, and devotional life. At Sabah, the students also met morning and evening for Bible study and prayer. In other groupings, students prepared the meals for the entire school, taking turns in gathering and preparing the food, serving the meals, and cleaning the dishes. At Nungalinya, families worshipped in chapel services and shared in spiritual formation groups. The school also provided vocational training for the spouses. In Melbourne, students and faculty met every Friday afternoon to eat sack lunches, to share and lift up concerns and highlights in their lives, and to participate in a service of Eucharist. What we might learn here is that piety is learned
not in isolation but in a religious community in which life is rooted in intentionality and discipline. Both of these are traits rooted in the Wesleyan heritage.

Conclusion

While all the theological colleges and schools have claimed the tradition and heritage of John Wesley, they have all done so in their own unique way. Although located in different countries and cultural settings, they understand themselves as Methodists and as standing in the rich tradition of Wesley. Methodists have always placed an emphasis upon scripture (within the context of other sources of theology), upon the doing of theology versus reliance upon rigid and sterile doctrines, and upon the deed (competent acts of ministry, acts of charity, and a life of piety). In this sense Wesley was a practical theologian who himself learned from the changing situations and from the needs of his societies. The distinctive ethos of Methodist theological education is grounded in what has come to be called practical divinity.

Notes

1. This distinction was made by Randolph Crump Miller in a lecture at the Claremont School of Theology, 1976; see also Theory of Christian Education Practice (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1980), 157; and The Clue to Christian Education (New York: Scribner's, 1955), 7ff.


6. Wesley’s reforms in education were motivated both by a religious concern for souls and by a humanitarian concern for the disadvantaged. The Methodist influence on the reform bill of 1870 led to universal education. See Marquardt, Social Ethics, 51.
8. One of the best and most-detailed accounts of Wesley’s publishing work is found in Sherwin, Wesley: Friend of the People, 145–146.
9. Ibid., 145.
10. Education: the Gift of Hope, 10.
11. This expression is often attributed to John Wesley, but Charles Wesley actually authored the words in a 1748 hymn for the opening of Kingswood School. The hymn reads, “Unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety.”
15. Wellspring is a house of study related to Trinity Theological College, Auckland, New Zealand. The leaders of Wellspring express some desire to expand this program to include older persons and others who cannot leave home to do a residential program of study but who could prepare for ministry in a home-study program. See Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Book of Readings: Education in Britain, Australia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific.” Unpublished case studies, (1994), 7–8.
17. Hobart Welch, ed., Selections from the Writings of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A. (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1993; revised edition), 262–268. Wesley makes it clear that his counsel is not limited to Methodist clergy but is for clergy in general, regardless of denomination (265). In this treatise, he concludes by affirming that he has no plans to leave the Church of England and will oppose the Methodists’ separating (260).
18. This standard of a higher education has long been an expectation for Methodist clergy, and it was possibly influenced by Wesley’s Oxford education. Marty writes regarding Methodist theological education in North America: “Methodism is the only denomination that consistently established divinity schools as components of its universities.” Cited in Martin Marty, “Divinity and the University,” The Christian Century (7–14 Feb. 1997): 147ff.
19. The value of a liberal education was simply assumed by Wesley and, in time, it became a common expectation among Methodists around the world.

24. Our summaries were submitted to the theological schools and colleges to test our conclusions and for their approval. They are currently contained in a "Book of Readings," edited by Mary Elizabeth Moore, 1995.

25. The Methodist churches worldwide are reported to have educated, ordained, and appointed more women than any other Christian group. Methodists are also open to and encouraging of lay persons to enter ordained and specialized ministries, even at a mature age.

26. The WCC program on "Educating the People" has seemingly had an impact on the schools and colleges, especially in the developing churches.

27. Commencement: A Service of Dedication, One-Hundred-Twelfth Graduation, Claremont School of Theology, May 17, 1997. The service was written originally by the late President Ernest C. Caldwell and is revised from time to time by the faculty in consultation with the administration.


29. Ibid., 111. Wesley does modify his position here, and he indicates that persons may change their beliefs, as in the Reformation.

30. Ibid., 109.


32. Will Herberg, a Jewish scholar, taught for many years at Drew Theological School; currently Marvin Sweeney, also a Jewish scholar, teaches at Claremont. Claremont and Iliff have also included a Buddhist scholar among their faculty. The theological schools associated with religion departments of universities, including those named here, offer still more diversity in faculty and points of view.


36. Welch, *Selections from Writings*, 263.

37. Ibid., 171-198.


39. John Cobb, 139ff. Cobb's book contains an excellent discussion of Methodist piety which, according to him, requires "rigorous discipline" (adherence to strict methods for living is the source of Methodism as a name). Methodists were, according to Wesley, to live for God and neighbor. He encouraged his followers to "do all the good we can while avoiding evil." The challenge for theological education is to translate this emphasis on piety into ministerial formation. See also Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1963), 11ff.
Gary E. Peluso

To Live and to Die in Battle: A Nineteenth-Century Metaphor and Clergy Self-Care

... be it ours to follow the Christian pilgrim warrior over the fields of his labor, and toil, and sacrifice, and recount the victories achieved by the cross.¹

Clergy, on the whole, do not care well for themselves. At least anecdotal evidence suggests this. If one listens to clergy at their lectionary groups, denominational gatherings, and local ministerial association lunches, one will hear an array of topics, most of them negative: the excessive hours they work; the vacation days they did not take; the exercise schedule they neglected; the reading and reflection that administration squeezed from their schedule; the emergencies that preempted family time; and the emotional needs that went unattended. When one gets more intimate with them and learns about the emptiness of many of their spiritual lives, the picture grows even dimmer.²

While there are many theories, mainly derived from the human sciences, about clergy burnout, depression, and loss of morale, my suspicion is that the practices of clergy self-care are grounded instead in Christian theology and church tradition—in practical understandings of God, what it means to be human, and what it means

Gary E. Peluso is Dean and Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He is an elder in the Oklahoma Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.
to be church. Ministry that is based on belief in a God who demands self-sacrificing obedience, who—like an ancient king—owns everything in his realm and can do with it as he pleases, and who will use people to the point of exhaustion and even death to win battles will look one way. Ministry based on belief in a God who lures free beings toward a balanced, "healthy," abundant life in the saeculum will look quite different.

In addition, there is the historical dimension of our experience. United Methodist clergy in the U.S. often feel tension when they try to care adequately for themselves. This tension can arise when clergy feel themselves bound by deeply held vestiges of early nineteenth- and the late-twentieth-century understandings of God, humanity, church, and ministry. To illustrate these views, I will use the reflections of antebellum nineteenth-century itinerants in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although we tend to think of these men as hardy souls who "wore themselves out" for God and the MEC, they did in fact sustain themselves in ministry in ways that we would understand as "self-care." Nineteenth-century circuit riders used certain metaphors for ministry that illuminate their practices. With this perspective, we will be in a position to make some observations about the nature of ministry and clergy self-care today.

Nineteenth-Century Circuit Riders in Their Own Words

The journals and reminiscences of itinerants in the Methodist Episcopal Church, mostly written from the 1840s to 1860s, together with late nineteenth-century biographies of these figures, tell the story of the church in terms of decline and heroism. These men believed that the Golden Age of the itinerancy was passing. The frontier-conquering, soul-winning, warrior-like preachers of yesterday (themselves included) were a dying breed. Each journal I read judged the younger generations as inferior to the preachers active in earlier years. The preachers of old were holy Paul Bunyans; the younger generation was merely mortal. The journal keepers published their work intentionally in order to keep alive the memories of the immortals and to make them available for inspiration.

The Metaphor of Conquest. For these clergy, the focal point of ministry was the process of winning souls for Christ. Conversion was
referred to predominantly in terms of conquest, from the events leading up to conversion, to conversion itself, to the progress toward sanctification, and to the hour of one’s death.  

Each of the itinerants, more or less explicitly, framed their experience in terms of battle, understanding themselves as God’s soul warriors. The biographer of John B. McFerrin described his ministry in the following terms:

*He started out as a preacher with the notion that this is an evil world that must be righted, a world in error that must be corrected, a rebellious world that must be subdued, by the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . McFerrin’s nature was a harp of many strings, its dominant note the battle-call.*

Of circuit rider Edward Morrison it was written,

*With him life is a conflict. The world, with its pageantry, tinsel, and glare; the flesh, with its corruptions and evil propensities; the devil, who has contended with him in every advance he has made in a religious life—all have been conquered.*

In his diary Maxwell Pierson Gaddis wrote:

*I wish to live and die in the service of God, with my armor on.*

... I lifted my hat and prayed to the God of battles to give me every unconverted soul in the place.

Jesse Walker:

*I have come, in the name of Christ, to take St. Louis, and by the grace of God, I will do it.*

Thomas Webb’s biographer wrote:

*He wielded the sword of the Spirit as successfully as he had his sword in defense of his country.*

After his conversion at the Cane Ridge revival in 1801, James B. Finley wrote that he soon learned that to
... reign as a king and priest with God and the Lamb forever. I must fight; that the only way to the crown was by the cross.\textsuperscript{13}

It would be hard to find a preacher whose life was more defined by conquest than Peter Cartwright. His autobiography is full of debates. He loved to bait Baptists into heated arguments, and he referred to debate helpers as “armor-bearers.” He was famous, sometimes to his embarrassment, for fistfights and near duels. More than once he literally knocked people over, including women, in the name of Jesus and “defeated the scheme of the devil once more.”\textsuperscript{14}

Bishop Thomas Morris described the entire work of the Methodist Episcopal Church in battle imagery:

\textit{Our thirty thousand churches, like so many fortifications, are weekly filled with some millions of soldiers of the cross armed with the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit. ... Bible societies are driving a million of battering rams against the bowing walls of the devil’s kingdom. ... In the mean time, thirty thousand pulpits are filled with ambassadors of heaven, exhorting millions to yield to the scepter of mercy, and render obedience to the King of Zion. ... By our own division of the Christian army, during the past year, more than thirty-two thousand of souls were made joyous prisoners of hope.\textsuperscript{15}}

The language of conversion as these itinerants used it is language of conquest. \textit{Winning} souls to Christ. \textit{Surrendering} to Jesus. \textit{Slain} in the spirit. David Lewis, who itinerated in Ohio, claimed at the moment of conversion that “an indescribable flood of glory overpowered my soul.” A good sermon for him, and for many of his colleagues, resulted in people falling “like men slain in battle.”\textsuperscript{16} Maxwell Gaddis framed his own conversion experience, with an emphasis on surrender fully and freely offered, with a passage from Livy.\textsuperscript{17}

Leroy Ludeman Lane\textsuperscript{18} noted that John Nessly, a circuit rider in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kansas in the middle-to-late nineteenth century, followed the Apostle Paul in grounding his language in metaphors of war and athletic contests. Lane argues that this is biblical and that such rhetoric made sense to the farmers and ex-soldiers of post-Civil War congregations.

This may be true. But Lane does not account for the fact that Nessly appeared to follow a well-established Methodist pattern. So the
question remains: Why did the metaphors of conquest appeal so strongly to Methodist itinerants through at least the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century? It is worth considering the possibility that the metaphor of spiritual warfare fit perfectly with the westward expansion of the U.S. expressed in the emerging mythology of conquest, which applied to the land, its indigenous people, and even to the new settlers, who were always in danger of succumbing to the undisciplined, chaotic evils of frontier life.

The Metaphor of Cultivation. More than souls needed conquering. There was also something fundamentally wrong with the world; all creation had been corrupted by sin. For these clergy, landscapes needed to be conquered, tamed, cultivated, and transformed. Without a radical transformation, the world and the souls that dwelt therein were not useful to God. In fact, in their world, nothing was useful to God until it was conquered and cultivated.

There was a metaphorical coherence between the frontier and the wilderness of an unconverted soul. Both needed cultivation, both needed order to be brought to them from without in order to be rendered useful. Stephen Beggs viewed his hard early life as "preparatory for the hardships of the uncultivated fields of his vineyard"; as an itinerant, he was "sent into the wild wilderness to cultivate Immanuel's land." Lane includes a telling quote from a Nessly sermon without noting the coherence of metaphors of farming and soldiering:

... how pleasing it is to the husbandman after hard labour in preparing the ground and sowing the seed, to see first the blade, then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear. ... Now [sic] delightful it must be to the soldier after the marchings, privations and all the perils of the field, to return home in peace to enjoy the spoils and rewards of victory.

The Metaphor of Satan. The primary enemy was Satan, the Prince of this World. Protestant evangelicals shared the perspective that God and the devil were locked in mortal battle and that the human soul was both the battlefield and the trophy. Because of God's victory in Jesus' cross, the battle's ultimate outcome was assured.

Nevertheless, Satan was still a formidable opponent. Lucian Holsey, an African-American Colored Methodist Episcopal leader who was...
raised in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, potently portrayed the Enemy's prowess:

As a warrior, he stands at the head and is the dictator of a multitudinous, powerful, and well organized army, equipped [sic] and skilled in all the military tactics of diabolical and spiritual warfare. The weapons of this warfare are mighty, formidable and tried upon the spiritual battlefields of the nations and ages... Messiah on the one side and the devil on the other are great leaders and captains.

What self-respecting soldier could rest with such a powerful enemy afoot? Every time an itinerant relaxed, the devil and his forces won another beachhead. This belief created an urgency, and even a crisis mentality, that goes a long way toward explaining why so many young men proved to be swords too sharp for their scabbards (see below). To make matters worse, Satan had allies who were disguised as angels of light within other churches. Their generic names were predestination, quietism, universal salvation, popery, and salvation by water; their family names were Presbyterians, Baptists, Calvinists of all stripes, Universalists, Catholics, and Campbellites. During these years, very few Methodist itinerants evidenced a "catholic spirit."

They thrived on this war. And if a Methodist were ever defeated in this battle, we would not know it through their journals. Each battle was a kind of divine confirmation that the Methodist Episcopal Church was superior to all others. No church was more blessed, won more victories, was awarded more trophies.

Self-Care for Spiritual Warriors

If we approach the subject of self-care from a contemporary perspective, we find the nineteenth-century practices sorely lacking, perhaps even destructive. But if we ask what Methodist clergy thought they were doing, and if we look to the basic metaphor from which they lived, then we find a rich assortment of practices analogous to self-care.

In order to be fair to the nineteenth century, at this point the language must shift from self-care to soul-care. This is not to suggest that the rhetorics can be neatly divided, Maxwell Gaddis in particular
provides a fascinating example of how the languages could be mixed. Gaddis, describing his state immediately prior to his conversion, wrote of his “bitterness of ... spirit, and the deep mental agony of my soul...” Struggling with his call to preach, he “could not make known the smothered emotions of my soul.”

But the soul, rather than the self, was thought to be the primary locus of God’s concern. The importance of the eternal far outweighed the temporal. This world is only the vestibule for life in the next. Mortal life is but a preparation for eternal life. Practically speaking, this theology was dualistic, dividing body and soul, flesh and spirit.

It was the soul that matured and was made ready for the next life by being formed and tested in battle. The soul was the temporal battlefield contested by God and Satan. Soul-caring persons did what was necessary to be protected from the devil and enabled others to do the same. Given this understanding, these itinerants cared deeply for their souls. Even those who died in the battle, although they neglected themselves, cared for their souls, because to die at one’s post was an honor (not uncontested); it also was considered evidence of the ultimate redemption of one’s soul.

The itinerants who persevered in the work believed that they were doing something important not only for the souls of others but for their own souls as well. Lewis spoke for many when he wrote: “I confess I never could feel satisfied without being made happy in my own soul, while trying to preach to others.” Certainly, these Methodists were working out their own salvation by taking up their calling and cross.

Support for Battle. The early Methodist system was famous for strongly discouraging married preachers. Francis Asbury considered marriage a fate worse than death, and he mourned the loss of preachers to married life. The circuits, especially in the first decades of the nineteenth century, often preferred single preachers because they were much cheaper to keep.

Before long, preachers regularly married. But ministry understood as warfare places an extra burden on marriage and family life. Itinerants were absent from their homes for long periods. F. M. Moore, a missionary in the Oklahoma Indian Territory after the Civil War, traveled a circuit so large that he saw his family only twice in a whole year. In one of his absences, a young son died; the family would not bury him until his father returned home. As a consequence,
Moore asked for an appointment the following year that required him to be absent no more than six weeks at a time. Moreover, dead soldiers for Christ left widows and orphans with few material resources.

Nevertheless, having a wife and family, even if they were rarely seen, was a source of comfort. They could also be, and often were, allies in the battle. At times, journal writers employed the language from Proverbs 31 on the value of a good woman. More interesting, however, is the comparison of a good wife with Aaron and Hur, who held up the hands of Moses in the wilderness so that the Israelites prevailed in battle (Exodus 17).

If the preacher who has borne aloft the ensign of the cross, and carried its crimson banner over mountain and plain, deserves the gratitude of mankind, she who held up his hands in the fiercest of conflict, and uttered words of cheer when he was ready to fail, merits well of those in whose interest she has encountered difficulties and suffered privations. . . . Gently reared, she makes many sacrifices, and denies herself many comforts that other women enjoy, that she might hold up the hands of him who ministers at the altars of the Church, and points perishing men and women to the Saviour. Peter Cartwright credited many wives with preventing their husbands from deserting their "post[s]." Between enabling their husbands to remain faithful to their calling and otherwise upholding their hands in battle, wives played supportive and caregiving roles. In this way, marriage was a form of clergy soul-care.

Training Body and Mind. While they cared most for their souls, these circuit riders realized that not just anyone was physically equipped for the work they did. They wrote often of the physical and mental constitutions necessary for itinerant life. Their descriptions of each other are replete with word-portraits of their physical characteristics, muscularity, and endurance. Cartwright literally measured new recruit George Richardson (over six feet and well-muscled) and judged his dimensions "sufficiently imposing." Morris, employing the language of decline, believed the early preachers were superior to the present generation, "not only of
vigorous and well-disciplined minds, but likewise in iron constitution and tremendous muscular force."  
Woe to those who were not sufficiently endowed for the work! One did not need great physical strength, but endurance and mental toughness were absolutely required. After twenty years of labor, Francis Poythress took a supernumerary status for three years due to his health. When he returned to itinerancy in 1800, he rode alone, which preyed heavily on his system, shattering his nerves, and making fearful inroads upon a mind naturally of a too contemplative, if not somber, cast; and seasons of doom and darkness gathered around him.

Broken in mind and body, he died.  

Training Necessary for Battle. Education was clearly considered one of the implements of battle. But the kind of education required by a soldier in the midst of battle is different from that of a resident pastor tending a garden. A resident pastor has time for reflection, even leisure time when he can legitimately rest from his labor. A soldier in battle is in a very different place. To foot soldiers under fire, a course in the history of warfare in the West would be irrelevant. But basic training, where recruits could learn practical skills and survival strategies, would be eagerly sought out. Itinerant preachers who spent so little time at home and had such limited carrying capacity while in the field had to be very judicious about what to take along. Resources for contemplation and study had to be portable.

Each of the men I read was opposed to seminary learning. They deeply preferred the brush colleges and the training system of class members, class leaders, exhorters, local preachers, and the levels of traveling preachers. It was education as paideia, as formation. It was learning by watching and doing; the battlefield was also a practice field. In this way they effectively outfitted their minds for battle with their enemies.

The Healing Power of the Woods. Morris’s journal includes a section entitled “Our Enjoyments.” At the top of his list was the woods, where he loved to retreat for meditation and prayer. While the devil was strongest in the woods at night (camp meetings, lit at night by torches
and flaming rhetoric, were loci of battle against Satan\(^{33}\)), during the day the woods were a retreat, holy ground, near to the Garden. Finley wrote:

\[\text{Alone in the deep solitude of the wilderness a man can commune with himself and Nature and her God, and realize emotions and thoughts that the crowded city never can produce.}\]^{34}

Itinerants found not only loneliness and danger in those long rides between appointments but often care for their souls.

Shore leave. Rare was the minister who did not have to spend a whole or part of a year away from itineracy in order to recover his broken health. One could liken their time off to shore leave for sailors. Like sailors, they were entitled to rest and relaxation (but not to the sailors’ legendary excesses) in order to gain the strength to return to battle. Although the itinerants sought to burn with gospel energies, they could not be burning bushes that were never consumed. Rather, at times they knew they were burnt up and needed time to heal.

Maxwell Gaddis wrote extensively about his health. He saw a physician often and frequently received orders to go to the springs or to New Orleans to regain his health. Even here, however, his battle mentality would not release him to rest. While on vacation to recover his health, he wrote that his travels and preaching “robbed me of all my little stock of strength.” When he finally had to take a superannuated relationship, he lamented that he was “no longer able to stand with [his brothers] on the battle-field.”\(^{35}\)

The Power of Conferencing. Conferencing was essential to the itinerants’ training, survival, and morale.\(^{36}\) The written records of individual efforts of the itinerant heroes must be balanced by the clear signs of mutual bonds between brothers in battle. Their love for each other was often profound. Finley depicted conferences as places where many hearts “were united as David and Jonathan.”

\[\text{When the preachers met from their different and distant fields of labor they had a feast of love and friendship; and when they parted, they wept and embraced each other as brothers beloved.}\]^{37}
At conference, some dead or superannuated itinerants were eulogized as fallen soldiers. The conference memoir for Joseph Oglesby (d. 1852) read: “‘He died with his armor on, and fell in sight of glory. Many shall rise up and call him blessed.’”

Lewis depicts annual conference as military headquarters:

Like as the officers of an army, after a successful engagement with an obstinate fool, meet and detail their progress in battle, as it transpired under their immediate supervision, in different parts of the extended field of strife, so these ministers of truth, officers in the army of the Lord, report at their annual convocation, the advancement made at different points, and the trophies won under the banner of the cross, and shout together the praises of the Captain of their salvation, through whose wisdom and power they have been led to achieve their glorious victories.

Taking Care of Business. Poverty afflicted many. More than one diarist lamented the plight of his colleagues who were “starved into location,” either for want of food or of clothes. Some sold boots or greatcoat for food (for themselves or their families), substituting blankets and rags.

Early warriors were seldom bitter toward the system, but the subject of their own financial support set their teeth on edge. While he defended the hardy souls of the old days, Finley also wrote with anger:

[The] great mass [of itinerants] live poor, die poor, and leave their families to the charities of the Church. Some I know who have spent a fortune for the privilege of traveling circuits, at a salary of twenty-five dollars a year, while their wives lived in log cabins, and rocked their children in sugar-troughs.

Toward the end of his life, when salaries had risen to $1,500, Finley complained that superannuates were given but $20 to $40 per year. “None seem to care for my circumstances now.”

On occasion, they fought poverty by challenging the authority of the circuit stewards. Morrison, writing a generation later than Finley, tells two success stories regarding battles with the circuits he served. In one, with the presiding elder’s support he obtained a substantial increase in salary. In another, the parsonage was in a place he
considered unsuitable for his wife. When the stewards refused to accommodate him, the presiding elder supported his “right to consult his own feelings and the happiness of his family as to the selection of the place of residence within his circuit.”

Another way they cared for themselves materially was to publish their journals in hopes of providing for themselves and their families. Their motivations for writing included keeping alive the memories of heroes inspiring and—sometimes—scolding younger clergy. But they also wrote to make money. Gaddis, who wore himself out in twenty years of service and could no longer speak either loudly or without pain, wrote, almost pathetically, about his need to make money with his story.

Others took care of themselves and their families by locating. The works consulted in this study are punctuated with complaints, sometimes bitter, that the parsimonious circuits drove some of the best men to locate in order to support their families. Moore went further than most, arguing the churches’ “utterable stinginess . . . has caused it to lose many of its ablest and most efficient ministers and in their places they have often to put up with cheap, shoddy preachers.”

This being said, the drive for some to be engaged in battle, for the sake of others and for themselves, was so powerful that they located for a few seasons and, as soon as they could, returned to the traveling ranks. A good example is David Lewis. He located to farm in Ohio and thereby better provide for this family. Although he preached frequently, however, he felt compelled to return to the traveling ranks because “. . . I concluded I must be a traveling preacher, or lose my soul.”

A Theology in Their Practice

“And he fell like a soldier—he died at this post.”

. . . his brethren urged him to rest, that he might recover his strength for new contests. “How can I rest,” said he, “when the prince of darkness is more vigilant that all the ministers of Christ, when sinners are standing on the verge of ruin, and when hundreds are daily falling into hell?” No! he would not pause amid the glorious scenes in which, under God, he was a prominent actor.
The itinerants preached a gospel of grace. But one wonders whether their behavior and, occasionally, their rhetoric, betrayed a different understanding of salvation—namely, heaven as reward for hard labor rather than a gift of grace, something earned through moral battling rather than granted through God’s graciousness in Jesus Christ. While they may have kept clear of “earned” language in the theologies they affirmed and the sermons they preached, when it come to the destiny of their own souls, the rhetoric of reward stands out. Morrison, reflecting on the end of a conference session, mused that “before another annual meeting some of them would be called from labor to reward.” Finley related the case of Richmond Nolley, worn out one conference, who was “a flaming herald of the cross” who “pressed on to the mark of the heavenly prize.”

What kind of theology drove large numbers of early itinerants to exhaustion? What motivated men like Alexander Cummins (d. 1823), who was a “sword [that] proved too sharp for the scabbard . . . his flaming spirit consumed the earthly tabernacle in which it was lodged”? It is difficult to conceive of a soldier’s life as a life of grace. These preachers were drafted or impressed as much as they were called. Language of trophy, winning and losing, conquest, victory—the language of battle—is hard to mix with salvation by grace.

The God under Whom They Served. Who is this battling God? Early Methodist itinerants occasionally referred to Jesus as captain, although they did not refer to God as general, commander-in-chief, or the like. Instead, they adhered to biblical metaphors for God, especially King. Despite their setting in the young republic of the United States, nothing of democracy had penetrated their piety. God remained the all-powerful, all-knowing, and benevolent monarch. The King battles for souls. Souls belong only to God or to Satan. Once the King won a soul, that soul is God’s to do the King’s bidding. One hears the prayer of consecration from John Wesley’s Watchnight Service. The King who owns all could act in ways that, if done by one human being to another, none would tolerate.

Their God owned souls and could use them—and use them up—as he saw fit, however mysterious his motives. The earthly task of human beings, in this age, was to surrender to the soul-battling God of Jesus Christ and to join God’s militant movement known as the Methodist Episcopal Church. The traveling ministers were set apart to discipline
the troops with mercy, compassion, and love, for the sake of growth in Christian maturity but also with truth and moral stringency. In addition, traveling preachers joined with class leaders and local preachers to equip the troops/church for battle, whether against Satan, rowdies, or adherents of other denominations. Methodists were set apart, a distinctive people, especially in their practice. They were as much fighting Methodists as they were shouting Methodists. And their fighting practice was undergirded and driven (not exclusively but substantially) by the metaphor of conquest.

Looking in the Mirror

As I reflect on the United Methodist Hymnal debate of a few years back, I chuckle and pause. The hymnal committee decided that "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Onward Christian Soldiers" ought to be excised. Many, many United Methodists had another opinion; and ultimately, they won. Apparently, the theologically reflective hymnal committee members believed that these hymns, portraying faithful Christian living as battle, no longer fit the ethos and theology of United Methodism. One can almost feel the ground quake with the rage of hundreds of nineteenth-century Methodist preachers who died at their posts or wore themselves out in battle.

This is not to say that the hymnal committee was wrong. Indeed, I enlist myself with those who hope and work for Christianity to be a kinder, gentler presence in the Third Millennium than it has been since the victory of Constantine in the fourth century. I stand with theologians such as Walter Wink who, with the intellectual and moral help of René Girard, re-imagine Christianity apart from the myth of redemptive violence. Furthermore, our piety, still based largely on the metaphors and understandings of God as omnipotent King, needs to take into account the now virtually worldwide call for and living experiments in democracy. In what ways can and should our ways of imaging and approaching God be altered if we image God in non-regal terms? What if God values freedom, personality, diversity of opinion, and the secular as much (and, most likely, more than) human democracies do?

If one takes the questions of the above paragraph seriously, then the subject of clergy self-care clearly needs to be set on a different footing than it was a 150 years ago. Present practice needs to be freed from
old metaphors. We are not preparing soldiers for battle; we do not believe this world is but a training ground for the next; we do not believe (when we are thinking clearly) that every opponent is demonic. On a purely pragmatic level, it is expensive to educate clergy; if we encourage them to use themselves up in service we will only have to educate new ones at even greater expense.

We understand the self very differently today than we did 150 years ago. While we may be concerned about the dominance of therapeutic language, it has also effectively illuminated some of religion’s deeper shadows. For example, we have come to understand the damage done to persons who try to give themselves away before they have a developed self to give freely; we call them co-dependent, and we worry that they will be preyed upon by a consumption-driven people or that they will “act out” in some boundary-violating behavior. Because of new psychological insights, many seek to understand the self more holistically, seeing the body-mind-spirit as a unity, rather than as separate compartments. We comprehend more and more that the self is constituted through relationships and our need to be in relationship does not wane as we mature.

Clergy, I would argue, need to be encouraged to care for their selves. Said another way, they need metaphorical and systemic support to be adults. That does not mean that, as adults, they are self-sufficient and do not need care. Rather, being an adult means taking responsibility to reach for the care that one needs, deliberately seeking experiences of renewal. It is good to be useful, but one can be useful without being used up.

Nineteenth-century itinerants cared for their souls through preparing for and engaging in battle. Eternal salvation was the reward for a battle faithfully fought. They sacrificed health, comfort, and sometimes even wives and children for the sake of working out their salvation. Clergy today need to care for their souls but also for their selves. They would do well to find the metaphors for God and God’s relationship with us in which we can live and treat our selves—ours and others—well. We will live in a metaphor that either helps or injures us in this pursuit.
Notes


3. At the 1997 Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies, some historians questioned whether the battle metaphors that follow were etched into the church after the Civil War. The metaphor of ministry as battle, however, is pervasive in the antebellum period. This is clearly demonstrated by the number of quotes below taken from works published before 1860. From a methodological point of view, since I present this paper as a work in practical theology, I have retained voices from the post-war period that continue the battle tradition, rather than limiting the historical references to the pre-war period.

4. Paul Bunyan is a North American myth of a giant with superhuman strength who, with his blue ox, Babe, raised mountains and created mighty rivers.

5. "The noble examples furnished in these sketches, of untiring labor and self-sacrificing devotion of those who cheerfully gave up all for Christ and the advancement of his cause, should stir up every impulse of our nature to emulate their virtues and strive to imitate their truly heroic deeds." Finley, *Sketches*, 3.

6. This reading of the texts is akin to Richey's: "Methodist ministers were to be boosters of a Christian nation either by shaping culture or by conquering its people or both." Russell E. Richey, "Evolving Patterns of Methodist Ministry," *Methodist History* 22 (October 1983): 33.


9. Maxwell Pierson Gaddis, *Foot-Prints of an Itinerant* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1857), 107. As Gaddis attended to his father at his father's deathbed, his father encouraged him to war like David the shepherd. His mother, near her death, enjoined him to be "a good soldier of Christ," 125.

10. Ibid., 189, speaking of his first circuit.

11. T. A. Morris, *Miscellany: Consisting of Essays, Biographical Sketches, and Notes of Travel* (Cincinnati: L. Savormstedt and A. Foc, 1853), 181. St. Louis already had a substantial Catholic presence; Stephen Beggs mentioned Catholics and Satan in the same sentence as powers that could not slow Methodist growth. Beggs also likened Walker to Joshua; Walker looked upon himself and Illinois "that he was to be the Joshua to lead on his spiritual Israel to possess it." S. R. Beggs, *Pages from the Early History of the West and North-West* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1868), 97, 137.


17. "At that moment the Holy Ghost pressed home, with power, the following interrogation: 'Do you give up all?' Bringing to my recollection a 'form of surrender' mentioned in Livy, where Egenious inquired, 'Are you the embassadors sent by the people of Callatia, that you may yield up yourselves and the Callatine people?' It was answered, 'We are.' And was again asked, 'Are the Callatines people in their own power?' It was answered, 'They are.' It was further inquired, 'Do you deliver up yourselves, the people of Callatia, your city, your fields, your waters, your bounds, your temples, your utentils (sic)—all things that are yours, both Divine and human, into mine and the people of Rome's power?' They say, 'We deliver up all.' And he answered, 'So I receive you.' After repeating these words several times, I said, 'Now, O my God, I would in like manner deliver up all my soul and body; all, all—no longer mine, but thine, to all eternity. Wilt thou now receive me?' The Holy Spirit then immediately whispered in my heart, in sweetest accents, 'Yes, now I receive you.' I instantly rose up from my prostrate position on the floor, and exclaimed with emphasis, 'I am the Lord's forever! I am the Lord's forever! I am the Lord's forever!'" Gaddis, 242–243.

The conquest metaphor was undoubtedly not unique to American Methodism. There was much cross-fertilization between Britain and the U.S. in what Carwardine denominated "transatlantic revivalism." See Richard Carwardine, *Trans-atlantic Revivalism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978). Finley records one instance in the U.S.-to-England direction of an English officer who, after attending a camp meeting, described the whole as a battle between the forces of Immanuel and Diabolus, with the latter totally defeated. The officer claimed that, upon his return to England, he would "show his countrymen how Americans conducted a holy war." Finley, *Autobiography*, 294.


23. One aspect of self-care which I suspect was a major item yet to which I found few explicit references was to self-doctoring and medications. The frequently ill Francis Asbury gave himself emetics. Lane notes that Nessly used herbal remedies and kept a recipe for "Cholera Aromatic Cordial" which included brandy, cinnamon, peppermint, laudanum, and loaf sugar. Lane, 96, fn. 45.

24. Gaddis, 73, 81; emphasis mine.

25. Lewis, 73. Lewis wrestled for years for the blessing of entire sanctification. "My mind was impressed that the more I was made like God, the more pleasing I should be..."
to him, the more useful in the church and in the world, as well as the more happy in my own soul." 148.

26. William Burke, the first married preacher in the West, wrote that his colleagues considered his wife "an encumbrance... everything was thrown in my way to discourage me." Finley, Sketches, 53.


30. But who held up her arms when she was tired from the battle? Carrie Morrison, upon having to move again, combined theology and feeling: "The itinerant system is God's plan for evangelizing the world, and although it has its sacrifices, I would not, as the wife of a traveling preacher, see it either changed or modified; but still, I repeat, it is hard." Old Traveling Preacher, 312.

31. Cartwright, Fifty Years, 82; Morris, 238-239. Cartwright, a near-perfect example of longevity in ministry, after a lengthy description of his practice of throat-care (voice was a prime weapon), concluded, "Keep your feet warm, your head cool, your bowels well regulated, rise early, go to bed regularly, eat temperately, avoiding high-seasoned viands, pickles, and preserves, drink no spirit of any kind, and there will be no need of your ever breaking down till the wheels of life stop, and life itself sweetly ebbs away." Cartwright, Autobiography, 406.

32. Finley, Sketches, 131.


34. Finley, Autobiography, 158.

35. Gaddis, 268, 345, 466. In a parting shot to the church as a whole, the man who hated to take his shore leave wrote, "It is too true that some of our societies remind me of a garrison which has kept out the enemy so long that the draw-bridges cannot be lowered. and they have become so fond of garrison fare and garrison duty that they have lost their courage, and feel no desire to enter the campaign and attack the enemy on his own territories," 540.

36. James Nelson has written a very nice piece on this subject. I regret that I could not locate the volume on Wesleyan Spirituality and Theological Education in which it is included.

37. Finley, Autobiography, 254; Sketches, 58.

38. Ibid., 249.

39. Lewis, 94.

40. Wakeley noted a different kind of declension from what has been discussed in this paper. In the records of John Street Church, he notes that, whereas the congregation paid for doctor bills and for barbering Joseph Pilmoor and Robert Williams, now (1858) the clergy pay such bills. Wakeley, 213.

41. Finley, Autobiography, 296-297; Sketches, 91, 92.

42. Old Traveling Preacher, 280.
43. Gaddis, 5-6.
44. Moore, 172.
45. Lewis, 217, 237.
46. Fitzgerald, 169.
47. Old Traveling Preacher, 54.
48. Lane notes the “reward” and “prize” language of Nessly’s sermons. Nessly also connected the frontier and the Christian life as places of constant perils and conflicts. Lane, 160.
49. Old Traveling Preacher, 89.
50. Finley, Autobiography, 341.
51. Finley, Sketches, 373. The metaphor of a “sword too sharp for the scabbard” apparently comes from John Wesley. Moore tells of Josephus Edwards, a missionary in the Oklahoma Indian Territory who died at the age of thirty-one, who “probably belonged to that class of men whom Mr. Wesley describes as ‘a sword that was too sharp for the scabbard in which it was encased.’ His fatal sickness is believed to have been brought on by physical overwork.” Moore, 194.

On rare occasion, a writer eschewed the complimentary metaphor of a “sword too sharp for the scabbard” and chastised a hero who wore himself out in battle. Bishop Morris described William Christie’s self-induced exhaustion (Christie was a mentor of Gaddis) and admonished young clergy “to regard their health for the good of the cause, and that unreasonable hearers will learn to make some allowance for such of them as labor under bodily infirmities, lest they die in the midst of their usefulness.” Morris, 194.

52. My thanks to Russell Richey for this insight.
53. The closest I found to directly calling God a military commander was Gaddis’s recollection of his father. The first time Gaddis and his father attended a camp meeting, when they heard the trumpet call them to the preacher’s stand, his father exclaimed: “THERE IS THE SHOUT OF A KING AMONG THEM.” Gaddis, 48.
54. For example, see Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
55. One attempt to do this is William Johnston Everett’s God’s Federal Republic (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).
Ronald J. Allen

The Life of the Preacher as a Source of the Knowledge of God

John Calvin frames the importance of our topic with the famous words that begin his instruction in the Christian religion: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” In today’s postmodern ethos, many would consider true and sound wisdom to have yet a third part: knowledge of nature.

But let us begin with the second term, human self-knowledge. It is commonly assumed that this is an elusive, highly subjective form of understanding. But by knowledge of ourselves Calvin means knowledge of both our personal lives and our social settings. We know ourselves as persons with an inner life and also as persons with relationships and social roles to play. We have individual self-awareness, but that is not all. The reality of being known by others in a certain way deeply affects the way we know ourselves.

The personal and social self-understanding of a preacher, therefore, offers a distinct kind of self-knowledge. But a preacher’s life experience
is of significance for another reason—because it can give focus to the quest for the knowledge of God. While the spirituality of pastors is essentially no different from that of the laity, pastors may be especially inclined to identify aspects of their lives that seem to reveal the divine presence and purposes. This essay, then, reflects on the use of experience—and in particular, a pastor's experience—as a source of the knowledge of God. First, it will be useful to summarize the church's views on how human beings are able to attain a genuine knowledge of God.

Four Sources of the Knowledge of God

The church typically draws on four sources for the knowledge of God:

1. Most Christian communities regard the Bible as the most important source. The Bible, however, is not a single book but a library. It contains a plurality of witnesses to the presence of and the purposes of God. These witnesses sometimes offer differing (and even contradictory) nuances in their interpretations of the divine life and its relationship to the world. Furthermore, a growing number of Christian communities believe that the Bible contains some material that misrepresents God. Hence, the congregation must mediate among the diverse voices of the Bible.

2. Christian tradition refers to thoughts, voices, events, and practices outside of the Bible into the present day. Christian tradition is vast, spanning several eras, places, and worldviews. The tradition sometimes enlarges on aspects of the biblical witnesses. It sometimes refocuses Christian perception. It sometimes adds material to Christian consciousness and practice. It sometimes seeks to correct the Bible. Even more than the Bible, the tradition is pluralistic. Again, the congregation must sort through the various voices and practices in the tradition and their relative authority.

3. Experience is a source of the knowledge of God because God is omnipresent. The divine presence permeates every moment of every day. Hence, persons and communities can become aware of Transcendent Presence at any moment. Experience, too, is diverse; for the experience of every community, and every person, has its own subtle (and not so subtle) shades.

4. Reason is not a defined body of data on which the community can draw. Reason is a process of making logical sense of the Bible,
tradition, experience, and their relationship. Reason helps the church determine how items of belief, practice, and experience relate logically (or illogically) to one another. It helps the community name points at which Christian understanding and action fit (or do not fit) with the community’s current worldview; such reflection may lead the community to reshape its grasp of the contemporary world, or it may lead the church to critique aspects of the Bible or the tradition.*

Different churches and different theological positions and methods give different weights to these different sources as the communities try to reach clarity regarding what Christians can believe and do. In general, churches associated with evangelicalism and fundamentalism will give greater weight to the Bible, while churches associated with liberal theology will give more weight to experience; conservative churches may lean more heavily on tradition. Reason is employed by almost all Christian communities to show that their witnesses are logical and believable.

One purpose of preaching is to help the community name and critically evaluate its use of various sources for the knowledge of God. The four sources in themselves do not consistently manifest God’s presence and purposes for humankind. After all, sin permeates the world, and it can compromise even the sources’ capacity to witness faithfully to divine intention. Church debate can help congregations discern those points where the sources may lead to fresh vistas of the knowledge of God or where current views have not been sufficiently faithful.

While this brief summary has separated these categories neatly in order to help us recognize them, it is important to remember that such sharp distinctions are ultimately artificial. In everyday life, all the categories intertwine, working together in life process to affect the church’s—and the preacher’s—theological perceptions.

The Preacher’s Experience and the Knowledge of God

The life of the preacher is touched by the Bible, tradition, and reason. Ideally, the preacher will internalize appropriate aspects of scripture (and methods of biblical interpretation), Christian tradition, and practice. The vivid nature of this internalization process corresponds to Susanne Langer’s observation about the relationship between a story and experience: the “livingness” of a good story about an event...
can have a greater impact on the receiver than experiencing the event firsthand. For the text (or practice) removes the extraneous elements from the moment of perception. Thus, as the New Hermeneutic has taught us, hearing a text or participating in a traditional practice is an event in itself. We are in the midst of experience when we encounter and internalize texts and Christian practices (such as sacraments).

But the preacher’s experience involves more than encounters with Christian texts and practices. It is constantly bombarded by social and cosmic influences in the form of human culture. Because of God’s omnipotence, even these influences can be a source of the knowledge of God. Culture can disclose “God working and encountering me through events, structures, values, and the past.” Culture is ambiguous as a source of the knowledge of God, however, because it can easily become idolatrous, encouraging us to confuse (to use a biblical metaphor) Caesar and God. Nevertheless, culture can still convey signs of the divine presence and purposes.

Experience, then, is the fullness of what really happens to us. It includes all that we can perceive through our five senses—but it is deeper and richer than that which can be measured through the classic scientific method alone. Experience includes the thick web of relationships, intuitions, and feelings that lies below the surface of consciousness. As Bernard Meland comments:

*Lived experience takes on a holistic character implying not just the discernible and describable datum available to any mode of empirical inquiry, but that discernible datum in the full, ongoing context of whatever is involved, whether discernible or not. As a total datum of reality, it is inclusive of whatever is to be apprehended, embracing an ultimate reference along with immediacies of recognizable occurrences. The scope, in a word, is as inclusive as the datum that would designate all that is.*

Meland points out that experience need not be perceived in verbal forms. “Presence, sheer presence in and of itself, is a mode of communicating...there is language in silences; and in the spaces between words.” Indeed, as he writes:

*Our language is rarely of a depth to apprehend, least of all to comprehend, the realities of which our lives are made, and*
within whose context they exist. Yet, when we speak, we speak out of a depth of existing; and to a degree, in terms of it.

Today’s philosophy, influenced by the postmodern ethos, stresses that all awareness of experience (whether conscious or unconscious) is interpretive. Human beings have no pure, prelinguistic, “objective” perception. As Alfred North Whitehead says, “If we desire a record of uninterpreted experience, we must ask a stone to record its autobiography.” Even dim, unformed apprehensions of sheer presence are acts of interpretation. We cannot seek pure perception, but we can aim for critical consciousness; and we can evaluate our characteristic grids of interpretation. To do this, we must constantly be in conversation with others.

Verbal and Transverbal Modes of Experience

This richer understanding of experience sheds some light on the nature of the preacher’s use of personal experience to come to the knowledge of God. Fundamentally, the preacher’s experience can be either verbal or transverbal. These differing modes need to be tested at the table of critical theological conversation.

1) Preachers can sometimes explicitly formulate their comprehension of their experience. Things can happen in the course of one’s life that capture the conscious attention, that make one immediately aware of some manifestation of God’s will or presence. For instance, a feeling of revulsion in the pit of one’s stomach at the sight of a particular human condition may lead one to ask, “Does my sense of outrage give me an indication that this situation is contrary to God’s will as expressed in the gospel?” Further reflection may lead the pastor to conclude that this is indeed so, and the situation does not comport with gospel standards.

2) The preacher may feel an intuition, a hunch, or a sense of leading that is consciously, but only dimly, connected to what she or he understands as the presence of God. The pastor may sense that certain aspects of life relate to one another, even though the precise interrelationship cannot be pinpointed. For instance, a pastor may intuit that a text, doctrine, or specific situation contains levels of meaning as yet ungrasped by conscious awareness but which cannot be dismissed. The preacher keeps probing; and, eventually, connections begin to
emerge—sometimes in quick flashes of luminosity and sometimes as slowly as fog lifting from a hollow on a cloudy morning.

3) The preacher may feel an intuition, hunch, or sense of leading that may not initially be consciously linked to God’s presence or will. Nevertheless, even without conscious awareness, a percolation process may be taking place. One day, the preacher will find himself or herself in a different spot relative to key perceptions, issues, situations, feelings, or actions. He/She may feel more deeply, or have a change of thought. In such cases, the preacher needs to ask, “Have I moved in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit?”

4) Preachers may intuitively fathom the divine ubiquity but never let that intuition pass into the realm of conscious reflection. Whitehead uses the term causal efficacy to describe this mode of perception. This refers to the fullness of feeling that is in the depths of life. Such feeling has causal effects on us even if we are unable to name the feelings or the effects. Causal efficacy is a deep well of massive, vague, and often undifferentiated feelings.

Each moment of a pastor’s life feeds into the well of causal efficacy. The arts may provide an example. We attend a symphony or a ballet, view a painting or sculpture, read a novel or see a play. We encounter each art in its own medium (e.g., hearing or seeing), and it moves us. We cannot give a clinical description of when and how this took place and may not even be aware of these moments. But we realize that the composite experience has deeply affected us. Other moments in life can be less focused, but a similar dynamic can take place. Hearing a sermon, having a conversation in the study, lying under the sun in the backyard, silently holding the hand of a dying friend—any moment in life can speak to us in the depths.

It is difficult to isolate the specific ways in which causal efficacy contributes to the preacher’s knowledge of God. But to the extent that human beings in general associate certain deep feelings with the presence and purposes of God, preachers can and do do the same. And for the pastor in particular, these feelings can be the source of great energy for theological (and moral) vision and action. They can feed us in much the same way as hidden springs feed freshwater streams. Furthermore, the preacher needs to bring her or his awareness of such deep associations to the table for critical reflection. These differing modes of knowledge of God must be tested in critical theological conversation because, while the preacher’s life can serve as a source of the knowledge of God, this singular experience ought never be used
as a singular standard to set the norms for the community as a whole. The preacher's experience must be tested in the community.

The preacher also needs to be aware that the congregation participates in the sermon at least in part in the mode of causal efficacy. Therefore, the preacher always needs to ask, "What are the deep feelings that are likely to be generated in the community as a result of the content and delivery of my sermon? Do these enhance the congregation's experience of the gospel?" Stories and images are particularly powerful ways of stirring the mode of causal efficacy. The preacher can also try to help the community connect its feelings in the mode of causal efficacy with its more conscious vision of God. Being aware of the dynamic of causal efficacy can assist the preacher in critiquing and discouraging negative feelings buried deep within a congregation, draining away energy from its penultimate, idolatrous, and/or abusive values and behaviors.

Criteria for Discerning Divine Presence and Intention in Experience

If the life of the preacher is to serve as a reliable source of the knowledge of God, it is important for him or her to learn to differentiate between those experiences that appear to reveal the divine presence and intention and those that do not. God is present and active in each moment, but some moments respond positively to divine leading and others do not. I propose three familiar criteria the pastor may use to discern and name (as far as possible) God's presence in a given situation. Naturally, these criteria can be neither applied mechanically nor used to absolutely identify the presence of God in one's experience, but they are a useful starting point for vital community conversation and exploration.

Appropriateness to the Gospel. My colleague Clark Williamson sums up the gospel in the following words: "The good news that God graciously and freely offers the divine love to each and all (oneself included) and that this God who loves all creatures therefore commands that justice be done to them." Using this statement as our starting point, we can see the dipolar nature of this message. The gospel is revealed to the church through Jesus Christ. It promises God's love to each of us as the only adequate grounding of our
existence, and it demands justice from us toward all others whom God loves. The life experiences of the preacher contribute to his or her knowledge of God when they correspond to the gospel’s view of the worth of all God’s creatures and the requirement of just treatment toward them.

Intelligibility. The preacher’s life experiences can contribute to her or his knowledge of God when their intimations of God’s presence and intention are capable of being understood. At one level the criterion of intelligibility refers to internal logical consistency within the Christian view of God: God has integrity, and God relates universally to the world out of that integrity. Therefore, an experience may reveal something of God when it is consistent with other experiences that reveal the divine. Experience that contradicts what the community believes about the divine nature needs to be called into question as a source of the knowledge of God.

At another level, intelligibility refers to a congruence between claims about God and the worldview of the community. A preacher and a community need to be able to believe that what they say and intuit together about the nature of God is in fact true. The witness of a preacher cannot be taken seriously if it contends about God ideas, promises, and models of divine action that stand outside the community’s belief system. At the same time, I want quickly and emphatically to add that a preacher’s experience may alert him or her to modes of the divine presence and intention that could cause the community to enlarge or reshape its worldview. Both possibilities illustrate the need for a broadly based and penetrating community conversation.

Moral Plausibility. This means that, in order for a pastor’s experience to function as a valid source for the knowledge of God, all who are involved in or affected by the experience must be treated according to the highest ethical norms. Moral treatment is love shown to all and justice embodied for all; any aspect of experience that denies the practice of love or justice for any is flawed as a source for knowledge of God.

Outcomes for Theology and Preaching

When the preacher begins actively to use his or her life experience as a source for knowledge of God, a number of different things can happen.
First, the preacher's experience, exposed to the light of community conversation and discernment, may reinforce the theological positions the preacher has already taken—especially if the experiences being openly considered are consistent with the church's traditional positions or closely resemble those operating at the subconscious or causal efficacy level. Preachers can then draw freely from their experiences in sermons in order to confirm the congregation's theological worldview and practices. The sermon, replete with stories or testimonies from the preacher's life, can reinforce the community's loyalty to its core understandings of the gospel.

At times the preacher's experience is in continuity with traditional Christian doctrine and claims, but new experiences expand his or her understanding of Christian life and practice. In that case experience enlarges the pastor's sense of God and God's demand for justice toward all God's creatures. For instance, my experience of unconditional love in a household setting may enhance my understanding of God's love for the world. Wrestling theologically with new experiences may cause the preacher to downplay aspects of his or her previous understanding of God, simultaneously allowing a different perception to become more prominent. For instance, the experience of the intimacy of God may cause a pastor's view of God's transcendence to recede, permitting a greater appreciation for God's immanence.

In cases where the preacher's experiences either enlarge or rebalance traditional church doctrines and practices, the experiences will reframe aspects of his or her understanding of God. The pastor realizes that a former way of perceiving an aspect of God's presence and purposes needs to be adjusted accordingly. A classic example is the interpretation of the biblical miracle stories. While extraordinary events do occur in life, they do not seem to correspond to miraculous events described in the Bible, that is, as primary vehicles for divine activity among a particular people. But the biblical miracle stories do alert us to the ever-present possibility of experiencing and discerning God's presence and activity among us. Therefore, a biblical source of knowledge of God is enlarged and reframed by contemporary experience. A pastor no longer expects to prepare brunch for the congregation by praying over a loaf of bread and a few fish, but the story of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand helps us ponder the reality of God's providence in unpromising situations.

The preacher's experience may even correct the Bible, traditional theology, or practice. Preachers may conclude that their experience
more adequately represents God and God's will than some aspects of established Christian faith and practice. (Examples of this in history would be the antislavery experiences of some preachers who contradicted biblical norms of slavery or those who defied church dogma about the Ptolemaic universe in the sixteenth century, but these examples may be a little remote.) In this case, the preacher's call is to help the congregation perceive the incongruities between tradition and experience and to adjust their expectations accordingly. (Should we not also say that congregational experience at times renders the same service for pastors?)

Of course, pastors may choose to ignore their experience. They may hide (consciously or unconsciously) from the deep wells of feeling that stir within. However, Whitehead's notion of causal efficacy reminds us that while we may not be consciously aware of our experience, feeling always has some effects. Ignoring one's experience simply gives it an unchecked role in life, and sin is especially eager to make use of such opportunities. Consequently, the preacher may want to be part of an ongoing community with other preachers or laity to contemplate the nature of his or her experience.

The Pastor's Experience and the Sermon

The story of the pastor's experience can often provide a useful vehicle for the sermon.24 If preachers bring appropriate experiential material into the sermon, the community may identify with the preacher's story. The telling then becomes a means whereby the congregation participates in the experience, so that it actually "lives the story" with the preacher. The story becomes part of the community's experience and, hence, is added to the life of the congregation as an experiential source of the knowledge of God.

This quality can be helpful when the sermon reinforces the congregation's existing knowledge of God. But the quality is especially important when the preacher invites the congregation to refocus or correct its knowledge of God. During the sermon, the congregation lives through the movement of insight. "I thought, I acted or I felt that way . . . but now, as a result of vital experience . . . I think, act, or feel this way . . ." Experience then becomes more than the testimony of the preacher. It becomes part of the witness of the community.

256
Notes

1. John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed., John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), 1:35. McNeill writes, "Knowledge, for Calvin, is never 'mere' or 'simple' or purely objective knowledge... probably 'existential apprehension' is the nearest equivalent in contemporary parlance." The understanding of knowledge in the emerging postmodern ethos of our time is much the same. Knowledge can be explicit and/or tacit. It can be conceptual and/or located in the realm of feeling. It can be informational and/or emotional. Knowledge is a function of the gestalt. Knowledge sometimes comes to precise, propositional formulation, but other times it is more impressionistic and intuitive. In Fallible Forms and Symbols (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), Bernard Meland writes, "We live more deeply than we can think" (p. 24), and he cites Whitehead's comments, "We think with our bodies," and "Mothers can ponder many things in their hearts which their lips cannot express." Michael Polanyi expresses the same view when he writes, "We know more than we can tell" (in The Tacit Dimension [Garden City, NJ: Anchor, 1967], 4). Thus, when speaking of the knowledge of God, I refer to the whole range of awareness of the Transcendent.

2. While this essay ponders the life of the preacher, its analysis can extend to the lives of communities.


4. On the difficulty of using worldview as a criterion in theological method, see the discussion of the criterion of intelligibility below.


7. The classic assessment of the possible relationships between the gospel and culture is still that of H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). Two voices represent the spectrum of the current discussion: Lesl...


10. Ibid., 30.

11. Ibid.


15. On this phenomenon, see Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.


17. In this context, the term *feeling* includes emotion but refers to much more. Langer explains, "... human feeling is a fabric, not a vague mass. It has an intricate, dynamic pattern, possible combinations of new emergent phenomena. It is a pattern of organically interdependent and interdetermined tensions and resonances, a pattern of almost infinitely complex activation and cadence. To it belong the whole gamut of our sensibility—the sense of straining thought, all mental attitude and motor set. Those are the deeper reaches that underlie the surface waves of our emotion, and make human life a complex of feeling instead of an unconscious metabolic existence interrupted by feelings." *Philosophical Sketches* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1952), 89; *Problems of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957). 15.

18. Some readers will dismiss this suggestion as a lingering vestige of the antiquated rationalist paradigm of understanding human life. As the immediately preceding paragraphs show, I agree that perception is more than rational apprehension. Recent studies of the role of interpretation in human life (especially the hermeneutic of suspicion) have exposed ways in which unexamined assumptions (often powered by unexamined feelings) can result in bitter exploitation, violence, and death. Critical reflection is not the safeguard against the power of hidden vested interests. However, until the rule of God permeates every relationship, critical reflection appears to me to be an indispensable means of trying to identify connections between various liberating (and oppressing) attitudes, behaviors, and feelings. Of course, people do not always respond appropriately to the results of critical reflection.


20. However, preachers need to beware of possible tendencies to try to manipulate the congregation’s feelings. Preachers also need to be aware that they cannot “control” what happens in the mode of causal efficacy.

21. These criteria so permeate my work that I hesitate to rehash them. However, they


23. This criterion is the most elusive of the various criteria. Worldviews change from time to time in response to fresh data and angles of vision. Furthermore, the contemporary world contains a plurality of worldviews. For a summary of worldviews, see Howard Snyder, *Earthcurrents: The Struggle for the World’s Soul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 151-231.

24. David Buttrick cautions against the use of personal illustrations in the pulpit because they “split consciousness,” i.e., they cause the congregation to stop thinking about the content of the illustration and to focus on the person and character of the preacher. See his *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 141-143. Buttrick suggests that the preacher’s use of personal experience should locate the experience in the common consciousness of the congregation. Instead of talking about themselves, preachers should offer the experience to the congregation so that the congregation can experience it. Instead of “I saw a child at play the other day. She had on a white dress and was dancing in a sunbeam . . .” the preacher might say, “Have you ever seen a child at play? Perhaps a little girl in a white dress, dancing in a sunbeam . . .” (p. 42). Fred Craddock (in a lecture I can no longer locate) suggests that preachers hold the camera not on themselves but on what they want the congregation to see. These suggestions are often apropos. However, Richard Thulin notes that direct autobiographical material can be used nonintrusively (and offers suggestions for doing so) in *The “I” of the Sermon: Autobiography in the Pulpit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).
For those dwindling numbers of churchgoers who continue to hold the institutional church in high esteem, it is distressing and sometimes even depressing to hear repeatedly of trouble in their pastors’ households. Are not pastors supposed to be the models for the rest of the congregation families? Does not their calling from God both require and empower them to be “special” people, setting the tone and example for all human relationships? How is it, then, that so many are allowing their own marital and family difficulties to cripple their effectiveness in ministry? How can parishioners learn about living godly lives if they cannot count on the pastor to be one who “has it together” as the family leader? Is it true that the divorce rate among clergy has now reached the level of the wider society? How can this be?

While these questions are painful for church members, they can be only more so for the pastors and their families who are themselves beset by the...
travail. It is typical for such pastors to feel they are failures, perhaps even total failures, in the eyes of their spouses and children, their parishioners, themselves, and God. Who am I, a broken-spirited pastor cries, to call people to blameless and upright living, when my own marriage and family are in such disarray? How can I lead people who are better than I am/we are in following the ways God intends?

My purpose in writing this essay is to offer encouragement to both lay persons and pastors as they confront together the tasks of providing leadership for a congregation when the "parsonage family" is overwhelmed with difficulties and is bordering on collapse.

What We Are All in Together

One of the most important things that church families share in common with all families is the struggle to develop, protect, and cherish their togetherness as families, while at the same time affirming both the uniqueness of each family member and the responsibility that he or she bears to become a mature individual in his or her own right. Though both family togetherness and respect for individual differences are essential to family health, it is no easy matter to ensure a healthy balance between the two. Togetherness suggests a sacrifice of family members' individuality; individuality seems to threaten the family's traditions, ties, and trust. Any balance achieved between the two is likely to be precarious and fleeting at best. But only a balance between our seemingly oppositional drives toward intimacy and individual distinctiveness makes for real growth in families—however fragile the balance may be for however short or long a time.

Furthermore, the balance itself produces tension in the form of anxiety: the sense that by satisfying one drive one must compromise the other. Anxiety is the inevitable accompaniment of vital, growth-inducing family process, and all families must deal with it constantly if they are to become and remain healthy families.

To make this point more concretely: every family must struggle constantly with the task of bringing into balance two contrary forces: 1) the need for closeness—including the sense of having a place in the family; of having a legitimate claim on a share of the family's resources; of being accepted, approved, and cherished; and of being able to make a contribution of one's own to the family's well-being, and 2) the need for individuality—including the right to challenge
other family members' expectations of them when they seem arbitrary or incongruent with one's own aspirations; a sense of confidence about succeeding in the world beyond the family; and hopefulness about the possibilities of reconnecting with family members on the far side of "making it on one's own." Whenever either set of needs seems threatened, anxiety increases.

How do family members deal with this anxiety? More mature family members will make their anxiety a subject of reflection. They will also develop healthy strategies for rectifying the imbalance that provoked the anxiety in the first place, chiefly by finding a way to express their feelings of distress to the appropriate family member(s) in honest conversation about what seems to be happening or not happening in their relationship. The less mature members of a family will deal with their anxiety by either demanding too much from other family members or by avoiding the issues between them altogether.

Today's highly mobile society brings a scattered quality to family relationships. This provides the perfect context for the perpetuation of some thoroughly misleading notions. People often assume, for one, that the closeness that may be lacking in their family of origin can be overcome easily by finding someone outside it who will be everything that one's own family is not. A second popular option is a head-in-the-sand approach: "If we just don't get into anything with him/her, what's bothering us will just go away or at least bother us less." But in families whose members live in close proximity, especially including the families comprising a congregation, it becomes less possible to avoid the anxiety generated by family relationships. The grass is not usually greener on the other side of the fence. Eventually, somebody will get anxious enough to open up long-avoided issues, no matter how hard others may be trying to keep the unpleasantness at bay.¹

Family members who must maintain close associations with one another (as, for instance, in three-generation families tightly crammed together in the projects or distributed across a single, three-story building) often make use of a device that family therapists call "triangulation"—avoiding something problematic in one relationship by distancing themselves from it and intensifying another one. Rather than attempting to get to the heart of a problem with another family member, one or the other may turn to someone else in or out of the family and simply leave the irritation behind. And when the new association develops its own problems, as inevitably it must, its

¹ Family members who must maintain close associations with one another (as, for instance, in three-generation families tightly crammed together in the projects or distributed across a single, three-story building) often make use of a device that family therapists call "triangulation"—avoiding something problematic in one relationship by distancing themselves from it and intensifying another one. Rather than attempting to get to the heart of a problem with another family member, one or the other may turn to someone else in or out of the family and simply leave the irritation behind. And when the new association develops its own problems, as inevitably it must, its
participants may form still other relationships, perhaps even with the one(s) originally triangled out. Pastors who lead congregations for a sufficient amount of time will observe readily the unpredictability of many parish relationships: e.g., who is "in" and who is "out," who speaks to whom and not to others, and who gossips about whom. All this changes repeatedly and often without warning. Sometimes it is difficult to stay up to date and to avoid all of a sudden being on the "wrong" side of things. For many families it proves easier to move the triangles than for its members to confront their family problems directly. And in the parish family itself, triangulation can regulate anxiety levels so efficiently that there remains little motivation to seek lasting solutions to the impasses which so enervate a church's mission to the world.

In sum, then: whatever a family's problems and problematic modes of functioning may be, overcoming them is, in the final analysis, a matter of family members' learning better to manage the anxiety that inevitably accompanies their struggles to be a family while nurturing their uniqueness as individuals. In this respect, parsonage families are no different from the other families that make up a congregation. They are just as much in need of others' patience, understanding, and encouragement as any other family, even though parishioners expect—sometimes without mercy—the parsonage family to be the model Christian family in their midst. Having said this, however, I want now to assert that there are important differences between parish families and the parsonage family, and I will attempt to point these out in the next section.

On Living in a Very Scary Glass House

Fundamentally, a pastor's family is no different from any other family in his or her parish—or anywhere else, for that matter. But in another and important respect, a pastor's family is quite different from at least most of the other parish families, and that difference makes for an importantly different dynamic among the members of that pastor's family (no matter how much they might wish things could and should be other than they are and will be).

The difference I have in mind can be expressed simply: unique among all parish families is the struggle of their pastor and his or her family to be a family unto themselves while at the same time meeting
the impossible expectations of parish families who regard them as “theirs.” Those who doubt the seriousness of this plight might well ponder what is implied in the innumerable salutary, appreciative, and winsome references to “our” pastor that pervade the polite conversations of otherwise courteous, respectful, and pleasant parishioners everywhere.

The principle significance of this difference is that it tends to keep parsonage family members so bogged down in dealing with transcendent ideals for their existence that they have insufficient energy left for coping with the ordinary things of family life (which their neighbors are confronting constantly). They may enjoy the unique status parishioners accord them and at the same time struggle against being swallowed whole by those same parishioners. But this special position can very easily distract them from the tasks they share with every other family, such as nurturing the growth and uniqueness of their own family and its members and managing the anxiety that accompanies every step and stage of the nurturing process.

It is the management of anxiety within a family that I want especially to focus on in the following paragraphs. Nurturing growth of and in families requires a willingness to acknowledge both the presence and the destructive potential of anxiety about togetherness and distinctiveness that pervades all family life. The problem that afflicts most of the members of troubled parsonage families is precisely this: their unwillingness and/or inability to acknowledge that the anxiety that is ubiquitous in other families is also part of their own heritage and destiny.

The heart of this problem is—cries of political correctness notwithstanding—that many of the pastors who are supposed to be “leaders” of their families refuse to acknowledge that they themselves are in any way burdened by this normal familial anxiety. By such denial, they remove the possibility of conscious deliberation, discussion, and negotiation with other family members for dealing with these important life issues. Instead, what they do on behalf of intimacy and individuality in their families is subject to unconscious determination. For these pastors, admitting that anxiety exists in themselves and hovers in the background of everything they do, both in their families and in their congregation, would seem to call into question their very fitness for ministry. Is not the “perfect love” to which every pastor aspires supposed to drive out just such anxiety? If so, is not the presence of anxiety a condemning sign that one lacks the
very kind of love which alone makes one worthy of being called “minister”?

What must it be like in the households of pastors carrying a heavy burden of unacknowledged feelings, along with such an astonishingly primitive understanding of God’s calling to the ordained ministry? Unable to discharge their own anxiety constructively, they can only leave other family members to contend with it. This means they have to deal not only with their own fears but with those of the “head” of their household as well. (If my references to the pastor as the family “leader” or as the “head” of the household continue to be grating and offensive, I can only say by way of defense that when someone dodges this role because of denial, the household is that much worse off.)

Some pastors run away from rising anxiety levels in their own households by involving themselves excessively with parishioners, leaving their abandoned family members bereft of their leadership. Other pastors quell their anxieties about what is and is not happening at home by distancing themselves from the parish and hunkering down with the pressing needs or crises of the family (often manufactured for the occasion), making the parish itself the neglected party. Pastors’ own families are anything but immune to the skewed dynamics manifest in so many families in every parish. What makes their family difficulties steadily worse is their refusal to recognize that anxiety about closeness and distance is an inevitable fact of life; an ever-present threat to and driving force toward integration and wholeness in all families, including their own.

But, I have been arguing, the danger of denial is greatest when the members of a parsonage family focus their attention less on the realities of their own family life and more on how they will deal with the exalted position they hold in the life of the congregation. For instance, parsonage family members may quickly discover that the togetherness they crave for themselves is no match for the congregation’s demand that they conform to its expectations. From the outset, they must resist being absorbed into the paradigms of what a pastor’s family should be like, paradigms that congregations impose upon one pastor after another, across decades and sometimes even generations. And so, the pastor’s wife who opens a law office near the town square arouses deep resentment from the parish’s younger couples who have delegated their own child-care to their nonworking spouses. Or the parsonage family gets set over against the church
family as a whole (e.g., members of the property committee criticize the housekeeping in the parsonage two months into the parish’s controversial new building fund drive). Spouses and children often wonder “when did we get ordained?” In the meantime, however, important things may be going on within the pastor’s own household to which insufficient conscious attention is being paid. To make this latter point more concrete, I will draw upon my earlier discussion of triangulated relationships.

Since no family is immune from anxiety, and since triangulation is a time-tested maneuver against its debilitating effects in every family, it is not likely that pastors’ families will escape its lure. And in point of fact, most do not. For example, the much-admired closeness in some pastors’ families merely disguises cut-off relations with one or more of the extended families. The pastor and spouse may be more involved with their own children, or with one child, as a way of avoiding problems in their own relationship. The pastor’s spouse may exhibit a number of physical and emotional symptoms which function as defenses against the anxiety generated by the couple’s own relationship. Or unresolved anxiety in that relationship may come out in the form of emotional and behavioral problems in one or more of the “preacher’s kids.” Particularly worrisome are the times when symptom-bearers become more attuned to their symptoms than to the family members who worry about them: for example, a teenager who comes to love drugs more than he does those who love him, and “thoughtlessly” gets drunk in his room during the parsonage committee’s semiannual walk-through. Family members who are “acting out” may be trying to “get out” of confused family relationships, “getting off” on the very behavior that the family most disapproves.

When members of the parsonage family use the strategy of triangulation in their efforts to constitute themselves as a distinct family in the congregation (together with the awareness of being “triangled in” or “triangled out”), it can be helpful for them to remember that the purpose of any triangulation is to reduce pressure in some other relationship. This pressure is better relieved by the direct approach, when the affected parties talk through together what is stressing their relationship and together determine what can be done about it. Here the main responsibility falls on the family leader. In my judgment, the one thing that determines whether or not the process of unhealthy triangulation will increase in parsonage families is the way...
in which pastors deal with their own anxiety about being a caregiver—both to their families and to the parish as a whole. Pastors must avoid the all-too-frequent pattern of allowing their responsibilities for the parish to outweigh their responsibilities to a spouse, to children, and in some cases to dependent parents.

The pastor who becomes overly involved with parishioners' distresses and in the process distances from his or her own family members will find that the triangled-out spouse and children begin to consider other families in the parish—and indeed the parish family itself—as threats to their own solidarity. If pastors continue to draw closer to their parishioners as a way of avoiding dealing with issues in their own families, their spouses and children may begin triangling-out the offending parishioners. Then, unhappy over what they now perceive as rejection by parsonage family members, the offended parishioners themselves reinforce the triangle—by attaching themselves even more intensely to their pastor. In the meantime, the overfunctioning pastor is rarely at home and when home is rarely truly present. Not surprisingly, the more anxiously that pastor works at meeting parishioners' needs, the more satisfied those parishioners seem to be, and the more they demand of their pastor's diminishing time and energy. The reason that this is so is not difficult to see: overfunctioning pastors are meeting more of their own needs than their parishioners' needs, and parishioners must step up their efforts to be heard by complaining more. The anxious pastor who overfunctions is a major contributor to problems in both his or her family and the congregation; and it is within the ability of every anxious pastor to become part of the solution to those problems. What is necessary for this to happen is the subject of the next section.

Leaving, Cleaving, and Leading

There are two familiar and time-tested ways for pastors to interrupt persistent overfunctioning on behalf of their parishioners: 1) develop a chronic illness or 2) have a nervous breakdown. Each has its advantages. The unresolved issues in both the family of origin and the family of choice which contributed to the overfunctioning in the first place will be permitted to slip quietly into background for a while. In a time of crisis, the parsonage family and other parish families more often than not will rally around a common concern, whatever conflicts
there may have been between them before the pastor's collapse.

Finally, the pastor will secure a time for rest unencumbered by both real and imagined expectations.

The downside, of course, is that the true benefits of illness and breakdowns depend on two important outcomes: the afflicted pastor must 1) survive the illness or breakdown, and 2) learn from it. Some people do neither. But there is a better way to break the cycle of overfunctioning, for everyone: the way of self-reflection.

Since patterns of overfunctioning almost invariably have a generational history, pastors who desire to break them will find it very helpful to explore, first, their roots in their own families of origin. How, in those families, did at least some members learn not to deal with their anxieties about family life by persistently doing things for others — within, but especially beyond, the family — things that those others ought better to have been doing for themselves? And how did the pastor himself/herself become one of their family's overfunctioners? A little reflection along these lines can go a long way, especially when by means of it we begin to learn that overfunctioning is a pattern of reacting rather than responding with deliberation to other people's expectations. It can be both exciting and liberating to develop a way of dealing with others' expectations of us based on our own sense of purpose, values, and responsibility and a shared vision of what is in everyone's mutual interest. Pastors who work their way into such a process will feel more comfortable being themselves, especially around people who want them to be something other than what they are. Their greater comfort level in their own family of origin will very likely carry over into relationships with their spouses, children, and parishioners as well.

Most pastors and religious leaders, of course, believe seriously that they have fulfilled the spirit of Gen. 2:24 in their own lives ("therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh"). But in reality, many have not come even close to doing so. Congratulating themselves on their supposed mature leaving-taking from the parental bosom, they fail to see that they have merely postponed, perhaps for a lifetime, the more challenging business of becoming genuine persons in their own right. Instead they cleave to someone who can be the kind of all-providing Parent with whom earthly mothers and fathers cannot hope to compete. They then embark upon the ceaseless toil that is always necessary to win the Ur-parent's approval. When the chosen partner (inevitably) disappoints the supplicant in his and her quest for emotional satiation,
help is usually readily available from congregations hoping either to submit themselves to an Ur-parent of their own or to find an attractive child to succor (as long as the child is appropriately winsome, pleasing, and grateful, at least).

If a particular congregation is unwilling to play an immature pastor's games, a substitute may always be found, often in the form of an entire ecclesiastical system which, though patriarchal to the core, transmits seductive images and symbols of "Mother Church." The maternal nurture offered by this kind of church family, however, exacts a considerable price from both its male and its female pastors: unquestioned loyalty to the system and the personal obligation to honor all possible claims on the church's God-given power to bathe human souls in non-demanding good will, positive feelings, and worldly success. The call to leave father and mother and children for the sake of the kingdom deforms into an invitation to leave them behind for the sake of a Family requiring that they care for everyone but themselves and promising that, in return, the Family will take care of them. It is little wonder that so many pastors harbor feelings that they have indeed "been taken care of," without fully knowing what has happened to them.

Ecclesial leaders the world over evidence an intense degree of self-protectiveness, and they are capable of exercising mesmerizing powers to keep people in their place. Because of this it must be abundantly clear that, until we discover within ourselves a sufficiently differentiated core of selfhood to offer to God and to one another in the first place, it is not really possible to be truly God's men and women in the church—whether as pastor or as layperson. Without such a core, church people remain captive to what others expect and want from them. Pastors need to make the time for further reflection on their own growing-up and on the roles, rules, rituals, the pastimes, prohibitions, and processes operative in their families of origin. They need to consider seriously the way these patterns affect their leadership of both their family of choice and their congregations on a daily basis. Pastors who engage in this process can find considerable help in disentangling from both parishioners' and ecclesiastical superiors' (impressively varied) triangulating moves, which will otherwise keep them perpetually fretting about whether they are on the inside or on the outside of the things that matter.

But more is required than just reflection on one's family history in order to overcome the patterns inherited from it. Overfunctioning...
pastors also need to reconnect with the family members who have so influenced them, but on a different, mature basis. The maturity required is this: a position of greater self-determination arrived at through achieving an empathic understanding of how and why things were done as they were done in the family and the conscious claim of God-given freedom to choose different ways of relating to their own spouses, children, and congregations. The fundamental truth applies to everyone, pastors and their parishioners alike: not only can we "go home again"; we must go home again. But not as the same person.

Pastors who develop a heightened sense of their own capacities and values as the basis for their leadership free themselves from a great deal of anxiety and the overfunctioning that results from it. They find they need not relegate their spouses and children to second place as they take on more and more parish responsibilities and become more and more frustrated in the process. However, there is a price to be paid for the freedom gained. The immediate consequence for the congregation is even greater anxiety, because church members' own fusion fantasies with their pastor will be threatened as their pastor becomes increasingly comfortable with who he or she is and what he or she is trying to accomplish. For if the pastor is more her or his own person, and if the pastor's own family is secure in its own relationships, then the pastor is less available to being cast in the mold that others demand and less subject to being molded as a way to escape facing problems in his or her own family.

But just as individual growth is contagious in families, a pastor's growth can be liberating in congregations. Parishioners who are striving toward genuine individuality will be able to experience and share their faith more joyfully as it becomes more genuinely their own. Interactions between such pastors and their parishioners will begin to flow more easily from reflection and conscious decision and less from unexamined convictions, blind feeling, and unconscious processes impervious to scrutiny and revision. And because of this change, the self-serving love predominating in most congregations can begin to take on the form, by intent and commitment, of a love that seeks the genuine well-being of others both in and beyond the confines of parish life.

The most crucial concept for caregivers in faith communities—pastors and laypersons alike—to understand is projection, which is a multigenerational family process. Family members are carriers of others' projections "from the beginning." The parsonage family is
especially easily conscripted into the process of carrying parishioners' projections of what they do not want to deal with in their own families. To use the language of faith, to accept and carry others' expectations transmitted through unconscious projection is a peculiarly pernicious way of "bearing one another's burdens." Those who project are also burdened by others' projections, and those who believe themselves to have escaped the emotional force field of family projections by distancing themselves (either emotionally or geographically) will nevertheless remain in thrall to imagined agendas, at the very least. And so, the universality of the projection process, and the toll that it extracts equally from all who make use of it, is no argument for its rightness.

The sacrifices God has called us to make together on behalf of others has nothing to do with the kinds of sacrifices unhealthy family members demand of one another and those a needy church family can demand of its pastor and the pastor's family. Genuine sacrifice is for the sake of what is in the best interest of the other; family projections are in the interest of perpetuating pathological closeness at the expense of everyone's personal interest and well-being. The projection process draws family members into relentless and herculean striving to earn their places in the families into which they are born and threatens to obliterate any sense that life is meant to be lived out of a sense of God's graciousness toward us.

One important requirement for pastoral leadership, then, which will have many positive consequences for de-triangulating the parsonage family is to attain a measure of courage in the midst of anxiety about the consequences of not being what others expect and, with that courage, to articulate a vision of what things can be without the rampant force of projection. In spite of our eucharistic affirmation about the "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice" which has already been made "for the sins of the whole world," many pastors continue to function as if it were up to them to see to it that such words come true in the lives of those they love and serve. Somehow, the primary thinking process goes, we will be better able to heal our parishioners the more we bear their conscious and unconscious expectations of us and the church. This is simply not so. Instead, the more pastors become aware of how they themselves get caught up in others' projections, the better they will be able to help similarly afflicted parishioners shed the compulsion to take care of others by holding others' projections in trust for them.
The "parsonage family" is no closer to the glassy sea than any other family struggling to survive and thrive in a society whose values are more often than not inimical to family interaction and growth. But there are grounds for hope, as well as positive steps to take. When the anxiety generated by family life becomes an impetus to self-reflection, self-determination, and self-giving, then love of self can spill over into love of neighbor as she or he most truly is. Then both communion and partnership in a common calling can become possible for the first time. Family-of-origin issues lie at the heart of the projections that both pastors and parishioners impose on themselves and on one another. When families find the courage to inquire into these issues, rather than overfunctioning in order to exercise them and distancing in order to avoid them, then genuine caring can begin. And this makes it possible for all parish families, the pastor's included, to open themselves to the true source of family fulfillment, the everlasting graciousness of God.

Notes

1. In spite of the strong and unequivocal emphasis in today's family therapy literature on the importance of clear, open, and honest communication of feelings, perceptions, perspectives, and wishes on the part of all family members, I think that it is equally important to temper the well-meaning dogmatism of this view with "reality." Fulmination against tightly drawn boundaries between permissible and prohibited subjects of conversation in families, sometimes expressed in the language of interdicting "secrets," can pressure people to remove just the kind of limit setting which allows them to hold precarious but valuable relationships together with at least a degree of decorum and even of grace. While intimacy may be more enjoyable, civility may be a more reasonable goal in some families. "Getting everything out in the open" is simply not for everyone.

Several years ago I had an opportunity to talk with a delightful older couple at their sixtieth wedding anniversary celebration. When I asked the couple what they thought most contributed to their staying together for so long, I received an interesting answer. They told me that, early on, they learned what not to talk about, and more importantly, that when they did "let the sun go down on their anger," things were always better the next day. Indiscriminate sharing may be more germane for serial monogamous relationships.

2. I have deliberately chosen to focus on the overfunctioning pastor, even though it is also appropriate to inquire into the underfunctioning pastor as an inevitable counterbalance. There are underfunctioning pastors, but some of these seem to be so only because they are actually anxiously overwhelmed by their sense of responsibility for the care of their parishioners' souls—and because they deal with their anxiety by...
holding back from intervening in peoples' lives, which, for them, carries a high risk of being the wrong thing to do. Such pastors are better understood as struggling with (ineffectively, to be sure) overinvolvement, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. The nondefensively underfunctioning pastor, by contrast, seems more like a person who has entered the ministry for the wrong reason: beneath the all-too-evident lack of involvement is a not-as-easily noticed lack of genuine calling; there is just no "spirit" behind it. When one is genuinely led by the Spirit of God into ministry, there can hardly be a lack of energy for the work; instead, there can be and often is a drivenness that wreaks havoc with family relationships in general.

3. In my own denomination, one sign, both amusing and appalling, of both the symbiosis and the hypocrisy has been the maudlin deference momentarily paid to the wives of male bishops, as the business of Annual Conferences is given over to paeans of praise to their "first ladies." Female Conference members, permanently stalled on the appointment ladder, may find it easier simply to take a recess at this bizarre junction in the proceedings. We are only just beginning to confront the still-more-unusual dynamic of defining the deference due the spouse of a female bishop.
Every church denomination today is involved in a crisis called clergy misconduct. Yet even more frightening than the dilemma itself is the tendency of the Church to make policy decisions based on the relatively safe, pragmatic approaches provided by the fields of law and psychology. Just recently a district superintendent told me that nearly half of his clergy have been advised by lawyers no longer to do pastoral counseling for fear of litigation. Other clergy, while recognizing the limitations imposed by these new authorities, do not know where to begin to change things.

But one healthy sign is the desire to find a sound theological basis for dealing with misconduct issues. I have received a number of requests such as this one from a Board of Ordained Ministry:

"Conduct a workshop for us that will help discover a theological grounding for what we are doing. Clergy misconduct has forced us to flounder in legal and psychological categories and language."

Theology has, indeed, been sorely lacking in the current discussions of...
clergy misconduct. But what is missing from most of our deliberations, even those that attempt to bring theological understanding into play, is any deep awareness of the historical dimension of the question. The Church has forged its theological understandings of misconduct over centuries of struggling precisely with agonizing dilemmas such as those facing us now. Misconduct as betrayal, along with every conceivable variety of serious sin, is far from unique to our age.

All churches acknowledge that the garden variety of sins are readily forgivable, involving only a temporary disruption of our right relationship with God and neighbor. Clergy misconduct, on the other hand, poses itself as a primary example of Sin. Sin is the breaking of a relationship so severe that we have to consider the possibility of a change of status. This forces us to raise the question plaguing the Church from its inception—are there acts that are unforgivable? Posed in this way, our history becomes strikingly relevant—for the evolution of the practice of "Penance and Absolution" provides us with the Church's collective wisdom in dealing with "worse cases."

Two important figures help set the parameters in which the Church historically has come to set the problem. Preaching on Easter day, Saint Maximus of Turin (a fifth-century bishop) declared that the full theological significance of Christ's resurrection was that of "bursting open the gates of hell." No "burden of guilt" should make one "despair of pardon"; "for if a thief could receive the grace of paradise, how could a Christian be refused forgiveness?" No sin is beyond the reconciliation effected by Christ's resurrection.

A second voice of importance is that of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the medieval theologian most cherished by Protestant Reformers. In a sermon on the Song of Songs, he says this: "I may have sinned gravely. My conscience would be distressed, but it would not be in turmoil, for I would recall the wounds of the Lord: he was wounded for our iniquities. What sin is there so deadly that it cannot be pardoned by the death of Christ? And so if I bear in mind this strong, effective remedy, I can never again be terrified by the malignancy of sin." Thus, Christ's resurrection renders no sin outside the pale of forgiveness, and Christ's crucifixion provides the "strong, effective remedy" which effects reconciliation. But neither did these clear theological parameters did not come easily, nor did the Church discern quickly how to mediate this remedy.

For the earliest Church, "believer baptism" removed past sins, and confirmation sealed the believer against future sin. But as infant
baptism became increasingly normative, the inevitable issue was what to do with serious post-baptismal sins. Hesitant to proclaim anyone as ultimately unforgivable, the early church regarded sins such as idolatry, murder, and adultery as warranting permanent exclusion (excommunication) from the earthly Church, leaving such persons to God’s mercy regarding the next world. This gave sufficient room for the Church to develop a process by which serious but not “fatal” sins could be forgiven through a long and difficult public penance. Such recompense, however, lasting from one year to a considerable portion of one’s life, was available only once.

By the time of Augustine (fifth century), a distinction had been drawn between serious sins that create a public scandal and those that do not discredit the Church. For the latter, private confession and penance were available, developed on the assumption that the penitent would faithfully follow the prescribed redemptive process. Distinguishing between private sin and public scandal is a distinction that “clergy misconduct” is reintroducing in our time.

Paralleling the development of this distinction was a blurring of the previous distinction between forgivable sins and virtually “unforgivable” sin. After the Decian persecution (250 CE), forgiveness became available for those guilty of idolatry; and the Council of Ancyra (314) permitted earthly reconciliation of murderers before they died. Finally, at the Council of Nicea (325), the Church declared that all sins are forgivable, for no one is to be deprived of final Communion.

As to how such reconciliation was to be administered practically, the monasteries had already developed the practice of confession and absolution as a normative part of the sanctifying process for monks, rendering it no longer a rare happening. It was only a matter of time until this practice was extended to all Christians. As this responsibility was assigned to priests and became more extensive and complex, practical handbooks were developed. Even the most serious sins were given their proper place within this emerging ordo salutus (“order of salvation”). This procedure, known as “Penance,” became so central to the process of “growth in grace” (sanctification) expected of every Christian that it was given sacramental status. The sanction for doing so was scriptural: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,... and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19).
The Protestant Loss of Penance

Luther's emphasis on sin and forgiveness brought him close to claiming Penance, along with Baptism and Eucharist, as sacraments. Two misuses, however, finally convinced him otherwise, unfortunately leading to the disuse of penance. His first concern was that, in practice, penance was coming to be understood wrongly as a form of works-righteousness. If forgiveness is earned by performing certain acts, grace is undercut, paving the way to the lucrative practice of indulgences as a way of avoiding genuine contrition. Second, misuse of priestly power encouraged Luther to insist on the "priesthood of all believers," so that one could confess one's sins to any Christian, not just to a priest.

There is good reason to regard Protestantism's present-day floundering over how to deal with clergy misconduct as a painful consequence of having lost the sacrament of Penance as a normal and normative part of Christian life. When we realize that all that is left of confessional practice is a Sunday morning "collect" followed by fifteen seconds of organ-filled "silent confession," with CPE-inspired "non-professional" counseling attempting to fill the vacuum, it is little wonder that legal processes have become the only option apparently available to deal with the "worst cases." Karl Menninger's question, "Whatever became of sin?" needs to be raised more than ever. The answer is that it has been pushed underground—at least for a while.

The solution to "clergy misconduct" lies in recognizing within the Church's long tradition a wisdom available to us today. There would be little need for Protestantism if Vatican II had occurred in the sixteenth century. In our time, the Roman Catholic Church has taken the Reformation seriously. As a result, Vatican II has restored the "strong effective remedy" to new fullness, significantly renaming it the "Rite of Reconciliation."

Reappropriating Church Tradition

How can Protestants become receptive to this crucial theological tradition? We can begin by placing "clergy misconduct" in perspective—by confessing in unwavering fashion that each of us is a serious sinner, every one. Evidence that "we're all in this together" is widespread. In 1946, a comparison of a group of college students with
delinquents within the Fort Worth juvenile court system disclosed that the illegal acts of both groups were comparable. In 1947, a study of affluent New Yorkers with no court record identified 91 percent as having committed one or more unpunished felonies as adults. In 1967 the President's Crime Commission reported that a survey of persons from all social levels disclosed that 91 percent had admitted committing acts for which they would likely have been imprisoned if caught. In an update in 1993, Lee Griffith cited surveys documenting that 90 percent of U.S. Americans "confessed to having committed serious misdemeanors or felonies for which they might have been imprisoned had they been apprehended." Nor are Church members or clergy different. In a recent misconduct consultation I held with an Annual Conference Cabinet and Board of Ordained Ministry, I asked each person anonymously to write either "yes" or "no" on a piece of paper in response to this question: "Is there anything in your past which, if made public, would seriously jeopardize your ministry?" 100 percent answered "yes."

Such confessions make concrete the words which many denominational liturgies use before receiving Communion—"Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." Alcoholics Anonymous, dealing with some of the most difficult cases of misconduct imaginable, has the same beginning point: "We admit that we are powerless over alcohol and that our lives have become unmanageable." All of us must begin with this never-to-be-forgotten self-awareness: that we are sinners, unable to change ourselves.

This beginning point must be coupled with the awareness that, whatever form our reclaiming of the redemptive process might take, the confidentiality involved must be inviolable, with no exceptions. One recent indication of this principle was Pope John Paul II's serious censure of a priest who, after hearing the confession of a secret murder by a Mafia member, inadvertently let this fact be known. Confession requires the absolute certainty, without any conceivable qualifications or reservations, of the total confidentiality of the content of the redemptive process.

Today's clergy misconduct crisis exposes the gap in the Protestant approach to sin and its consequences even under regular circumstances. But the high cost of clergy misconduct has also exerted enough pressure on churches to make them look for ways to create an official theological channel for dealing with these situations. I am
convinced that the best way to do this is to resurrect in practical terms the Church’s historic ordo salutis as a context for healing clergy misconduct. This “ordo” consists of five stages, or steps.

Stage One: Attrition

The word *attrition* literally means “wearing down by abrasion.” By the thirteenth century, some theologians recognized attrition as a first step in the reconciling process for sin. In this context, attrition means repentance arising out of a fear of punishment. Self-interest can bring a person to the awareness that it is worth one’s while to express sorrow for one’s misconduct—but that is as far as it goes. No theologian regarded attrition as sufficient in itself; and in fact some, including Aquinas, insisted that it is of no consequence. Thus, even at best, attrition can be only a starting point.

The concept of attrition can be readily illustrated in modern times. Patrick McCormick called 1995 the “Year of the Public Confession.” Yet, he concluded, none of these publicly acclaimed cases was confession at all—for the statements never went beyond attrition. Thus Robert McNamara “confessed” his mistake in Vietnam, but did it to redeem his place in history. The Southern Baptists “confessed” their sin of racism, but out of a desire to attract African-Americans into their membership. Pope John Paul II’s “Letter to Women” qualified his “confession” with an “if;” the statement timed to influence the outcome of the Beijing Conference. On it goes, with “attrition” used as an evasive attempt to dodge true confession by doing little more than admitting tactical mistakes or questionable judgment. Classic was Senator Robert Packwood’s “confession”—that if he was guilty, he was sorry.

I am convinced that a central reason why accused clergy who are actually guilty are rarely able to go beyond this stage is that our non-theological approach to misconduct makes it legally fatal and politically stupid for anyone to move toward genuine confession. As is the case within our secular legal system, the Church immediately places both accused and accuser in a process whose ultimate purpose is not to explore mutually the healing truth but to win a battle of defensiveness. At best, honesty here means answering only what is asked, within a context arranged to make the most convincing, self-interested case. That is precisely what “legal counsel” has come to involve. Thus, even when a “client” is innocent, the “lawyerly”
stonewalling frequently gives the appearance of defensive guilt. Furthermore, the all-too-human temptation to rationalize everything becomes systemically encouraged, moving accused or defendant or both into the full blown sin of self-deception. The "problem" becomes identified as totally "them" or "it"—rather than "me" and "us." The heart of our dilemma in dealing with clergy misconduct, then, comes through providing litigation as the only concrete option, rather than being, as it should be, the last resort. Therefore, it is imperative for the Protestant Church to provide a vehicle for encouraging and enabling the redemptive process to be attempted.

Stage Two: Contrition

Contrition, which the early Church regarded as the essential first step, means inner repentance in recognition that one has done wrong and is remorseful for having done so. Here one is genuinely sorry and takes responsibility for one's conduct—not because one has been caught, or even because one is ashamed—but because one knows and acknowledges that by hurting others one has offended God. This is a hard step to take, particularly in a culture such as ours where violence to others has box-office appeal. Contrition entails feeling deeply within ourselves the hurt which we have caused others to feel—walking in their moccasins until the hurt becomes compassion. This would be far easier for us as clergy if, following the example of such persons as Ignatius and Wesley, we had been trained to do a daily examination of conscience.

Having lost any such modeling, the Church might well examine the Twelve-Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous—an incredible vehicle which has preserved, far better than most denominations, the Christian redemptive dynamic. AA gives concrete meaning and a central place to "contrition" in Step Four. It is identified as a "searching and fearless moral inventory of one's self." This intense process entails a searing enumeration of one's failures and negative propensities as a way of establishing honesty with one's self, as manifesting itself in one particular form of misconduct. This inventory is not done once and for all. It must be a contrite beginning, sufficient to give promise of its ongoing deepening as one discovers more about one's self. This is why such an exercise in self-honesty should be part of the formation process for every candidate seeking ordination.
Stage Three: Confession/Absolution

Confession/absolution is what AA calls the fifth step: to “admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human the exact nature of our wrongs.” By no longer providing the opportunity of having a “confessor,” Protestantism has damaged the redemptive process almost beyond the point of repair. For each of us, confession to another person is necessary for at least two reasons. First, we need someone to counter our tendencies toward superficiality, defensiveness, projection, and self-deception. This preparation for making a genuine confession requires a context of supportive encouragement, modeling, probing, and concrete assignments in redoing parts of the inventory. The goal is to enable the person to move beyond a preliminary recital of incidents to a painful probing of motivations. Such housecleaning leads from diagnosis to surgery.

Secondly, to confess to another person is necessary because only through a probing dialogue based on a written confessional inventory can it be ascertained when, or if at all, one is ready for true confession. Absolution as an act of unconditional forgiveness dare not be granted until the confessor is convinced that the preliminary stages have been sincerely, deeply, and sufficiently done. Forgiveness is never automatic but must be prepared for; at the same time it must be seen throughout as a free gift of grace which one can never deserve, earn, or lay claim to. The litmus test for genuine confession is twofold: a firm resolve to be changed, and an urgency to do what one can to undo the harm one has done. In other words, confession is a pledge of intent to be a “penitent.”

Protestantism has largely lost this act of “Absolution,” both in name and as act. Even the response to “confession” in Sunday worship is, at best, little more than a prayer asking for pardon, or perhaps only a verse of Scripture. Many ministers even regard “absolution” as presumptuous. Yet against all such reductionism, we must restore the insistence of Scripture that the “rock” on which Jesus built his Church is the “keys” of absolution, whereby “whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18-19). A denomination might implicitly give to its laity the power to forgive; but at ordination it explicitly gives a minister the authority to preach the Word, to celebrate the Sacraments, and to proclaim forgiveness of sin.

Absolution is a clear declaration of an act of Grace, delivered by one authorized to speak on behalf of the Church. Words such as these are
appropriate: “Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, may God give you pardon and peace, as through the ministry of the Church I absolve you from your sins—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” This precise moment is the central miracle of Christian faith: that someone knows all about me and nevertheless as an act of God accepts me, not because of who I am but in spite of all I have done. Grace is the unconditional love of the unlovable who know themselves to be so. Jesus makes the condition clear: “I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom ahead of you” (Matt. 21:31). Why? Because self-avowed sinners know themselves to be inadequate, incomplete, and unlovable—and thus are prepared by grace to receive grace.

This stage of Confession/Absolution, which is at the heart of the present clergy misconduct dilemma, should force upon Protestantism a fourfold awareness. First, we have no vehicle by which both accuser and accused can be invited into the Church’s redemptive process. So deprived, we provide no alternative but the judicial one of competitive accusation, forcing a win-lose situation destined almost always to become a tragedy of lose-lose. Second, deprived of any process rooted in absolute confidentiality, the situation is forced inevitably into a damaging quasi-public arena. Third, trained spiritual direction is seldom available to help a person understand and thus be able to consider the rule of penitence through genuine confession. The best we seem able to offer is counseling to help persons cope. Fourth, this redemptive process as an indispensable means of spiritual growth is so absent from the daily life of most pastors that when public misconduct issues do arise, we are thrust into an unfamiliar and bewildering territory.

If United Methodist clergy really want to understand this dilemma, they should reflect on it in light of the second and third questions asked at their ordination: “Are you going on to perfection?” “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” Most of us as candidates were embarrassed by these questions, yet the heart of Methodism rests in them—intended as they are to help provide modeling for all Christians. Wesley's genius was in creating societies, classes, and bands as vehicles of supportive accountability without which sanctification (“growth in grace”) cannot occur. When this understanding of Christian life as ongoing pilgrimage faded, it followed that Wesley's practical vehicles for practicing this ordo salutis would fall into disuse. This left the pastor on his or her own spiritually, and the ordination questions as lifelong vows were reduced
in status to "historic questions," deserving only pro forma responses. No wonder, then, that when a case of public clergy misconduct arises, we have little redemptive experience upon which to draw.

Stage Four: Satisfaction

First and most importantly, we cannot understand satisfaction, the desire to please God, as a precondition for forgiveness. On the contrary, satisfaction is the joyous response to having been forgiven. One's motivation is transformed, so that we are dealing no longer with calculated self-interest but with a genuine desire to respond to God's graciousness with a gift that will "satisfy" (please) God. The gift for which God yearns is that all shall be reconciled.

Satisfaction involves two major areas. First, one must work hard to rid the world of a "hurtful me." Here three dimensions may be involved: therapy, healing the dark, unconscious motivations lurking in my personality; situation, changing or modifying one's working and living contexts so as to avoid tempting situations (e.g. a carefully chosen pastoral appointment, a leave, or a nonclergy alternative); and spiritual direction as ongoing supportive accountability by a trained Board-approved spiritual director contracted to shepherd the person(s) through this whole process toward a mature, disciplined faith-style. At Stage Four, this involves developing a "covenantal rule"—a mutually negotiated contract concerned with how the person will receive such "means of grace" as frequent Eucharist, periodic retreats, disciplined prayer life, ongoing confession, etc. While confidentiality must always be guaranteed, this contract negotiated by the Board must guarantee that the spiritual director is able and willing to "pour salt on open wounds" as needed, and, through mutual agreement, provide "guarantees" within a recognized time frame that the redemptive process is progressing fruitfully.

The second area of satisfaction is restitution, involving both persons and situation. The person(s) must develop a clear approach for undoing as much damage as is feasible and fair, exemplifying a sincere passion for reconciliation. Acts of restitution must be directed imaginatively so as to avoid becoming perfunctory. McCormick suggests that as "satisfaction" McNamara might have begun writing personal apologies to the families of the 58,000 U.S. casualties; and "if he finishes early, he might even start on the families of the 3
In cases of serious clergy misconduct, the Annual Conference might grant a carefully supervised “Restorative Leave” in order to live out this satisfaction stage. Here, as throughout, the Discipline’s guideline is crucial: “Support without accountability promotes moral weakness; accountability without support is a form of cruelty.”

Stage Five: Reconciliation

The basic truth about reconciliation is that it is outside the power of the person seeking reconciliation. It can be given only by the victim and the covenant community whose trust has been violated. It cannot be earned, no matter how well one has moved through the ordo salutus towards personal transformation and public restitution. A trust once broken can be restored only if the hurt parties can trust two things: 1) that the redemptive process is being faithfully and accountably followed, with guarantee of sufficient progress for reconciliation to be given an appropriate place; and 2) that the vocational setting has been so designed that the likelihood of repetitive behavior is minimized, whether this be in or out of a pastoral appointment. If possible, it is desirable that at an appropriate point there be a liturgy for marking reconciliation, thereby bringing meaningful closure.

A Concrete Beginning

The God who can bring good from bad may be calling us through our present crisis to reclaim the ordo salutus at the heart of the Church’s normative life and work. This would require developing a model for use in these crisis situations which could be offered in due time as a redemptive process to all. The following suggestions might help the Church turn our struggle over clergy misconduct into a creative opportunity.

1. Just as most denominations have developed a harassment policy outlining a clear litigation procedure, it is crucial to develop and communicate an outline of the ordo salutus as our working theology, indicating clearly that theological resolution is our initial, primary, and preferred method.
2. A spiritual director, explicitly trained in this ordo salutis as a working context, needs to be made available to both accused and accuser to enable the redemptive procedure. A wise working premise might be that while one or the other or both persons may or may not be "guilty," each as a Christian is in some sense "responsible." While application of this redemptive process may be different in each case, the hoped-for goal of reconciliation should be the same. Entering this process need not mean that one is guilty as charged. It indicates a willingness to probe, on both sides, the motivations and responsibilities that might be involved in what happened.

3. This redemptive process must guarantee, more than is presently the case, the equal confidentiality of both parties. Mutual anonymity within an inviolable confidentiality is the only way that persons will be able to hear the invitation to work through the crisis in a uniquely Christian manner. Therefore, our present legal method must be recognized as a last recourse—as an admission of theological failure.

4. It should be mutually understood that the spiritual director is responsible for indicating to the appropriate board or authority if the process is proceeding appropriately or if it is malfunctioning or sufficiently stalled to justify moving into ecclesiastical litigation.

I am convinced that the reason why so many cases of clergy misconduct today are unredeemptively painful is that they cannot move beyond the stage of attrition—because from the inception all that we offer is litigation rather than the redemptive theological process. To recognize this is to become open to implications beyond that of clergy misconduct.

Notes

4. Patrick McCormick, "Bless me, Father, for I have been caught," U. S. Catholic (January 1996): 38–41.
5. Ibid, 41.
Pamela D. Couture

On the Spirit of Bondage and Adoption: Toward More Wesleyan Theology for the Bishops’ Initiative on Children and Poverty

Two years ago my twenty-three-year-old daughter and I camped throughout the Southwest. We visited the Acoma Pueblo, high on a mesa with steep cliffs. As I watched the Pueblo children playing near the cliffs, I thought about how carefully I “baby-proofed” my home when my own children were toddlers and young children. There was no way to baby-proof this mesa. A toddler who did not yet have depth perception or a youngster playing carelessly could easily fall over the edge to his or her death. Yet the Pueblo village that lives on that ledge does not have a significant accident rate among its children.

Today, our children are growing up near a far more dangerous precipice. Children need our protection, our hope, and our confidence that they can find their place in the adult world. But too often, our best efforts to provide that protection and hope have fallen short. That is why the United Methodist Church has a Bishops’ Initiative on Children and Poverty. The bishops are calling us to join with those in Methodism...
who have long been working on behalf of children, such as the United Methodist Women's Campaign for Children. Now it is time to take our place in the living Wesleyan tradition of caring for the most vulnerable members of society, particularly children. The Wesleyan tradition has been characterized by the bishops in this way:

Methodism was born among the impoverished of eighteenth-century England. . . . Everything Wesley did in leading the Methodist revival was influenced by the impact on the poor—where and to whom he preached, the design of preaching houses, the availability of published material, the education of children, the leadership of the classes and societies. Wesley considered regular visitation of the poor as a necessary spiritual discipline. He would no more neglect regular visitation of the poor than he would miss partaking of the Eucharist. The poor literally accompanied him to his grave. As directed in his last will and testament, he was carried to his grave by six poor people who were paid one pound each. The black drapings used in the Chapel for his memorial service were remade into dresses and distributed to poor women.

Children and their total needs were of particular concern to the early Methodists. . . . Methodist preachers were expected to spend time with the children. Whenever a society included ten children, the preachers were to establish a band and meet with them twice a week. . . .

Wesley's commitment to children and the impoverished went beyond friendship and proclamation. He sought to provide holistically for their needs. He provided education, opened free health clinics, established a sewing cooperative for women in poverty, provided a lending agency, opposed slavery, visited the imprisoned, and ministered to the condemned malefactors. . . .

In his famous sermon on Rom. 8:15, "On the Spirit of Bondage and the Spirit of Adoption," Wesley describes two conditions in which our faith is in bondage—conditions to which the good news needs to be brought, conditions which need to be evangelized. First, our faith is in bondage when we choose to remain ignorant of what God is doing in the world, when we willfully disregard God's activity. In particular, John Wesley meant willfully disregarding the activity of God, who is
at work in poor children and their families. Second, our faith is in a spirit of bondage when, having opened our eyes and seen God at work in children and the poor, we respond out of fear, guilt, or shame.

No, the Christian faith as Wesley saw it is a response to God arising from the spirit of adoption. Responding in faith means we become aware that God is actively working in us, even though we didn’t know it, recognize it, or understand it. The active work of God within us makes us more compassionate, more generous, more kind and loving to others, whether they are sitting next to us in the pew, whether we barely know them across the Conference, or whether we have never met them. As adopted children of God we realize that we are loved by God, and we are called to love others. We love others out of the experience of appreciation for the God who has adopted us, who has loved us with enough reliability to help us become kind, compassionate, and generous people.

The neglect and impoverishment of children in the United States has multiple causes. Many children have two parents who are both employed, but who receive very low wages. Other children have a single-parent mother and an absent father who does not or cannot provide economic or emotional support for the family. And when children are born into communities that are poor, the family’s difficulty in rising from poverty is compounded.

Some parents will not reach out for the resources that would help them change their lives. Other parents want to improve their situation but don’t know how, given great educational, emotional, and financial obstacles. Other parents do have a vision of how to change their lives and are working valiantly to overcome barriers and make a good life for themselves and for their children.

In the meantime, the children of these parents want what all children want: to play with other children; to laugh like other children; to be loved, even when they do something wrong, like other children; to have adult care, attention, and economic stability. They want to live with their families, and their hopes and dreams center around the security and prosperity of their own homes. But sometimes they can’t live with their families. They need reliable adults and families who can provide some of the material, emotional, and spiritual stability—some of the safety and hope—that their own families can’t provide. But even if they live in safe, secure foster care or group homes, they still need other adults and other families who can help them love their own families and accept the love their families can...
offer, even if this is limited. Many of these children, having seen so much difficulty so early in their lives, are deeply religious; they search for a God who can help them; they pray to God in hope that God will hear their prayers.

These are truly the special, adopted sons and daughters of God. But how will they know that they are the special, adopted sons and daughters of God, if we in the church do not show them? The church must tell them in deeds first because these children cannot trust words. They have endured so many broken promises from adults that they have learned to be cautious with them. And it is not only by their own families that they have been betrayed, but by us, the wealthy adults, who pay attention once or twice a year—maybe at Christmas or Easter—but do not care for poor children and their families day in and day out.

By what deeds might we show our children that they are the adoptive children of God—that they are loved by God with regularity and reliability?

The Gift of Time and Its Limits

Sometimes we bring gifts of money to provide for the needs of children and the poor. Money will help to provide safety and hope at critical points in the lives of children and their parents. Many of us have been materially blessed, and we are called to share these material blessings with others.

But God has given us an even more basic gift—the gift of time, twenty-four hours a day. Children are deeply in need of our time. God has also given us the gift of Christian values, particularly the gift that John Boswell calls “the kindness of strangers.” In early and medieval Christendom, these strangers cared for children who were abandoned in the doorways of churches. God has also given us the gift of finitude, of being limited. People often think of finitude as a condition to be overcome because of the frustration we feel when we can’t do everything we want to do. But finitude also contains a blessing: it requires us to work in community because we can’t accomplish our aims alone. It also requires us to develop a strong sense of reality: for all of us, life will end, and with it the opportunity to make a difference. Without finitude, time and Christian values would be less precious; they would have little relationship to each another. When we
sense that our time and opportunity for service are limited, we are forced to use our Christian values to decide the best way to live.

Most of us who give serious thought to these issues find that there are some areas of our life that should be reexamined. But this is a difficult process. Because we are busy we think we have no spare time—but we constantly act as if we have time for everything we really want to do. In simultaneously acting as if we had no time and as if we had all the time in the world, we tend to remain locked in our own routines, losing sight of kindness, compassion, generosity, and warmth that we are called upon to offer toward the very vulnerable among us.

If we come to grips with the finitude of our situation, our deeply held Christian values, and the limited nature of time, and we are clear that we wish to live from the spirit of our relationship as adoptive children of God, then we will have to change. But we will have to start slowly and accept with humility the incremental growth in faith that will take place, which Jesus compared to a mustard seed. In the beginning, we must keep our promises to children small, as small as that mustard seed, so that we do not promise that which we cannot fulfill. But if we are reliable in our relationships with these children, even in things that seem insignificant to us, then the integrity of our mission—indeed, our Christian character—will grow.

It is not just those of us who are currently raising families who are called to extend the boundaries of caregiving to include vulnerable children. Households with one or more adults but without children, "empty nest," "childless," or "retiree" households, also have a unique contribution to make. We usually think of these homes as having some combination of loss and leisure. Instead, they could become associated with wisdom, service, and reward: households of god parenthood. If we have never parented or if our biological nest is empty or our employment subsides, we might tithe one-tenth of the time we previously spent raising our own children or earning money. If in this tithe of time we mentored a child beyond our own biological family, we could fulfill many of the needs of children for adult attention. We could safeguard children's lives in times of transition. We could build hope for children's futures by introducing them to museums, farms, and places of employment.

Senior citizens—according to the American Association of Retired Persons, persons over fifty—are needed by the younger generations. And eventually seniors need the younger generations also.
Demographically, the baby-boom population is enormous. If any significant number of baby-boomers cared for children beyond our biological families, we would transform the problem of child neglect. We would also provide ourselves social connections we need for our own emotional and spiritual support in the later retirement years, when our social security system will be most strained.

Our Spiritual Responsibilities to the Children of the Poor

So, we start small. But what form should our action take? Let us, clergy and laity alike, consider regular visitation of children and the poor as a necessary spiritual discipline. Let us no more neglect regular visitation of the poor than we would miss eating lunch in the companionship of good friends. Let us do a better job of modeling that practice to which United Methodist candidates for ordination specifically agree: "Will you visit house to house?"

If United Methodists visit no more than two houses, I hope one will be the house of a child beyond our biological families and the other, the house of the governor. First we should visit poor children, especially those in state custody and those who are working to create a future for themselves, and take the lessons that we learn from them to the governor. Then we should let the governor know that he or she will need to answer to the children and the church for the way that welfare reform is implemented in our states.

**Visiting Children.** First, visit children beyond our immediate families. Make sure that the place you visit a poor child is convenient to you—within a few minutes of your home or work. Start with modest goals—a half-hour a week is enough. If you make contact with the same child week after week, you will develop a relationship that will be rewarding to both of you. Tutoring is a relatively safe, easy, supervised activity. Or think of a hobby of yours you really enjoy. Read a story. Teach them to play a musical instrument. Take them fishing. Show them where you work. Teach them how to bake biscuits and rolls. Take a walk. Let them pet your dog or cat. Help them do a report for school or Confirmation class on the lives of other children and ways that programs and public policies can help them. Let them remind you how to ride a bike or play basketball. Ask them
to show you how to find the Bishops’ Initiative Home Page on the Internet.

Do these activities make a difference? My colleagues at Candler School of Theology gave me permission to share their experiences. Roberta Bondi recounts in *Memories of God* that she grew up believing that, as a Kentucky woman, she had to bake rolls and biscuits well or she might as well lie down and die. And indeed, she became a wonderful baker. But Roberta despaired of her ability to relate to children. “They scare me because they are so vulnerable,” she used to say when I left our dinners together to go to the United Methodist Children’s Home to tutor. On Christmas Day one year, I stopped by Roberta’s house to deliver some presents. My godchild from the Department of Children and Family Services was with me. Roberta was baking rolls, and while I spoke with her husband in another room, Sarha, who loves to cook, got involved in the baking. In that hour, Roberta and Sarha became happy friends. Now they look forward to seeing one another. They discovered a gift they had for one another—the shared joy of baking together.

The life of Don Saliers, theologian, Wesleyan scholar, liturgist, and church musician offers the most profound example of the impact of regular, supervised visitation with a child. Don’s mother died when he was four; his father was alcoholic and couldn’t care for him. First he lived with his grandparents and then with his aunt and uncle. When Don was twelve, his father, a jazz musician who was trying with moderate success to become sober, began visiting him on Sunday afternoons. He taught Don to play violin, clarinet, and saxophone. Those Sunday afternoons launched Don on his career as a church musician and composer. Although Don’s father never taught Don guitar, he lived to see the emerging talent of his granddaughter, Emily Saliers, a Grammy-award-winning member of the Indigo Girls. A musically talented family, yes—but that talent might never have developed had it not been for his father’s regular, supervised, Sunday afternoon visits to Don.

The Reliability Factor: I hope that some of us will eventually make a greater commitment than a half-hour a week—that we will become godparents to a child in need, responding to God’s spiritual and moral claim on us to watch over the children who are most tenuously connected to society. They need us greatly. But if we do respond, we must be regular and reliable in our visiting. We cannot disappoint...
them by not visiting when we say we will. God-parenting, like good parenting, calls us to be the adults—to respond to a child's needs rather than responding only when the child meets our needs. If we are unreliable, we retraumatize children who already have experienced substantial loss. Committing ourselves to visit the house of the poorest children is a responsibility that cannot be taken lightly.

Advocacy for Children at the State Level. When we visit the governor or other legislators, we do not need to be experts in public policy, but we do need to ask how policy is grounded. What are the values being expressed, and how are they being implemented? The church's most important role in this time may be to hold out for values in public policy that provide stability in the midst of instability. As public officials push for rapid change, the church can insist on values that provide a humane situation—one in which time and finitude are balanced on the fulcrum of Christian values. These values include:

1. The Golden Rule. Do unto strangers' children as you would have strangers do unto your own.
2. Respect for individual differences. Persons with short spells of poverty, two-to-four years, will move more quickly from welfare to employment than persons in multigenerational poverty. Respect for individual differences is the meaning of the biblical phrase "being all things to all people," which Wesley took quite seriously.
3. Broadening our definition of work. Work should be defined not only as employment but as care for creation through child and family care, volunteer work in the community, education, and other responsible adult behavior.
4. Forgiveness for backsliding. Just as we have to be prepared to be disappointed by the children we visit, we cannot be discouraged by their parents, who may be minor children themselves. We need to cultivate in ourselves the capacity for long-term hope when their parents let us down, just as God has held out long-term hope for us. Furthermore, we need to be forgiving of our own backsliding—our own loss of vision, values, or caring practice, when we become disoriented, especially as we care for children in and beyond our biological family. Only by forgiving ourselves can we reorient our lives and our talents.
5. Joining Forces. We can seek partnership with the secular service providers who are stressed by these transitions. We can engage in continuing conversation with the governor and legislators to work out
public policy issues. We can think of ourselves as co-creators of our society with God and with our neighbor.

Other options for visiting. In addition to regular, reliable visits with individual children and the governor, we could start small by visiting the people in the social-service sector of our local communities. We can ask them what they’re seeing locally, what their needs are, and how churches can assist them in small things. Most people in secular social service are related to religious faith in one of two ways. Frequently they are people—especially preachers’ kids—who learned gospel values but have become disillusioned with the organized church. One southern, white public health director I met gave up on organized religion when he discovered that his local congregation was eager to help children—as long as they weren’t African-American children. A Korean leader in social service told me recently, “In the beginning the churches are interested in helping people. Then they get rich and lose the desire.” Our job as evangelists with social-service people who have lost the church but not the faith is to admit that these incidents do occur in the church but also to witness through our behavior that we are church people who take seriously our responsibilities for care of the vulnerable. In other words, our job is to accept God’s justifying and sanctifying grace and to behave as if we are striving to fulfill the Wesleyan responsibility to make right our relationships with God and our neighbor.

Other social-service people have not lost the faith or the church and are quietly caring for children and the poor in their everyday jobs. Many church people, Methodist and otherwise, care directly for children day in and day out. Their lives are being reorganized by the massive restructuring that welfare reform has produced, and they need the support of the church to continue ministering in emotionally stressful employment in which they care for others, day in and day out. Someone needs to say, “Thanks. We appreciate your efforts. We know you are doing this on behalf of all of us.”

Other houses to visit are our own United Methodist child-care institutions. We can develop a successful Bishops’ Initiative on Children and Poverty only because our local United Methodist institutions have depth of experience in this area already. Ask their perspective on the crises facing children and how we can help. In addition, each of the general boards and agencies of the United Methodist Church has established programs to lead local
congregations and religious groups on behalf of children and the poor. These resources include the Campaign for Children of the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries; "Putting Children and their Families First—A Planning Handbook for Congregations" from the General Board of Global Ministries and written by Laurin Dean Friedreich; the Child Advocacy network of the Board of Church and Society; "Sprouts—Nurturing Children through Covenant Discipleship" from the General Board of Discipleship; "Education: The Gift of Hope" from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry; "Shared Mission Focus on Young People" from the General Council on Ministries; and "ABC's: Advance Book of Children's Projects" from United Methodist Communications, to name a few. Most recently the general boards and agencies cooperated on a project, "A Church for All God's People," that guides churches in ways to become more child-friendly and offers suggestions that range from creating buildings that are safe for children to creating policies that protect them. This resource was designed specifically for the bishops and will be available directly from your bishop's office or on the internet at http://www.umc.org/bishops/.

Be sure to visit church members who are leaders in the business community. Ask them how the church might join with business to assist children and youth to develop employable skills. The business community has a stake in the development of skills and values among children and youth—let it know you understand this.

Finally, visit your local community colleges, seminaries, colleges, and universities. Ask them how they educate their students to pay attention to children and the poor, what they do to make themselves available to children and the poor, and what knowledge they have that might help the church in its ministry. Ask them whether their faculty members have direct experience with children and the poor that they are able to relate to their academic disciplines.

How do you decide which house to visit? Start with the house with which you can make the easiest connection. Then, the more public your leadership role as a religious person, the more important it is for you to model for others your willingness and creativity to practice living differently by mentoring a child beyond your biological family. The less visible you are, the more likely you are to already be in ministry with an individual child, and the more important it is that you join your voice to those of others in political action.

If you have children at home yourself, should you leave them at
home to visit house to house? No. Some situations do require the focused attention of an adult, but mixed in with those times are occasions when our children need to be in ministry with and for other children.

Goals for Church Action on behalf of Children

Here is my wish list for very specific, measurable goals that I would like to see United Methodist Annual Conferences adopt over the next several years:

1. Make it your Annual Conference's priority to insure that every child in state custody has a legally appointed guardian ad litem who is also a morally and spiritually responsible godparent. We could easily develop a ritual related to the reconfirmation of baptismal vows for those persons who take on this responsibility.

2. Find godparents for every child whose parent is in prison and does not have transportation to visit his or her parent, for every teenage parent, and for every youth on probation.

3. Sponsor an immunization clinic for children, a health fair, a poster display, or a hearing on community services for children in each local congregation as part of charge conference.

4. Engage children and youth in worship leadership on a regular basis, especially in any creative way that reverses the roles of children and adults.

5. Monitor and publicize the particular problems of transition to block grants in the immediate locality of local congregations.

6. Use the political networking of the Annual Conference to influence the implementation of block grants.


8. Finally, there is so much to be done that the adoption of ANY conferencewide goal that allows a wide range of contributions to be
made will make a significant difference. Ask your bishop to choose at least one goal that he or she considers to be critical in your area for the coming year and measure and report the results at the next Annual Conference. Convert the energy we usually spend debating goals into direct service to children. If turf battles emerge, ask yourself if you have set your sights too low; there is plenty of work for everyone who wants to be involved. Recommend new goals to your bishop as you visit house to house.

These activities are fundamental to our ministry as Christians. They arise from the vows congregations make during Baptism:

Members of the household of faith, I commend to your love and care these children, whom we this day recognize as members of the family of God. Will you endeavor so to live that they may grow in the knowledge and love of God, through our Savior Jesus Christ?

With God's help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ that these children, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.  

Notes

1. "Children and the Poor": Toward the Spiritual Renewal of the United Methodist Church, available through Cokesbury, 1-800-672-1789.

What, Me Suffer? Women's Suspicions and the Servant Songs: Lectionary Readings for Epiphany, Year A

Stretched out before us are five lectionary readings that would typically make most feminist-types and their male sympathizers shudder. The readings from the Epiphany cycle in Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary include texts from Isaiah that use the dreaded "servant" language, imperial language, and a final coda on humility from the prophet Micah. If they are read, interpreted, and preached through traditional sexist lenses, they could reinforce dangerous messages implied by the faith: be submissive, sacrifice yourself, and be nice and humble. Preached from the Christian perspective of the Cross, proclamations based on these texts can become abusive theology that glorifies suffering.

Therefore, I want to read these texts subversively—undermining not the texts themselves but the sexist and individualistic interpretations of them that reinforce gender stereotypes; the triumphalism of kingship language; and the romantic, middle-class notions of "making nice." A subversive reading of the prophets will in effect read us in our contemporary situation and challenge all the platitudes we've come to associate with Christian servanthood rhetoric. Along with Elisabeth

L. Susan Bond is Assistant Professor of Homiletics and Liturgies at the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee. She is also an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
Schüssler Fiorenza, I contend that a proper rhetorical-critical interpretation will disclose radical possibilities within the texts.¹

First, though, we should address the troublesome question of preaching Hebrew Bible texts within Christian congregations. Although we certainly do preach the Christian faith from such texts, we don’t want to do so in a way that reinforces anti-Jewish biases within the Christian tradition. This means that we cannot preach from a supercessionist or fulfillment Christology which ultimately suggests that our messiah is better than anyone else’s messiah; to do so would violate both the Christian faith and the texts at hand. We must always preach Christian faith from the perspective of the hope that pervades both testaments: the coming reign of God. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls this perspective a “basileia privilege,” a hermeneutical approach whose explicit theological bias is “articulated within three emancipatory struggles for the ‘restoration of the world,’ of . . . the social, political, and religious transformation of patriarchal structures of injustice and dominance.”²

As soon as we make this “basileia shift,” we can discover that Jesus’ ministry and preaching was continuous with the eschatological hopes of the Hebrew prophets. The prophets’ message is located on a theological and historical trajectory that continues through the faith of Israel and into the faith of the church; namely, that God’s purposes are for redemption of the whole world. Christians tend to read the Servant Songs in terms of their fulfillment in Jesus. But again, we can read promise and fulfillment as ongoing themes without locating them exclusively in Jesus. The hope of the messianic age is consistent with both the Jewish faith and the Christian faith; indeed, it is the primary eschatological hope of both Testaments. We should probably not use Christology as an interpretive grid for the servant songs but should reverse the order, letting the servant language of Isaiah become an interpretive grid through which we make sense of Christology.³

Isaiah is one of the most familiar First Testament books for Christian preachers. According to Luke, it was the Isaiah scroll from which Jesus read in the synagogue to inaugurate his public ministry. And it was the servant texts of Isaiah that the early church pondered in its struggle to make sense of Jesus’ crucifixion. The Gospel writers found Isaiah’s themes of promise and fulfillment central to their own eschatological hope in Christ, because the dominant theme of Isaiah is salvation. For the faithful of Isaiah’s time, however, eschatological hope was couched in terms of historical realities: reunion of the
scattered people and the restoration of Jerusalem as a sign of hope to the world.

Scholars generally divide the book into three major sections and assume different authorship for each. Although each major section has its own distinctive perspective, we may want to assume a fundamental theological continuity with regard to the future of God's people, the characteristics of faithfulness, and the servant model of leadership. Both Paul Hanson and Christopher Seitz argue for a theological trajectory, since the later writers considered their own work to be in continuity with the earlier writers, choosing similar themes, images, and rhetorical strategies. For example, the later writing "becomes intelligible only against the backdrop of the earlier ones."4

First Isaiah (chapters 1-39) is assumed to have been written by the southern prophet, who was preaching during the period of the Assyrian conquest of Israel (Samaria, the capital of Israel, was conquered in 722/1 BCE). Like his contemporaries (Hosea, Micah, and Amos), First Isaiah stresses the fact that the people of God have clear ethical mandates. Certainly this is one of the reasons the Micah text is included in this lectionary group: God's people are to act with humility in their walk with God. Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) is assumed to have been written by a contemporary of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and perhaps the author of Lamentations during the Babylonian captivity (597–538 BCE). Second Isaiah contains the books of oracles against other nations. During this exile time, doubt about the legitimacy of the Davidic line increased. Walter Brueggemann has pointed out the communal similarities between Second Isaiah and the early church. The community of Second Isaiah probably considered itself a marginal group within the exiled population; only in these chapters are there references to persecution. It is perhaps the most apocalyptic of the three divisions, simultaneously hopeful and terrified, seeking comfort. Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66) was probably written by followers of Second Isaiah, who were liberated from exile by Cyrus's Edict and began returning home to restore Jerusalem.

Of the readings for our immediate consideration, only one comes from the book of Immanuel in the First Isaiah, or older section; two are from the book of consolation of Second Isaiah; and one is from Third Isaiah, or the restoration and return period. The lectionary order reverses the order of the composite Book of Isaiah, so we preach the glorious texts from Third Isaiah before we preach texts from First Isaiah. Certainly this is a theological clue about our own
interpretation: we preach from a future hope to a present reality. Just as the early church traced out its theology of hope from the starting point of Easter faith in the Parousia, the current lectionary readings assume this same backward trajectory. The eschatological vision of ending frames our expectations and understandings of the present.

January 6, 1999—Epiphany
Isaiah 60:1–6
Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14
Eph. 3:1-2
Matt. 2:1-2

Gathering the Dispersed

The theological claim of this first text is, like the beginning of Isaiah, that of a prophetic call. "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." While we typically think of Isaiah’s call as the divine summons to an individual prophet, this text clearly indicates that God is calling the whole people in their collective witness. The text suggests the image of a rising nation, a light to the world and to all the nations, a brightness so compelling that rulers around the world will be attracted to it. Certainly within Isaiah’s time this oracle envisioned Israel’s future as that of an ethical nation that will exert moral leadership for the rest of the world. There are national and imperial hopes contained within this vision: God’s chosen people have already begun to taste their victory. There are hints of Zion’s former glory under Solomon; gold and incense would come from Sheba to Jerusalem to adorn the second Temple. The sons and daughters have already begun to return, and those who are now in exile can expect to return home where a brighter future is already in the making.  

This brighter future is the sum of Israel’s messianic hope. The "restored Jerusalem" is a symbol of the same hope that marks God’s people throughout the entirety of the First Testament. From Creation to the New Jerusalem, the people of God hope for a real historical future that is brighter than whatever the current situation is. The physicality of the vision is critical, since it takes flesh and blood seriously and attributes theological meaning to such activities as civic organization, food production, and the survival of communal traditions. Walter Brueggemann points out that the city image is a
"land" motif which attests to Yahweh's sovereignty over nature and history and involves a notion of inheritance from one generation to another. Exile is a theological problem for Israel because the loss of their land has profound consequences: without it, they are cut off from the possibilities of abundant life that the land represents. Land as a broad category refers to "actual earthly turf where people can be safe and secure, where meaning and well-being are enjoyed without pressure or coercion"; and it also symbolizes "wholeness of joy and well-being characterized by social coherence and personal ease in prosperity, security and freedom." Within the New Testament, this theological view of the land is represented by the symbol of the Kingdom of God. While this symbol is frequently used in a highly spiritualized sense, its origins in the Hebrew Bible are unmistakable. In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God involves notions of inclusion, belonging, place, security, and abundance. Again, Brueggemann reminds us of the centrality of socio-historical nature of the symbol: "It includes among its nuances the idea of historical, political, physical realm, that is, land." Jesus' teachings and parabolic acts concerning the Kingdom portray it as a new creation where the meek will inherit the earth. In a time when homelessness and dispossession are real political and social problems, the theological symbol of a place for all people is a stunning proclamation of God's presence among earthlings. The Kingdom of God symbol can and has been abused. Tyrants have frequently used ideas of divinely ordained nationhood and kingdom to restrict access to social well-being and political power. But the theological relevance of the possession of landed wealth or the restoration of a nation is positive only from the underside, and then only as an egalitarian impulse. We do not want to preach that God is unequivocally in the nation-making business or that all who hold political power do so by God's designs. Such strategies lead to triumphalism and seem to pronounce a benediction on "power-over" schemes. If, as Brueggemann suggests, the idea of land or nation refers to claims of wholeness, well-being, safety, and security, then the theological claims about such sociopolitical hopes must be expressed with care. Only under the assumptions of equality, freedom, and radical security can the symbols be opened up with theological integrity. Note, though, that the theological claim of wholeness and safety can expose and even begin to heal the distortions of the vision.

With these assumptions in mind, we can explore the meanings of
gathering the dispersed. At the broadest symbolic level, the dispersed are any and all of those who are in exile. Within contemporary society we may want to reflect homiletically on the personal dimensions as well as the social dimensions of exile. At the personal level, there are those who are emotionally homeless, psychologically disenfranchised, and without a sense of belonging. We are, as Vance Packard wrote, a “nation of strangers.” Part of the reality that we call “postmodern” includes suffering from a sense of discontinuity and rootlessness. We don’t feel like we belong anywhere, but that is precisely what we hunger for. Our contemporary passion for the supposed purities of the past or for identifying goodness with one racial or ethnic group over all others are symptoms of this emotional homelessness. And, of course, on a deeper level, there are serious manifestations of emotional and psychological disconnectedness. Teen pregnancy is partially attributed to a desire for belonging, since for many having a baby is confused with having “someone who will love me.” Alcoholism and drug abuse are also symptoms of alienation, faulty attempts to fill the emptiness or at least to numb it. The high divorce rate creates “dislocated” families, leaving children to feel at least partially orphaned while their parents feel likewise rejected.

The personal dimension of exile and homelessness are probably pretty familiar to most preachers; we tend quickly to psychologize the faith. For some of us, this is because we belong to traditions that value personal religion; for others it is due to increasing therapeutic appropriations of religion. I would encourage preachers not to rely too heavily on the personal interpretations of exile and belonging. Such approaches not only border on the cliche but also tend to blunt the radicality of the faith. I would instead urge preachers to capitalize on the social and political dimensions of a “new nation” or “kingdom” language. The new socio-political reality to which Isaiah refers is one in which God is fully in charge, because Yahweh has displaced earthly kings and rulers. This is in contrast to the former pattern of Israel, when people did what was right in their own eyes (as in the Book of Judges) or were strangers in a foreign land (the Babylonian captivity). The new reality that Isaiah proclaims is neither a nation where each individual is his or her own master nor a nation of slaveholders. Instead, Isaiah proclaims a nation ruled by the divine mandate to form a community of justice and inclusion. The nation will be a place where all the homeless and displaced can gather in security and where violence and destruction are things of the past. Isaiah’s vision, like the
other prophetic visions, includes ethical mandates for the care of widows, orphans, and the impoverished. In this just world, as verse 17 claims, peace will be the overseer and righteousness will be the taskmaster. There will be neither absolute princes nor absolute paupers.

Interestingly, the verbs of the first verse are feminine singular, "appropriate for a city personified as a woman." The new Jerusalem will be a light to the nations, the image of a new community dedicated to justice. In Revelation, the New Jerusalem is depicted as a bride coming down from heaven to meet her bridegroom. Elisabeth Schlüssler Fiorenza claims that "as a heavenly and eschatological figure, the symbol "woman" signifies not only the protection and salvation of the people of God, but also the future of the renewed world." In Isaiah, the heavenly city is already taking shape, and without the somewhat questionable nuptial imagery. The imagery of the City of Glory continues through both Testaments and functions as a projected future against which communities live out their common vocation. The nations are returning to God, a homecoming comparable to the reunion between mothers and sons and daughters.

Other preaching considerations include the seasonal liturgical themes of light and glory. The liturgical themes and the eschatological themes could be combined so that the darkness and light of the opening verses include not only the incarnational language of the birth and epiphany narratives but also the eschatological symbols of Easter with the darkened tomb and the morning sunrise. Superimposing these symbolic structures will allow even more meaning to emerge. The restoration of Israel is not only like the disclosure of God in the incarnation but also like the astonishing disclosure of resurrection life in the Kingdom of death. "Arise, shine; for your light has come."

January 10, 1999—Baptism of the Lord
Isaiah 42:1-9
Ps. 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matt. 3:13-17
Servant, Light to the Nations

The Servant Song in the first four verses of our text is the first of four similar passages in Second Isaiah (49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12). By
their very existence and positioning in Isaiah, the servant songs qualify our notions of kingship and glory, standing as a giant "however" or a boldface footnote to our notions of the characteristics of sovereignty. Following immediately on the previous Sunday's landscape of glory, it associates the servant with light but also with humility. The vocation of the Servant is to act consistently for the welfare of the world, a burden of responsibility. The model of servanthood that runs throughout both Testaments is a reminder and rejection of the human tendency to claim mastery over nature and over our own affairs.

There are two dimensions of the servanthood theme as it emerges in Isaiah. First is the question of identity. But this need not be understood narrowly, in terms of the correct identification of the servant. Certainly there is room in the symbol for associations with an individual (a Messianic ruler, a prophet, or a king) or with the community of Israel. In this first song, the association is left ambiguous and might most appropriately be associated with the faithful community. Such a suggestion helps us avoid the traditional Christianizing of the passage which interprets the servant as an individual, and most particularly as Jesus. Preachers need to avoid reducing the servant songs to "commercials" about Jesus. But we also need to avoid the tendency to personalize and individualize servanthood. This is one of the first subversive strategies I mentioned earlier, since it sidesteps the possibility of projecting servanthood onto solitary persons.

As soon as we assume an interpretive posture that projects servanthood onto a faith community, other problems arise. Servanthood should not be the assigned status of groups whose "special" vocation it is to serve others. Womanist theologian and historian Jacquelyn Grant has written that the terms of servanthood have most customarily been used to "relegate certain victimized peoples—those on the underside of history—to the lower rung of society."12 Grant notes that the Christian model of servanthood has been selectively applied to keep certain folks in their places: women, children, African-Americans, etc. Our notions of servanthood, drawn from our experience with this dynamic, typically imply servitude, subjugation to other more powerful humans, and a denial of the servant's independent selfhood.

But by shifting to a communal interpretation of servanthood, regardless of the risks of misunderstanding, we can explore the
meanings associated with Israel's vocation as a covenantal community. While notions of election also have deep theological traps, it is still possible to appropriate notions of election that involve not special status but special responsibility. Isaiah is calling a whole community back to its foundational vision and vocation as a priestly kingdom: to be a light to the world. This prophetic call couldn't be more necessary or more difficult, since the people Isaiah addresses are consumed with their communal captivity and doubts about their identity. Isaiah reminds them that they are not defined by their captors, by their captivity, or by their failures or their weaknesses. The servant people is defined by their vocation to a divine task.

For Christian congregations worried about falling numbers, shrinking denominations, and temptations to worship other gods, this word comes as both indictment and reminder. We are not to base our primary identities on our affiliation with either denomination or nation, by ethnic identity, by our views on sexual preference, by our size or our "success" as congregations. We assume our identity as a community whose mandate comes from God. The message of Isaiah's servant is a shockingly ecumenical and interfaith witness that calls us to move beyond our own narrow notions of identity and claim our vocation as God's children. Since this text is used in the church year to interpret the baptism of Jesus into ministry, it should humble us to realize that baptism (whether in infancy or the age of accountability) identifies us as belonging to God alone, and not to ourselves or to anyone else. In baptism, we join the whole community of contemporary Christians and also with those who have gone before us. We speak of baptism as a new birth, signifying that our old birth families and inherited worldly status are left behind. In baptism, we put on Christ, and we lose our old selves to join a new "kinship" group. In servanthood, selfhood diminishes both as model and as priority.

Beyond the question of identity, there is the second question of vocation. To what are we called? To what was the servant called? The task is threefold: to bring forth justice, to establish justice in truth, and to do this worldwide, to the nations in the earth. The concept of justice, or God's compassionate righteousness, dominates Second Isaiah as "that which God has created and upon which the wholeness of the universe depends." Hanson reminds us that God's justice is revealed in the Torah and that to repudiate it is to introduce evil into the world. Wherever justice has been denied, it is the task of God's servant people to restore the harmony of God's compassionate reign.
Certainly this is why the oracles against the nations are seen as an act of compassion; speaking out against injustice is fundamental to the task of faithful living. Note the interesting twist to our conventional ways of understanding servanthood. The servant community serves the nations by telling them what they’re doing wrong! Prophetic servanthood is no weak and submissive proposition, but it involves a vigorous engagement with the world to reveal God’s compassion for a just world. When God is the sovereign, all other sovereignties are called into question.

For Christian preachers, this task has two temptations. The first is to avoid the rigors of such prophetic activity by domesticating servanthood—“making nice” with each other and doing acts of kindness. We hate to sound negative, so we skip to an easy, post-reconciliation posture and try to get along with everybody. On the other hand, there is the temptation to climb up on a soapbox and point out what every other group and nation are doing wrong. Servanthood calls for a kind of radical prophetic activity directed toward the complacent community of faith as well as the surrounding world. But if we preach prophetically only to denounce others, we fool ourselves and mask our own complicity in the structures of injustice. True servanthood to God’s justice demands that we compassionately examine all injustice everywhere and call for righteousness with impartiality.

Within the faith community, we are all called to servanthood. Within North American Christianity, this will necessitate a serious critique of military imperialism, economic hegemony, and prejudice of all kinds. We cannot be faithful to God’s mandate for justice without also looking at our own complicity in the machinery of domination and “progress,” which has set up human beings as “masters of the universe” who routinely rape the environment and destroy other cultures. We will have to provide serious critique of our own denominational practices that reinforce prejudices against women, racial and ethnic minorities, other nations, and those who suffer sexual preference discrimination.

Finally, we go about this worldwide mission as a servant people who have no earthly power. Scholars point out that in the ancient world, coronation rituals included a “state of the union” address by the new ruler. Immediately after the crowning, the new king would make ritual threats to his enemies and announce his plans for law and order. But this servant king in Isaiah doesn’t threaten or menace; he speaks...
nonviolent words of truth. To the rest of the world, our "bleeding heart" vision will look weak and precarious, like Isaiah's metaphors of bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks. Preaching is always a matter of the foolishness and apparent weakness of language. But we will have God's spirit upon us, and we don't have to rely on the worldly strategies of power and coercion. With God's spirit, neither will we break nor will our voices ultimately be drowned out. Through the ordinary routines of prayer, remembrance, song, and worship, God continues to strengthen us so that we do not have to succumb to human weakness or to despair. God gives the community of faith the resources it needs for remaining faithful in its proclamation of compassionate justice.

January 17, 1999—The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 49:1-7
Ps. 40:1-11
1 Cor. 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

The Servant's Mission

By now we should see the direction of the biblical texts. This passage builds on the previous one by focusing on the particulars of the servanthood identity and vocation. The accumulation and arrangement of texts within the liturgical year seems to suggest that the entry of the servant into the world is just the beginning of the project whose ultimate goal is the gathering of all those dispersed and separated from the covenantal vision of God.

This particular passage begins to sketch out a modus operandi for the vision of justice and truth that has been established. The opening verses review "the servant people's appeal to islands and peoples . . . the 'universalism' of the servant's newly defined mission stands out." Roth notes the rhetorical and poetic structure of the text, which offers reversals of familiar separation narratives. Inclusion is the reversal of separation; all those descendants who have been separated will be returned, not just the ones in immediate exile. The text suggests a more radical reconciliation than imagined. Israel's commission is the salvation of all the world.

We should not be surprised by this vision of universal salvation, says the prophet, since it was God's plan from the very beginning.
Isaiah’s words (“while I was in my mother’s womb”) remind us of the words of Jeremiah, “before I formed you in the womb,” an indication of God’s prior commitments. The servant mission is not parochial, but universal. The redemptive process intends to gather all of Israel and all the world into its vision of justice and reconciliation. There is a dialectic that we need to attend to: God is doing something new, and God is not doing something newly concocted. Both dimensions of the dialectic are accurate, since God has always been about the business of reconciling the world, and God has to keep intervening to make this reconciliation operative. God’s ongoing redemptive plan for the world takes new shape in each generation and with each situation.

With regard to Christian preaching from this text, the emphasis must be on the continuity with Judaism and the plan for universal salvation. It is popular to preach that Jewish notions of salvation were exclusive and that Jesus challenged the tradition by including the Gentiles. What we notice in Isaiah, though, is the dialectic tension between God’s eternal plan for world redemption and the human interpretation of that plan as “a plan for our salvation.” Isaiah’s text is a wake-up call to Israel, reminding them that God has intended to save the whole world all along. Jesus, like Isaiah, is simply recalling the faithful to the vision of God. Jesus stands in the prophetic tradition, reminding us that salvation is not just for the Christian faithful but for all those who have been separated: all those who have left the church or been kicked out. Like Israel, the church is called to servanthood on behalf of God’s bigger and more inclusive vision.

A note of tragedy begins to emerge in this text, though, and one that will allow us to make continuous (but not exceptional) connections to Jesus. In verse 4, the prophet, and presumably the Servant, laments, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” As Hanson points out, the world will be resistant to this vision, and the prophetic servant community cannot expect things to go smoothly. “The world to which the Servant is called to bring justice-engendering words may be in turmoil, and this may lead to doubts whether anything is being accomplished.” With this note of tragedy, we are reminded of Augustine, Luther, and Bonhoeffer. Sin abounds. The world lives in a house built and maintained by the sin of arrogance and will-to-power. The folly of preaching justice seems extraordinarily weak in the face of such entrenched resistance. The structures of evil are indeed massive and interlocking. We preach, we work, we hope; and still nothing much seems to change. The days and
decades and centuries stretch out, filled with prophetic words which seem to have little payoff.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.  

The way of servanthood is neither easy nor sure. "Jeremiah at the bottom of a cistern, Jesus hanging on a cross," claims Hanson, are the symbols that continue to humble our pretensions to success. If we think we can accomplish God's purposes by sheer genius and determination, we have underestimated the tenacity of evil in the world.

It is precisely here that women's suspicions should be most vigorously engaged. The text begins to hint that servanthood will involve suffering, failure, and resistance. Many contemporary women theologians have rejected the symbol of the servanthood and the tradition's understandings of virtuous suffering. They argue that an image of a suffering servant has supported centuries of abuse and violence toward women, who were told that their virtuous response should be to suffer in silence. If suffering is a woman's virtue, then violence against women can be excused, if not fully justified. For some it is enough to assert that the suffering of women is not a relevant theological problem. But our preaching on these texts should not reinforce, even subtly, ideas that eventually cover up and defend sado-masochistic practices against women. An appropriate interpretation of the suffering servanthood (and the Cross) will be one that does not function to support violence or imply that suffering itself is redemptive.

Here is where our communal strategy of the collective biblical "you" yields the most dramatic results. The highly individualized mode of interpretation has allowed preachers and pastors to counsel that the mandate is directed toward individual women, including those who have been violated and abused. We have said to them, "You
should bear suffering patiently. Be like the suffering servant. Forgive your abuser." Thus women whose lives are threatened are counseled to tolerate abuse, keep it a secret, and ultimately blame themselves for it. But look what happens with just a little heightened grammatical awareness—where the "you" of the prophetic mandate is correctly understood as the plural, "you folks." Instead of requiring that solitary and isolated women bear the servant image, what if we required the church to witness against violence and to face suffering as a consequence? Will the church, as a prophetic servant community, be willing to assume the risks and burdens of standing against evil? Can the church be courageous enough to say "no" to the powers and principalities that destroy all God's children?

The prophet therefore reminds the servant community of its calling and its power in God. We do not know at any given time whether we will be "successful," but we can proclaim the vision of wholeness and reconciliation. We are called, as a biblical community, to be fools for God and, as a peculiarly Christian community, to be fools for Christ. We preach in season and out, engaging in activities that the world considers a foolish waste of time.

January 24, 1999—The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 9:1-4
Ps. 27:1, 4-9
1 Cor. 1:10-18
Matt. 4:12-23

The Reign of the Coming King

The lectionary selection for this day brings us back around to the beginning of Isaiah and the announcement of the coming King. If we had not already had the vision of God's just and compassionate reign, the hint of failure, and the premise of the servant community, then the symbol of kingship could be interpreted according to "worldly" standards. We could fall into precisely the kind of triumphalism that marks Israel's sinful arrogance and the history of the Christian Church. Kingship and imperial metaphors carry potentially dangerous theological freight and must be handled carefully.

Scholars remind us that one facet of Isaiah's genius was his reinterpretation of the whole notion of kingship. In Israel's view, any notion of earthly kingship must derive from the claim that God alone
is sovereign. There is only one King, and any earthly representative rules under the authority of God. Popular messianic hopes for a Son of God were hopes for an earthly “governor,” or anointed one. The term *Son of God* was not an indication of ontological relationship but an indication that the human, political figure acted on God's authority. Even though we don't formally include the most familiar part of this text in the day's reading, the remaining verses will be in the hearers' minds: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (italics mine). We are trained to hear the messianic announcement and to associate it with Jesus, just as the hearers of Isaiah's time were trained to hear the messianic announcement and to associate it with the house of David. Since this unit really functions as a theological whole by including vv. 5–6, and since folks will “hear” them anyway, I would advise ignoring the suggested lectionary divisions. Good preachers are regularly suspicious of lectionary breaks, because they tend to wonder what's being left out.

Isaiah's reinterpretation of this messianic figure can help us hear the announcement in a fresh way. Isaiah emphatically uses the language associated with the Zion tradition and the Davidic tradition and blends them into a prophetic messianism. The royal theology of the Psalms becomes prophetic under Isaiah, who points to this historic period as the time for God to inaugurate the awaited reign. God has promised to save Israel and all of creation by establishing a messianic ruler from the house of David. But let's note that for Isaiah this ruler will not necessarily come from David's own descendants and lineage. God promised David not a throne but a *house*; it was the house of David that would be established from the root of Jesse. As Mays points out, the identity of the anointed one is unclear precisely because Isaiah's hearers were breathlessly awaiting a candidate who would assume the messianic role and lead Israel into a new way of life. "We need to view Isaiah in the context of a trajectory of messianic thought concerned with the role in the reign of God of the figure who is called king, seed of David, servant of God, messiah, son of God." The Psalmic expectations of monarchy and absolute imperial power are transformed by Isaiah into a messianic expectation of a prince of peace, a steward of the reign of God.

Our suspicions about imperial language are usually well-founded, given the "worldly" way they have traditionally been interpreted. We've
inherited a history that has applied religious language to secular authority structures of all kinds, implying that states and their rulers exercise their power by divine right. Isaiah's prophetic vision contradicts this heritage. Isaiah's portrayal of human authority is tempered by his God-given, passionate view of earthly peace and prosperity, along with nurture and stewardship. Isaiah seems to suggest that we can recognize messianic figures by their mode of leadership and their vision of hope for the world. They are the appropriate leaders in the establishment of God's empire, which is a radical alternative to a world where injustice and oppression are in control.

When we turn to homiletic issues, we may want to begin by locating certain structural divisions and themes in the text. The first is the shift from times of trouble to times of a brighter future. Symbolically, this is captured in the opposition between night-time darkness and the light of a new dawn. God's vision and hope for the future bid farewell to the days of bloodshed and trouble. Preachers have only to watch the evening news or read the papers to find images of oppression and warfare that God wants to overcome. We should probably avoid spiritualizing this into the "dark night of the soul" and shift it toward the socio-political midnight that haunts the postmodern world. Darkness and light as biblical metaphors almost always point to earthly captivities and their domination.

The next major section is designed to point to signs that the new era is already beginning to dawn. Within this, three signs are apparent. First, the questionable image of dividing plunder suggests that the enemy has not succeeded. Even before reconstruction and rebuilding begin, we celebrate amid the ruins of battle. This celebration is also likened to a harvest feast, an image of plenty and abundance of food. Within a Christian context, food celebrations and the sharing of treasures should remind us of our regular eucharist celebration. We rejoice and celebrate that in Christ we are a new creation, characterized by generosity and inclusivity.

The second sign of the messianic age is the destruction of battle gear. This image corresponds to the "swords into plowshares" image and is standard reign-of-God rhetoric. The savvy preacher will look around to see where signs of peace are most vividly imaged: perhaps in international efforts to disarm missiles, where military budgets are being dismantled, where military jeeps are being used for farming.
Preachers should also pay close attention to ordinary examples of reconciliation and nonviolence from their own communities.

The final sign is the odd juxtaposition of a throne room and the birth announcement. It would be hard to find a better image for Isaiah's redefinition of the messianic expectation than this one. Through an odd telescoping of time, we shift from the announcement ("We're pregnant!") to the full-grown baby on the throne. Our pretensions to power and control are challenged by an image that located salvation in the future, in an unborn baby, and in all the vulnerability of pregnancy and childbirth. If the prophet can use this means to remind Israel that they didn't yet know the fullness of God's divine plan, it can also remind us that, even in Christ, we wait for the future to be born. The wild mythology of the Second Coming is precisely this kind of anticipation. We wait for the fullness of time, nurturing the new creation to birth.

We have concentrated exclusively on the Isaiah texts for this study, but trajectories for Micah are already in place. Preachers will want to read their commentaries with an eye to the themes and theological concerns already indicated. Micah is not Isaiah, but many of the same theological interests are in play. Preachers will note that the structure of the Micah reading repeats the overall movement of the lectionary arrangements. Micah moves from high and grandiose expectations down to an ordinary community's humble attempts to do justice. We don't get the Christian Century or the establishment of an empire. No, we get a living God who walks with us into the paths of ordinary service. From a nation on a hill to a baby. The lectionary passages bring us down from the dazzle of Christmas to the ordinary life of service to God's compassionate justice.

Notes

1. I am following a particular rhetorical strategy outlined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, rejecting feminist approaches which reduce all metaphors and interpretations to gendered readings. Certainly metaphors have been interpreted abusively, and it's probable that the authors were products of sexist assumptions. However, Schüssler Fiorenza claims that gendered readings are reductionistic and miss the radicality of the symbolic reversals. The radicality of the servanthood critique demands its own deconstruction. See Revelation: Vision of a Just World, Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 12-14. For an alternative (gendered)


3. In a complex argument, Marinus De Jonge argues that, to the extent that we can postulate that Jesus claimed any messianic identity himself, Jesus’ use of the Kingdom of God language and concept points in the direction of the Servant-Messiah identity. Such an identity does not require suffering, and certainly not the kind of substitutionary atonement we tend to project back onto messianic figures of the Hebrew Bible. See De Jonge’s essay, “The Christological Significance of Jesus’ Preaching of the Kingdom of God,” in Malherbe and Meeks, eds., The Future of Christology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 1-17.


5. For an interesting discussion of the estranged child metaphors, see Darr’s Isaiah Vision and the Family of God, chapter 2, “Child Imagery and the Rhetoric of Rebellion.” She argues that the Servant imagery functions within a family metaphor where the Servant is the obedient child and Israel has been wayward. Her reading of the Servant theology is more suspicious than my own, and readers may find it a helpful tool in avoiding traditional stereotypical approaches. For those who are suspicious of family metaphors in general, her approach is quite illuminating. In a day when family metaphors function to reinforce tradition and family values, a hermeneutic of suspicion is in order. For other gendered reading approaches, see also Emily Cheney’s She Can Read: Feminist Reading Strategies for Biblical Narrative (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996).

6. Consider the “curse” of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:14-19), which suggested that the earth and humans would be at enmity with each other. The threat of nonproductive land or exile from the land are similar in their threat to livelihood.


8. Verse 17 is not included in the lectionary passage but should be included in the preacher’s homiletical reflections. It, along with the preceding verse 16, imposes serious conditions upon what kind of “kingdom” God ordains. Otherwise, we could fall into precisely the kind of triumphalism that Third Isaiah seems to project.


11. See Craddock, et al. for more discussion of the themes of light and dark and the connections to the Epiphany season, in Preaching through the Christian Year, 72. And see also Hanson’s essay, “Third Isaiah: The Theological Legacy of a Struggling Community?” in Seitz’s Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah, 91-103. Preachers will note the similarities between the natal star, the visit of the Magi, the expensive gifts, and even the presence of camels. As a symbol of light coming into the darkness, the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Magi only reinforce the Isaiah claim of a brighter future.


14. For an astonishing critique of modern notions of mastery, see Douglas John Hall’s *Lighten our Darkness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), especially chapter 3, "The Official Religion of the Officially Optimistic Society." Hall claims that we have lost our notions of sinfulness in our attempts to master nature and each other. The question is not so much, he claims, whether we can master the world but whether we should trust ourselves to do so. This dialectic between the potential for good and the potential for evil has been severed with the myth of progress so that we “forget” that might does not automatically indicate right.


21. "Isaiah’s Royal Theology and the Messiah," 43–48. Mays and others conjecture that this text is part of a coronation ritual for King Hezekiah. Even if this is the case, it doesn’t jeopardize the argument here that Isaiah dramatically reinterpreted messianic expectations and the characteristics of that role. See also Seitz, *Isaiah 1–19,* 84–85; Craddock, et al, *Preaching through the Christian Year,* 29; Roth, *Isaiah,* 39–45.

22. Mays, "Isaiah’s Royal Theology and the Messiah," 41.

23. See Isa. 2:4; Joel 3:10, and Mic. 4:3. Preachers who want to read contemporary homiletic reflections on war and peace may find William Sloane Coffin’s recent work or Walter J. Burghardt’s work helpful. See Coffin’s *A Passion for the Possible: A Message to U. S. Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), especially the chapter "Beyond War," and Burghardt’s *Preaching the Just Word* (New Haven: Yale University, 1996), especially chapter 3, "Preaching the Cry of the Poor," where Father Burghardt explores the institutionalization of violence in the U.S.

24. Freeman Dyson offers a beautiful illustration describing a visit to God in Heaven. He enters the throne room in awe and some terror, and, from a distance, the throne seems empty. He moves closer to find only a diapered baby lying on the seat. See *Disturbing the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 250-261.

25. See Paul S. Minear’s smart interpretation of angelic announcement in Luke’s birth narrative. He argues that the announcement of “peace on earth” is a cosmic reversal of the violence of history that began with Cain’s murder of Abel. He connects this reversal to the curse of the land and the privation of abundance. This reading fits well with Brueggemann’s claim about the land and the reign of God. See *Christians and the New Creation: Genesis Motifs in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), and also *Christian Hope and the Second Coming* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965).
Quarterly Review is a publication of The United Methodist Publishing House and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.