The Household of Jesus Christ in the Age of Access
M. Douglas Meeks

A Royal Priesthood in a New Millennium: The Ministry of the Baptized
Gayle Carlton Felton

The Future of Ordination in United Methodism
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Introduction

Faithful Ministry in a New Millennium

The hype surrounding the dawning of the new millennium seems finally to have settled. Aside from the novelty of writing “2000” following the month and day on our checks, life appears to have returned to its all-too-familiar routines. In the new millennium, we still worry about how we’re going to pay our kids’ mounting college bills. We still read the headlines announcing with numbing regularity the crimes of the day. And we still fear for the moral and physical safety of our children, families, and friends in a society in which it appears anything can be had for a price.

But we shouldn’t let cynicism get the better of us. Important events do offer an opportunity for us to reflect on the deepest meaning of our lives, our churches, our society. Crossing the threshold into a new millennium has inspired many of us to ponder how our lives might become new, how irruptions of rejuvenating grace might lift our tired eyes to the horizon of divine possibilities. But our longing for new life is not just for us; it is also for our congregations and our church—those places and that institution that nurture the defining relationships and values that make up our being and doing.

“New” does not mean somehow magically wiping the slate of our lives clean and starting from scratch. Christians know better than that. Rather, becoming new—renewal—means kindling the steadfast hope that the God of Abraham and Jesus and Hildegard and Wesley will teach the church—even in this new day and time—what it means to be faithful to God’s vision for the world.

The articles in this issue of Quarterly Review wrestle in a variety
of ways and at different levels with the question of the meaning and shape of the church's identity and ministry in the new millennium. William McKinney counters the customary jeremiad that "mainline churches" are dying with a robust program for their renewal.

Douglas Meeks asks how the church can be the household of Jesus Christ in a "wired" world increasingly subject to the ubiquitous logic of commodity exchange. The path to renewal for the church in an "age of access," says Meeks, is to be a community shaped by the logic of God's grace. Only as a "community of gifting" can the church practice a ministry of reconciliation that effectively counters the deleterious power of the global economy.

For Gayle Felton a renewed church recognizes that it is in baptism that "God gives us both our identity and our mission." Baptism is nothing less than ordination to ministry for all Christians, not just for clergy. And this ordination bestows on all believers their vocation to be priests in Christ's service—a "royal priesthood."

Thomas Frank, too, examines ordination—the future of ordination in The United Methodist Church, to be precise. While celebrating the continued emphasis on the ministry of the laity, Frank claims there exists serious confusion about the meaning and scope of ordained ministry in the denomination. To enhance the church's witness and service in the world, a clearer definition of ordained ministry is needed.

For Ronald Sider, any definition of ministry that does not combine Wesley's emphasis on personal and social holiness is inadequate. Churches need a holistic understanding of ministry, especially in the first decade of the new millennium when faith-based communities have a historic opportunity to address some of our nation's most desperate social problems, particularly urban poverty.

Emerito Nacpil asserts that effective Christian ministry in the new century requires a creative tension between the sociocultural and historical milieu in which such ministry happens, on the one hand, and the church's theological identity and purpose, on the other.

In her sagacious commentary on the Book of Revelation, Catherine González disabuses us of the caricatures of the Apocalypse and unveils the profound hope in God's promised future that animates this ancient writing.

The century may be new and unpredictable, but the future belongs to God. May that assurance inspire our faithful ministry.

Hendrik R. Pieterse
Mainline Protestantism: A Proposal for Renewal

In 1987, Wade Clark Roof and I published the book American Mainline Religion, which received quite a lot of attention and continues to sell fairly well. Within a few months of the book's publication I began to get comments from friends and colleagues around the country to the effect that while they found the book helpful as diagnosis, it lacked a prescriptive chapter.

"Okay," they would say, "you've given some tools for understanding what has happened to various faith communities over the past half century. But what do we do about it?"

For some time, I countered with the argument that my role as a sociologist of U.S. religion is to describe reality in ways that will help decision makers formulate responsible decisions about the future. Over time, as my vocational priorities shifted from research to seminary leadership and administration, this argument wore a bit thin. In the past decade I have been working in a more sustained way with national and regional church leaders, as well as with ecumenical leaders. Meanwhile, a number of very good books have been published that attempt to suggest a future for the community of churches we lump together as Mainline Protestantism.1

I begin with two assertions. An assertion is less than a theory but more than a hunch. The first assertion is that the genius of the move-

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ment and churches we call "Mainline Protestantism" is as much in their ethos, sensibility, and interrelationships as it is in their doctrine, demographics, or organizational structure. At the heart of Mainline Protestantism is the search for a way to be in the world with the recognition that what we believe is both true and corruptible at the same time. An editor of the *New Yorker* captured this ethos well when writing about Cambridge, Massachusetts, some years ago. He described the town as having a nineteenth-century sense of being "right and open-minded at the same time."

Many of the nation's leading educational institutions and thousands of national and local cultural and social service institutions were founded by Protestant churches and laity. William Hutchison has pointed out that even into the twentieth century the social networks of Protestant clergy and leaders of business, culture, and government remained strong. While most of the official ties between churches and institutions like Ivy League and liberal arts colleges, art museums, and benevolence agencies and their founding churches are gone, they nonetheless share common origins and values.

Part of the genius but also a source of the contemporary struggle of Mainline Protestantism is its determination to bridge or mediate seemingly conflicting ideas and relationships. Its instincts lead it to seek common ground among what seem to be irreconcilable concepts or ideas. Early on, these tensions were between European church roots and the needs and possibilities of the new land. Could, for example, churches founded to serve specific ethnic populations reach out to persons of varied national backgrounds? Later, tensions were evident between faithfulness to Christian orthodoxy and accommodation to the new insights and possibilities of philosophy and science. One can see the split between Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism as a division over the degree to which churches ought to accommodate cultural changes. For most of the past century, Mainline Protestantism sought to affirm loyalty to nation while pressing for a new sense of global interdependence. Today its churches struggle to affirm traditions they helped to shape while taking responsibility for the sins of its earlier position of privilege. In ecumenical and interfaith circles we see attempts to affirm the particularity of our specific traditions while also striving for a new openness to the insights of other living faith traditions.

Now, to be sure, some people see this determination to bridge or mediate as part of the problem of Mainline Protestantism and its institutions. Its message, they say, is too soft, too blurred. Better, they argue,
to establish clearer boundaries between the church and others. The future belongs to those whose message is fixed and clearly articulated and who enforce their teachings with increased levels of strictness.

I disagree. While it is true that Mainline Protestantism needs to be clearer in stating what it affirms, we are not well served by pretending that there are simple answers when there are not. I see strength in our engaging the difficult tensions between

* affirming cultural identities and striving for global understanding;
* national pride and international interdependence;
* individuality and community;
* faith and science;
* Christian confessional particularity and interfaith understanding.

We live in a time that tempts individuals and groups to value clarity and to avoid nuance. That is not as I see it. Quite the contrary: our willingness to resist easy answers or to draw premature conclusions is one of our strengths, not one of our weaknesses.

My second assertion is simpler. It is that Mainline Protestantism has a distinctive understanding of what it means to speak of religious renewal.

James Carroll is a former Roman Catholic priest and novelist who writes regularly for the Boston Globe. Some time ago he reflected on his annual summer visit to the town of Well in the Netherlands. On the first Sunday of his family’s visit he waited for the ringing of the bells from St. Vitus, the town’s parish church. “Always, at 10 minutes to eight, the calm of this little Dutch village on the River Maas would be shattered by the peel rolling across the fields of rosebushes and hay, summoning worshipers as it had been doing for hundreds of years, but the bells did not ring today.”

Carroll went off to the church and found that there was no longer a mass at eight; indeed that there was no Sunday mass at all. Father Jerry, who had served St. Vitus for many years, had retired and there is no one to replace him. A priest from another parish comes over on Saturday evening, but the church is locked on Sunday morning. Its once-active rectory is closed and the church’s future is in doubt.

While Carroll experiences a personal sense of loss in the silence of the bells at St. Vitus, he is more worried by its larger meaning. He quotes historian Karen Armstrong on the “god-shaped hole” in the consciousness of Western Europe: “The god-shaped hole in a village,” he writes,
is a locked church, and it forces the question: When we lose “God,” along with a system of set rituals that enshrined “God’s” presence in our lives, are we losing something central to our humanity? Or are we only repeating the pattern of our ancestors, whose religious impulses were constantly refined, progressing from the violently primitive to the intellectually sublime?5

James Carroll is a sophisticated thinker, aware that Western Europe’s now-dominant liberal humanism is not the whole or even the most important development on the world’s religious scene. He wonders whether resurgent forms of fundamentalism may not be in part a reaction to secularism, but he cannot avoid concluding that Western Europeans are abandoning the very forms of spirituality they invented. He closes:

None of this denies my own sense of dislocation today at the loss of Sunday Mass; nor does it mean that locked churches are not an ominous symbol of time’s power to erode, or that the lovely fields on which I look out do not themselves seem sadly chastened by the silence of the bells.6

I like this story because it summarizes so well the complex situation in which we find ourselves today.

The situation begins with an individual with religious yearnings. James Carroll is an individual who, on a particular Sunday in a place where he is something of a stranger, wants to go to Mass.

The church, St. Vitus, has its own story. It has been around for hundreds of years and occupies a dominant public space in its village center. Carroll describes it as a “hulking” brick church that dominates the physical setting of the town of Well. Carroll, who is middle-aged, says that almost all who worship there are older than he. This St. Vitus isn’t dancing anymore. It’s nearly closed.

Furthermore, St. Vitus exists in time and space: in the town of Well, in the Netherlands in Western Europe, late in the twentieth century. Carroll is correct, I think, in seeing connections between the silence of the bells, the locked church door, and the wider sociocultural context of Western culture.7

For Mainline Protestants, to speak of renewal means dealing with all three of the actors in the story: the individual as a child of God with spiritual needs and yearnings; the faith community; and the
world, extending from the local community to the globe. None of us has much chance of personal renewal if our churches are dysfunctional. Nor will we feel very good about our churches if we live in a sick and heartless world.

I begin with these two assertions because they are foundational for the agenda I want to suggest. Note what I have not said: I do not regard Mainline Protestantism’s current situation as the product of a failure of leadership, or of laziness, or of unfavorable demographics, or even of bad theology. These are, for me, poor descriptions of our current reality. And a problem badly defined rarely leads to a viable solution.

I want to suggest four points toward a program of renewal for Mainline Protestantism.

We Must Recover a Public Voice on Matters of the Spirit

I was raised in the 1950s, schooled in the 1960s. Dominant themes of my formation as a Christian and as a citizen included the essential compatibility of faith and culture; the sense that religion is reasonable; that things were fundamentally right with the world; that religion evolves and gets better as time goes on; and that to be religious means to be moral.

Harvey Cox, in his book *The Secular City*, captured the spirit of the age. He provided a portrait of a world that is becoming more and more secular as other forces take a more central role in the individual’s and the society’s efforts to deal with questions of purpose and meaning.⁸

Even among people of faith, one detected an assumption of the progressive marginality of religion. Implicit was a sense that the real action was elsewhere or that religion’s real contribution is the value it adds to something else—to politics, the family, the workplace.

In retrospect we can see a case of faulty anthropology, and one of the first to proclaim the error was none other than Harvey Cox himself in a fine book on Pentecostalism, *Fire from Heaven*.⁹ God, it turns out, is not an afterthought. Faith, Cox discovers, continues to have raw—sometimes scary—power!

For me, the discovery that many sociologists and commentators have largely been proved wrong in their assumption that secularization is an inevitable consequence of modernity has important implications for Mainline Protestantism. It is time for a new assertiveness regarding the religious message of our traditions.¹⁰
If I were to criticize religious leadership today it is for our public silence on matters of the spirit. Too many of our churches are failing to address the spiritual crisis in the United States today. The rise of the so-called Religious Right is not only a challenge to our politics; it is also a reflection of the fact that other groups are doing a better job of focusing on the religious needs and hungers of our neighbors.

We delude ourselves with our assumption that the TV preachers, the megachurches, the storefront Pentecostals—and on the New Age left, Marianne Williamson and New Age bookstores—are the product either of some form of social deprivation or of the scheming of a sinister band of foundation-funded, neo-conservative think-tankers in Washington.

The social base of the Religious Right and of esoteric new religious movements is to be found in a different place: in peoples’ search for meaning and belonging, for a sense of peace in a world of conflict and pain, for a sense of transcendence in a world of cellular phones and organization charts and ritualized behaviors. I give them credit: Pat Robertson, Marianne Williamson, and Promise Keepers—all recognize an almost desperate search for God in our culture today. And so, the first item on my renewal agenda is to reclaim a public voice on matters of the spirit.

What we now call Mainline Protestantism is a complicated amalgam of individuals and groups with different motivations. Most of us are active in churches because when we were young someone told us about Jesus, who was our friend and who cared about “all the children of the world.” We learned about the God who stayed with the people of Israel even when they turned their backs on God. My fear is that we are relying on spiritual capital built up by previous generations. Can we count on the religious socialization provided by Willow Creek and “A Course on Miracles” to replenish our ranks? I doubt it.

It Is Time to Take Steps to End the Culture War in America

According to sociologists Robert Wuthnow and James Davison Hunter,11 the United States is witnessing a conflict between two moral visions of what our country is about. “The end to which these hostilities tend,” Hunter writes, “is the domination of one cultural and moral ethos over all others.”12

Scholars have helped us to understand the contours of the culture war, but novelist Anna Quindlen has done it even better. In one of her
New York Times columns, she noted that readers who send her letters often make assumptions about her positions on a range of issues. One reader, disgusted by her support for the "homosexual life style," ended her letter with "I assume you support gun control." Other readers are "convinced that if I oppose capital punishment, it follows as night the day that I am divorced, a Democrat and a bad mother." Quindlen suggests that conservative columnists probably receive letters assuming they are "white male fascists who are in the service of the Pope and wear string ties."

She argues that such assumptions grow out of a commonly held belief that the United States is divided between "us" and "them" and that all of us (in her case, liberals) agree on every issue but always disagree with "them" (i.e., conservatives). For example:

Us believe [them] are . . . in favor of law and order, execution and abstinence, mandatory drug testing, and an end to affirmative action. Them think us are licentious proponents of sex education who created the welfare state and use drugs. Us stand up for 2 Live Crew and Robert Mapplethorpe, even if we've never heard the music or seen the pictures; them think America has gone soft on censorship. . . . Them are for sex in marriage, missionary style, us like it every other way.14

Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne argues that the source of this polarization is the "cultural civil war" that broke out in the 1960s and over thirty years later refuses to end. He writes in his book Why Americans Hate Politics, "We are trapped in the 1960s." Ideological polarization leads to a restructured and dysfunctional politics, with politicians substituting symbol for substance: "Liberals and conservatives alike are uncertain about what remedies they can offer without blowing their constituencies apart."15

I think Dionne is correct in his analysis of U.S. political culture and would extend his point to the world of U.S. religion as well. We are not yet at the point where we can expect a book that asks why Americans hate religion, but it is time that we took a serious look at the culture war in our churches.

Our churches cry out for help in bringing an end to the culture war. Writing in Christianity Today just after the 1992 Presidential election, evangelical Christian columnist Chuck Colson reflected on Americans' anger about the political process. Colson, who served a
prison sentence for breaking political rules, refers to the notion that we are facing a cultural civil war and asks, "How can this civil war be ended? What can bring us to a cultural Appomattox?" It is the right question. We could use a "cultural Appomattox" in religion. It is unlikely to come from those who have made their choices; who are the current combatants; who, like some generals, have serious identity problems until they can identify a new enemy.

How do we do that? First, we can refuse to allow every public issue to be reduced to two positions. The television program, "Crossfire," is one of the leading enemies of responsible public discourse. Every night it reduces issues to terms that fit the political divisions of the 1960s. We can challenge simplistic "Crossfire"-style debate when we see it, and we can model more complex and nuanced approaches to issues. Second, we can commend political and cultural leaders when they refuse to reduce their opponents to stereotypes. Not every political race ends up with all the candidates bloodying one another. We can celebrate occasions when difference doesn't end in division.

Third, we can resist bipolar debates in the church itself. For too long, debate in Mainline Protestantism has looked too much like the debate in the wider culture. One of the contributions churches could make to the wider culture of which they are a part would be to demonstrate ways persons of conflicting views can disagree while retaining a sense of common purpose and identity.

Let Us Reassert the Power and Promise of Congregating

The idea that voluntary gatherings of free people, informed by Scripture and open to the Holy Spirit, can make responsible decisions is one that is very much alive. We do not exist in isolation as individuals or as congregations, but we are free.

To congregate is to raise a quiet protest against the radical individualism that pervades religious and cultural life. It recognizes that we understand that the Christian life is more than a mountaintop experience—as important as such experiences are. It recognizes that it is in voluntary community that we learn the language of our faith, its rituals and practices. Congregating subjects us to correction when we lose our way and provides vehicles for expressing our faith in concrete action in the world.

I do not believe everybody belongs in the same congregation or that there is only one way to congregate. But a call to congregating is
an important component of any agenda for Mainline Protestant renewal.

I am encouraged by the rediscovery of the significance of congregations that has taken place in recent years. Scholars and journalists are recognizing that the future of church life in the United States is being shaped from the ground up.

Let Us Create a Climate That Supports Responsible Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Church Life

This ought to be a time of innovation and reinvention within Mainline Protestantism. We ought to be building new churches and challenging one another to develop fresh ways to serve our changing world. My four years on the West Coast have helped me understand that innovation and entrepreneurship are part of the culture of this region of the country. Our churches are full of persons who work for companies like Microsoft, Intel, Nike, Cisco Systems, Hewlett-Packard, Netscape, and Disney. We ought to be learning from those in our congregations who have had the courage to build new businesses and new institutions to serve the needs of our neighbors.

Happily, there are examples of innovation in our midst as churches and their leaders come to recognize that many of our practices and forms no longer fit the new communities in which we find ourselves. Changes in technology, dramatic shifts in the shape of our population, and increased religious and cultural diversity are but a few of the changes we face. Sometimes they seem ominous and threatening. Church leaders wonder how they will cope.

I believe we need to approach these changes with a new burst of confidence and innovation. This ought to be a time of hope and innovation for churches that have done so much to bring us to where we are today. A new burst of confidence and innovation is what we need now to bring us where we need to be for tomorrow.

Endnotes

1. For a summary of some of these works, see my article “Mainline Protestantism,” in Contemporary American Religion, ed. by Wade Clark Roof (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2000).

2. William R. Hutchison, ed., Protestantism as Establishment. In Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900–1960 (New York:
3. James Carroll, "In an Old Dutch Village, the Silence of the Bells is Deafening." 
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
Early in the new millennium the church is in jeopardy. This is not news. The church has been in one sense or another in peril since Pentecost. We knew from the beginning about the internal threat to the church, namely, our disobedience as disciples of Jesus (John 13, 18). Neither were we left in doubt about the external threat of the world’s rejection of those who stick with Jesus (John 17). If we try to narrow down the issue and say that the church is in jeopardy because human community is in jeopardy, this also would be nothing new.

Having always assumed that it had to be a kind of human community, the church has nevertheless always been subject to the ways in which the forces of various societies rend community.

Threats to the church change in form according to the power of the time, the society, and the culture in which churches exist. In our time power is concentrated in what we call the “global economy.” Everywhere in the world, but especially in the First World, the global economy is amazing us with its dominion while at the same time it wreaks havoc on families, communities, and civil society. The more powerful some of us feel because of the economy, the more devastated are masses of people because of the collapse of community.

The threats to the church, because they are threats to human community, could be termed cyberspace and the global economy.

M. Douglas Meeks is the Cal Turner Professor of Wesley Studies and Theology in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.
Churches in the developed and developing areas of the world experience cyberspace and the global economy in different ways, but churches all over the world are affected. Behind the wondrous potency of cyberspace and the knowledge economy are the ancient questions of communication and justice that all communities have had to face. Cyberspace promises us a new economy of access in which it is more important to have access to knowledge than to own things. But two facts about cyberspace should be immediately clear: First, there is much false communication in the virtual world of cyberspace; and, second, since only those who have something to exchange have access, cyberspace exacerbates already existing conditions of injustice.

The church has claimed that false communication and injustice can be overcome only by communion and that communion is a gift of God. The jeopardy of churches in the "wired" world is that the new forms of global economy seem to harbor no place for what the church has always assumed necessary for communion: promise, grace, and reconciliation. Communication can thrive without these realities but communion cannot. The jeopardy that churches in the "unwired" world face is the deepening exclusion from global networks of the peoples among whom they live. The imperilment of both is the threatened loss of communion.

It is thus no surprise that most recent theologies of the church have been predominantly "communion" ecclesiologies. These theologies understand the church as grounded in the communion of the Triune God and seek ways in which the church can be a reflection of the Triune communion. God is the communion of perfect self-donation. The persons of the Trinity give themselves unstintingly to one another and thus constitute one another as distinct persons and as perfect communion. The church cannot be this perfect communion of giving, for it lives in history under the conditions of sin, evil, and death. Yet, as creature of God’s acts of love, the church is to be like the divine communion. It is to be in the world but not of it. The testimony of the entire New Testament is that our self-giving love can take place only through the grace of God. Like Israel, the church has its “origination in gift.” Only by the participation of the Christian community in God’s self-giving of Jesus Christ through the Spirit can it be in communion. The existence of the church is a gift from God.

Precisely this character of the church is threatened in new ways by our modes of living in the new millennium’s world economy, in which gift is an alien reality. If the self-giving of the Triune
Community constitutes the church so that grace (charis) is the being of the church, then the church is faced with a new challenge. If the logic of the church is grace—God's gift of Jesus Christ to the world for its redemption—where then can the church exist if all time and space seem already occupied by the logic of commodity exchange and the accumulation of wealth as power?

If God intends to make the church open, visible, and public, and if the church by its very nature has to take up space and time, then why is there a prevailing sense that mainline churches have disappeared from our public landscape? Why have mainline churches in North America fallen into a kind of quietism? Has the church become only a cipher, a notion, or an ideal that does not appear in significant ways in public space and time? Can the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacraments create persons, relationships, and structures that serve the forgiveness of sins, the upbuilding of community, and the giving of self for God's new creation of the world?

A deep forgetfulness that the church is primarily about salvation accompanies the disappearance of the church. If the church doesn't make sense in terms of God's rescue of human beings and of creation, then the church has lost its reason for being. The malaise may have to do with a growing sense of fate about the globalization process. Those who benefit from globalization, even if they are deeply concerned about its effects on human beings and nature, may, like those who suffer from its costs, feel that there is, after all, nothing that can be done to slow down or turn around its processes.

The sense that an inexorable global juggernaut is underway, so obdurate that nation state, local community, and family have little power to withstand it, leads to an increasing sense of fate, not unlike that with which Augustine struggled in the face of Rome and its empire based on slavery or in face of the collapse of this empire and the rise of barbarism. As Augustine saw so clearly, fated existence spawns violence. We are threatened with living by fate in face of the universalizing market logic spreading to all space on the globe. We cannot simply assume that, even in view of its vast power for good, the global market will bring salvation. It has no power over sin, evil, and death. To make an idol out of it is to contribute to the violence that lurks when we rely on the global market to do what it cannot do in face of the powers that serve death.

One way of living with fate, recommended by Stoicism, is apathy—a squelching of passion in the face of what cannot be
changed. According to Aristotle, freedom means living according to what is necessary in your life; and if feverous changes in the global economy are "necessary," then conforming to them is the only chance to be "free." Adjust to the way things are and live by the lottery. That is a lifestyle that seems more and more a way for individuals to navigate in the roiling sea of the global economy. Living by the lottery means, "The others may not make it, but I may." It is the formula for the demise of community.

In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert D. Putnam is the latest communitarian to trace the disintegration of American communities, neighborhoods, and civic and professional associations. "Social capital," by which Putnam basically means participation in community, has become so eroded in the education of children and youth, urban space, the workplace, and politics/state that there is little that can resist the pervasion of all aspects of life by the global market. In following the "household rules" of the public economy we are held together by contractual obligations, legal binding, binding without enabling, and economic acts motivated by fear of loss or hunger or by greed for accumulation. The denial of a common good, a common promise, and a common obligation leaves scant means for upbuilding community. Where is the community out of which could arise a new politics and a new governance for regulating and redirecting the global economy? Those who have no answer to this question are particularly tempted by fate.

In subtle ways the church also abets its self-secularization by assuming that everything that happens in it is the fault of the culture in which it lives and by devoting its energies to self-maintenance. The result is that Christian faith becomes banal, and void of content and succumbs to fate and idolatry. In this situation it is salutary to retrieve one of the most ancient designations for the church, the "household of Jesus Christ." In calling the church an *oikos* (household) or an *oikonomia* (economy), the Scriptures refer to that economy which takes part in God's "economy," that is, God's way of redeeming the creation. It is as important to call the church an economy as it is problematic. We should not understand the church according to the dictates of current economics, however enticing is the new economy of access. The church has always had to be wary of the prevailing economy in which it existed, since its Lord was executed in the name of the political economy of the Pax Romana. Even so, the tendency of the church has been to take on certain forms and intentions of the
political economy of the time. While the church can never and should never be completely free from the public economy, the church’s relevance to all human beings lies in its difference from the dominant public economies. It proffers something for the capacity of the human communion-like economy that only God makes possible.

Thus the church must understand its distinctive character as the “economy” given by its Scriptures and traditions and the experience of the living Christ and the Spirit. Living in the public economy and thus being aware of its implications, the church should constantly remind itself that its integrity is not a product of the prevailing economy. The church must resist the public economy wherever it denies the communion willed by God. Blocking the logic of the market in the space and time of the church is, in fact, necessary if the logic of grace is to govern the lives of the baptized and the Holy Spirit is to create disciples of Jesus Christ and empower them for spreading the righteousness of God in the world.

“Economy” as applied to the church approximates “communica.” The ancient appellation of household/economy helps us remember that the church as communion is not private and hidden; rather, it appears publicly and must communicate with the world. It is not a spiritualized abstraction living above the question of whether each will have daily bread; rather, it lives in embodied relationships of self-giving and of sharing what is necessary for life and life abundant. It is not privately absorbed in its own safety but is commanded by God actually to participate in the real reconciliation of the world with God and of the world’s opponents with one another. These are mandates that cannot be realized except in relationships and practices of common house-holding in a household governed by the reality of God’s becoming a slave in order to deliver the world from its various forms of slavery (Phil. 2:4-11). Without the church’s formation into the communion that God desires for the world, the church has scarce means to fulfill its mission. In this situation it will be silent, for it has nothing to say to the world for fear that it cannot show to the world in its own life what it says God wills for the world.

These reflections lead us to say that the focus for our ecclesial thinking about ministry at the beginning of the new millennium should be on God’s grace. Christian ministry is a function of the commands given the household of Jesus Christ by the Triune God to (1) communicate the gospel, (2) form itself in the communion of reciprocal gifting, and (3) give itself for God’s transformation of the
world toward the reconciliation and justice found in Jesus Christ. The provocations of ministry arise when we ask in our time how grace can be communicated, how grace can be practiced in the Christian communion, and how grace can transform the world. As we look at the challenges of these forms of ministry in the new millennium, we will consider what in the new historical situation makes grace so problematic. First, we look at the problem of communicating grace in the face of communication systems that do not aim at communion. Next we deal with the problem of “gifting” in the formation of communion. Finally, we treat the question of reconciliation within the pervasive isolation and violence of the world’s household.

The Ministry of the Gospel

Christianity considers itself a missionary movement; that is, it is not an end in itself, but it exists for the sake of God’s passion for and redemption of the world. Therefore, the church has assumed that it can communicate the gospel across cultural and social boundaries. This has always required translation into different languages and social contexts. The ever-present threat is that the translation will swallow up the gospel and exchange it into the coin of the receiver culture. And yet the gospel cannot be communicated except through the words of a culture. Preachers whose knees are not shaking as they enter the pulpit are probably not clued into their severe predicament: The church is asking them to utter the Word of God, but all they have are the words given to them by their own culture. The ministry of the church is to communicate the gospel about the rescue of human beings from false communication and distorted relationships. In announcing God’s deliverance from the bondage that people live under, the church shows the world what is possible for its relation to God. The good news is that human community is possible because God intervenes to make communion with God possible.

Communication without Communion

In preparation for the turn of the millennium a popular occupation of historians was to make lists of the one hundred most important this or that in the past thousand years. A number of historians put down as the most important historical event of the past millennium the invention of the moveable-type printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450s in Mainz, Germany. From its inception printing was a
phenomenal force for uniting people and yet, not unlike many advances in techne, it was "the physical instrument that tore the West asunder." The Reformation, the development of the middle class, the modern university, and the dissemination of scientific and technological information—as well as the steady drive toward possessive individualism—would have been inconceivable without the printing press. But the printing press was only the first step of the communication revolution. The eighteenth century saw the introduction of print media and with it a new definition of the public. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries greeted the telegraph, teletype, typewriter, telephone, radio, recording and copying machines, television—and at the end of the twentieth century fax machines, cell phones, modems, broadband, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. The way we communicate has come to define our culture. We have become creatures of our communication systems. Because it is widely believed to be the primary reason for the longest run of a bull market in history, communication technology and the gigantic conglomerates that control its uses are given a wide berth.

Of all the possible meanings of postmodernism, perhaps the most acute is that postmodernism is the "cultural logic" of advanced capitalism. Recent developments of the communication revolution have made it possible for the market logic to occupy the last sphere we thought could be free from commodity exchange, culture itself. The invasion of culture by commercial values produces "cultural capitalism." Industrial production is replaced by cultural production. Intellectual property is the guiding force of the new era. Concepts, images, ideas, and experiences—not things—are the real items of value in the new economy. Cultures become the means of transaction as well as what is transacted. Those who have control over the "pipes" (broadband) are able to control the content of what is communicated. Add to this the fact that people are increasingly purchasing their lived experiences, and we have a situation in which the communication of the gospel becomes an enormous challenge. Our plight is that we have tremendously sophisticated communication that does not lead to communion.

Communication of Grace
The ministry of communicating must begin with the assumption that the gospel is God's proclamation to the world and as such it is not at the disposal of the world or the church. We cannot change the gospel,
even if we all agreed to do so democratically. The gospel is God's own word. How else can we speak about God if God has not already spoken? The gospel as God's uttered word effects its own claims; it illuminates through its own being. Proclamation or preaching, on the other hand, is our attempt to say this gospel in the church and to the world. The word of God will endure; the proclamation of the gospel is an extraordinarily fragile thing because it partakes of our signs with all their capacity to communicate as well as their faculty for false communication. The living Word, Jesus Christ, is constant; the written word must always be interpreted afresh and proclaimed faithfully in a changing culture.

In the new millennium, as at all other times, the gospel has to be proclaimed in two senses. First, we must preach the gospel that Jesus himself preached: the kingdom of God is at hand. This is the promise in Israel from the beginning—that God will reign and not others. It is the proclamation of freedom from Pharaoh's slavery and every other urge to domination that crushes God's creatures. That everything in the gospel depends on the "at-handness" of the reign of God's righteousness means the church's ministry has to recognize the timing of the gospel. The preaching of the gospel is not possible at all times and places; rather, it belongs to the messianic times. If the Kingdom is not imminent, then Jesus came too soon. If the reign of God is not beginning in our midst, then it is too early to preach the gospel. The gospel initiates the future in which God's creative righteousness will become manifest and God will be all in all. In this sense the gospel creates time for itself. It is time to utter the gospel when the signs of the messianic age are expected as a matter of course: the poor have good news preached to them, the blind see, the captives are set free, and the Jubilee year of the Lord is announced (Luke 4:18ff.). Those who live by fate will not see the signs. The signs of the Kingdom do not appear in the virtual world of the global economy.

The second aspect of the good news is the gospel about Jesus. The good news is that the righteousness of God has the shape of Jesus Christ, that the judgment of God's righteousness is grace. The gospel the church proclaims is the life, death, resurrection, and future of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. The gospel's proclamation is this: The reign of God has already dawned in Jesus' death and resurrection. It has already become accessible to everyone.

The gospel announces grace as the abundance of God's self-giving and thus undermines the primary assumption of the global economy,
namely, **scarcity.** From the manna in the desert to the feeding of the five thousand to the elevation of the eucharistic Host, the gospel creates an economy that begins with the assumption that there is not only enough but more than enough. “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (Rom. 8:32).

The intention of the gospel is to make disciples for God’s redemption of the world by delivering them from various forms of slavery. For this purpose the gospel has its own language. It is a language that sets free, a language that does not define or determine. It is composed by lived, enacted, performative words that free us from the debilitation of our guilt and our fear of death. How can we keep the command of God when we are sinners? The gospel speaks the first-person language of Jesus: “I forgive you.” God’s justification of the godless stands at the center of every proclamation of the gospel. It is a forgiveness that liberates us from guilt’s compulsion to evil, from control by the powers and principalities, and from the apathy of the isolated life turned in on itself. It gives courage for a new life in fellowship with Christ. The gospel also speaks first-person language—“I love you.” God’s excessive gift of God’s own life is the surety grounding the amazing command, “Do not be afraid.” Nothing can separate us, not even death or the fear of death, from the love of God (Rom. 8:38-39).

**The Ministry of Communion**

Every language lives in a community and creates one. The church is the fellowship that corresponds to and embodies its primary language, the gospel. The gospel is not just the spoken word; it is the experienced and lived new being of grace. The gospel has to have a context, a framework, a culture into which it is spoken—that is, a time and space in which the gospel is being lived at the same time it is spoken—in order for faith to be nourished. Thus the proclamation of the gospel enlists the life and practice of the whole church. The church narrates the story of Christ by the way it lives; it shows the grace of God by mutual self-giving in the congregation and by the giving of its life to God’s redemption of the world.

The deepest challenge to Christian ministry in the new millennium may be that we have forgotten how to conceive grace, for its reality of gifting has become arcane and perplexing to us. So used to the logic of commodity exchange are we that the logic of grace
seems foreign. We have forgotten how to be gifted and to gift.

Everyone is suspicious of gifts, for they make one "much obliged." Gifts destroy the freedom to follow one’s whim. For most of us, gifts are for private, sentimental occasions. This is why public policies assume that all solutions to all social problems should be market and contractual solutions. This is also why the stewardship of the church is often governed by Andrew Carnegie’s rules of philanthropy. Is gifting possible in the postmodern conditions of the global market society? Can a gift be given? Has our culture become so saturated by commodity exchange that there can be no such thing as a gift anymore?

If there is no such thing as a gift, if a gift cannot be given, then there is no content to Christian faith and no possibility of the church of Jesus Christ. For our faith, our hope, and our love depend utterly upon the gift (charis) God has given and upon the gifting God enables us to do. If there is no real space and time for gifting, what chance is there for human life?

The New Community of Gifting

If we ask how the gospel creates new time and space for life in the power of the Spirit, we have to turn to the Eucharist. “Thanks (charis) be to God for [God’s] indescribable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15). Charis leads to Eucharist. The Eucharist provides the foundation for the upbuilding of the church and its social practices. In this meal one is invited to a physical communion, not merely a spiritual experience. Bodies matter in the Eucharist. God gives Godself in what is accessible to general experience. To eat with the Host and all those whom the Host has invited provides a disconnection with the way things are. It causes one to become “unwired” in the confrontation with an order that refuses access to those without knowledge or something to exchange.

The Eucharist as the community meal in which the reconciliation with God and one another is celebrated creates home for the homeless. The acts at the eucharistic table conform to all the meals Jesus celebrated with the lost: he takes bread as gift from God, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the other. The mode of distribution follows a radically different logic from the exchange of commodities. The Eucharist is the mutual building up of Christian persons in the likeness of Jesus by giving them gifts so that, having been gifted, they can gift others. The church lives as a feast that is the present memory.
of Jesus broken for us and the present celebration of God's coming peace of the new creation.

God's hyperbolic giving initiates all our giving and thus points to a certain surplus of unilateral giving over reciprocity. God always gives without the guarantee of return. But God's love should not be depicted as so transcendent and idealized that God's gratuity excludes human giving in return. Response to God's giving should not follow the logic of commodity exchange, but God's giving does create more than gratitude (that is, gratitude narrowly construed as less than a real return of the gift). God's grace creates human mutuality and further giving.

God aims at a community that responds to giving with further giving, creating relationships of obligation and responsibility. The perfect sacrifice of our worship, our gratitude to God, opens up the possibility of our giving "like" God's giving—though the gift God gives us is a "crucified" gift that qualifies all the possibilities of our giving under the conditions of suffering, deceit, and violence in history. But even under these conditions giving is the way in which God is received.

In giving the Son, God gives God's own life (John 3:16). The Father's gift is infinitely great, so great that we are in infinite debt. If one gives so much that a similar gift cannot be returned, then the receiver thereby becomes enslaved. This violates the duty to receive; namely, the duty to give in such a fashion that one expects to receive in turn. God would then look like the "strong man" of archaic and modern economies who gives in order to subjugate the receiver. Why is not this the case with the Triune community?

The reason that the immensity of this gift does not destroy us is that in giving the Son, God forges us in our debt. The gift of the crucified, risen Son is appropriate; it may not be what we desire, but it is the one thing needful for life. The power of God's love freely given us is the only power that is stronger than death, evil, and sin. This, then, is the freedom in obedience which we know in justifying grace.

But if we do not go beyond justifying grace, we are not yet living in the fullness of God's grace, for we have not yet returned the gift. Holiness means the practice of love in justice as the return of the gift of God's love. We have been forgiven our debt, and yet in the life of grace we receive a new command: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Rom. 13:8). Love is not the effect of our will; and yet, for all that, it is the subject of a strange command: "love one
another [just] as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Sanctification is our return of God’s gift. God the Holy Spirit gives us the power to return the gift of God. God the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to serve the life-giving grace of God in the world.

That something will come back to the giver is not the condition of the gift, though the character of gifting is that something does come back. The sacrificial gift of ourselves will not come back in the same form. And therein is the surprise and joy of the sanctifying gospel. In order to retain the character of gift, gifts are transformed in their circulation. They are changed by the character of the person or the community that receives. The joy of the gift, if it succeeds in establishing an understanding too deep for words, is the mutuality of peace. When we receive a reciprocal gift (even if it is only gratitude), we receive the same gift of mutuality that we had first offered. But now giver, giftee, and the gift are all transformed into the mutuality of the new creation.

In commodity exchange there is neither motion nor emotion; the point is to keep the balance, to make sure that the exchange doesn’t consume anything or involve one person with another. In gift giving, however, an imbalance is created that causes momentum and creates new relationships. We give because God has first given us. We give back what God has given us: our lives. This is the power of gifting that creates communion in which lies the power for reconciliation.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

The gospel message is that there is a new world because God was in Christ “reconciling the world” to Godself (2 Cor. 5:18-19). God’s renovation of the oikoumene takes place through God’s undermining of the divisions that create the deadly isolation into which human beings fall. The world creates its own standards of access, but the risen Lord of the church is the very one who has been rejected by the predominant patterns of access. Having died forsaken, he has a new life beyond death that belongs to none of these systems. The risen Jesus establishes community with those who do not belong according to the public household rules; and in so doing he realigns the criteria for access. He empowers the community to become a new economy, a new household constructed out of the sinners, the unclean, and the unconnected. Itself summoned to the new covenant of grace, the ministry of the church seeks a new kind of belonging in the world.
that corresponds to a shared belonging with Jesus. But here again the church’s ministry in the new millennium is challenged by new realities of division and isolation.

The Digital Divide: Globals and Locals

The new mobility of the global economy affects people in radically different ways. The communication technology driving globalization divides as much as it unites. It effects a new kind of segregation that hides and intensifies the already existing divisions of race and gender. In the polarization between the “connected” and the “unconnected,” the “wired” and the “unwired,” some people become fully global; others are fixed in locality. For globals there is an unheard-of freedom from distance and an ability to act from a distance. The globals set the tone and make up the rules of the life-game. Since bodies do not matter in cyberspace, globals seem ethereal, nonphysical; and yet they have the media power to shape the social perception of reality. What globals in their disembodied power desire is the security of isolation from community and neighborhood. Thus an increasing sector of the global economy is devoted to helping globals perfect an invulnerable isolation, translated as the “safety” of persons and their workplaces, homes, and playgrounds.Globals drop out of locality and create their own exclusive space in gated communities, their own security systems, inaccessible to anyone who is confined to a locality. They resist taxation or often other public responsibility for education, healthcare delivery, support of the family, and care of the environment.

Being local in a globalized world, on the other hand, is a sign of social deprivation. To be a local means scarce freedom for moving away and thus unchosen isolation. The isolation that elites have chosen and pay for lavishly is very different from the unchosen cultural, psychological, and political isolation of locals. Locals find it increasingly difficult to be at home in their own locality, to create the local culture and life-supporting institutions that give a locality meaning and future. Prisons that no longer seek their inmates’ rehabilitation or restoration to society but only warehouses those deemed unworthy of access and belonging are the epitome of locality as immobility. Television, movies, music videos, and other cultural expressions often feed on this isolation to provide distractions for numbing its pain or fantasized escape from locality that only deepens the political and social conditions of isolation. The new fragmentation of city space both reflects and enhances the digital divide. The
shrinkage and disappearance of public space intensify the disintegration of locally grounded forms of togetherness and shared communal living.

**Eucharistic Practice in Public Space and Time**

The ministry of reconciliation in a world with new patterns of isolation and violence works for correspondences with the righteousness that appears at the Communion table with Jesus. The work of reconciliation seeks to make the world at home with God and to give access to the conditions of life for all of God’s creatures.

The first gift the ministry of reconciliation offers to the world is hope. The church itself is constantly tempted with despair, but it has been given a resurrection hope that springs from God’s power against death, a hope that is meant for the world. The global economy produces a sparkling confidence in many. For those who are called into the ministry of reconciliation, however, the light of the resurrection is thrown upon the hidden misery and violence of the globe. “Africa fatigue” has become a symbol of all those historical conditions—AIDS, poverty, and ethnic strife—that globals seem no longer able to fathom, even though all of these conditions are also in their vicinity. A truly interconnected world cannot leave out any person or any part of the world. Therefore, the ministry of reconciliation in hope presses the question of who belongs in the household by remembering the one who leaves the fold to search for the hundredth lost one.

The ministry of reconciliation requires a eucharistic ethics in mission, an imagination for communal life in relationship. The work of reconciliation, though universal in scope, begins with embodied persons in their locality. It will resist the global temptation to allow the compression of time and space to eradicate the different times and spaces in which people live. It will not treat people as if they did not already belong to affiliations in family, language, social, and political systems. The way of reconciliation is to ask how existing patterns can work with the new community of embodied mutuality.

Reconciliation cannot take place on the basis of scarcity that drives a system of commodity exchange. The Christian witness in the world therefore points to the reality of abundance that could allow us to conceive of transactions as more than simply commodity exchanges so that they serve the integrity of community. In any case, those who work for reconciliation must witness publicly that human beings cannot live without gifting. The biblical history of “God and
"bread" shows that bread is the symbol for all those things human beings need for life and life abundant. According to the gospel and the depth of human wisdom, what is necessary for life cannot be a commodity, or exclusively a commodity. Thus social goods such as food, housing, jobs, education, and healthcare should not be exclusively distributed according to the market logic; and social goods such as justice, security, belonging, respect, affection, and grace should not be distributed in any sense according to the logic of exchanging commodities. Otherwise, it is inevitable that those with nothing to exchange will get left out of home.

The peculiar reality of gifting, however, is that when the gift is used, it is not used up. The gift that is passed along remains abundant. Gifts that remain gifts can support an affluence of satisfaction, even without numerical abundance. Gifting replaces the bloated satiety that results from narcissistic consumption and competition for scarce goods with the liberating fulfillment that stems from sharing.

When the righteousness of God is present, there is always enough. Therefore, desiring reconciliation means working with what one has been given, with what is on hand.

Giving food to those who lack what is necessary for life can happen according to the "welfare" logic. Or it can happen in the feast in which one eats along with the others and thus in losing oneself, finds oneself. Modern philanthropic and bureaucratic forms of "giving" miss the sense in which sacrificial gifts come from communion and create communion. In isolating gifting from communion they produce giving as self-gratification or self-loss or welfare giving that results in making neighbors strangers.

God expects a return to God's gift. What is our appropriate gift to God? We owe only what God gives us to give further: our lives. The sacrificial giving of Jesus on the cross enables our self-giving, but it ends sacrifice as our way of assuring salvation. Sacrifice is not in itself the good but rather it is what sustains the way to communion in the face of everything that negates communion. Giving up oneself in love is not an end in itself, even though it will be frequently required as we journey on the way with Jesus. This is true because we are never in the company of Jesus without the company of those in whom Jesus makes himself present: those who are sick and dying, those who fail, those who are made commodities in the global market, and those who lose their identity in cyberspace. To preserve the feast, to keep alive a community of generosity, one may very
often have to act in one-sided ways, without apparent return. But the gift of surplus, unilateral giving in such “sacrifice” is God’s gift of the cross, the gift of suffering love, which is grounded in and aimed at not death but the life of resurrection. The hope for a reciprocal gift, if it does not occur in today’s communion, has its sustenance in the promised resurrection banquet.

Endnotes
7. For the discussion that follows, see Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access* (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).
8. Postmodern philosophy, especially in the work of Jacques Derrida, has taken up the ancient paradox of gift as the thorniest question in global market society. The gift, in order to be gift, must not be returned; yet by obligating a return gift the gift always becomes a form of exchange. See *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
A Royal Priesthood in a New Millennium: The Ministry of the Baptized

Through baptism
you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit
into God's new creation
and made to share in Christ's royal priesthood.
We are all one in Christ Jesus.
With joy and thanksgiving we welcome you
as members of the family of Christ.¹

This congregational response from the United Methodist ritual is the statement of welcome immediately following baptism. It encapsulates many of the themes in this article. It is through baptism that persons are commissioned into Christian ministry—made a royal priesthood. That ministry is our vocation as Christians—that which we are called to do in response to the grace of God which has made us new spiritual beings. The ministry of the baptized takes diverse forms, but it is always to signify and make real the oneness of all persons in Christ.

Baptism as Ordination to Christian Ministry

The designation "royal priesthood" is, of course, not original to the writers of the United Methodist ritual. It is found in 1 Peter 2:9, as part

¹Gayle Carlton Felton is a church historian who taught at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina, and is now consultant and writer for worship resources with the General Board of Discipleship.
of a breathtaking declaration of who Christians are in the plan of God: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of [God] who called you out of darkness into [God's] marvelous light." The first letter of Peter probably originated as a sermon or teaching on occasions when persons were being baptized into the Christian community. It instructs new Christians on both the privileges and the responsibilities into which they have been inaugurated through baptism.

The sacrament of baptism is ordination to ministry—the general ministry of all baptized Christians. We are all ordained ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ; perhaps we have assigned the clergy exclusive use of the term for too long. Speaking of only clergy as ordained feeds the insidious temptation for laypeople to sit back and watch their clergy person do ministry, to expect her or him to do their praying, their witnessing, and their social service. All ordination to ministry is grounded in baptism. The ordination of clergy persons may be thought of as specialization and professionalization of ministry, for the sake of the community of faith. Many congregations now express their sense of general ordination by declaring on their church bulletins that while John or Jane Doe is their pastor, the ministers are all of the people of that church. It is a simple practice and, like many simple things, profoundly important.

Granted, it is not essential to always employ the term ordination, and because of our customary usage it may be confusing. Calling, commissioning, appointing, and even anointing can be used to express the idea and will be used interchangeably in this article. It is, however, essential to recognize that it is in and through the sacrament of baptism that God gives us both our identity and our mission. Baptism represents God's claim on our lives, a claim which is so intense that it tells us who we are and who we are to be. God's outreaching, initiating love marks us as belonging to God. This identity is given, not chosen; received, not achieved. The tracing of the shape of the cross upon the forehead of a newly baptized person is an ancient practice in the Christian church that many in United Methodism are now reviving. Such action signifies that we are sealed and branded as belonging to Christ and that our lives will be lived under the sign of the cross. Our remaining years on this earth will be spent in the struggle to become the people whom God has already declared us to be. It is God who tells us who we are; it is God who makes us whom God intends for us to be.
Baptism is not an individual or human family event. It is instead initiation into a faith community: the body of Christ. This is why United Methodists and most other denominations now emphasize that, unless there are severe extenuating circumstances, baptisms of persons of whatever age should take place in the church, in the midst of the worshiping congregation. This is affirmed in the introductory paragraph of the ritual: “Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ’s holy church. We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation...” (UMH, 39). In other words, in baptism all the actions of God to make human salvation possible are applied to each individual who receives the sacrament. It is out of that grace and as a part of that grace-filled community that we are enabled to serve.

As another baptismal Scripture passage makes clear, to be baptized is to die. In Romans 6 Paul affirms that our old sinful nature must be put to death so that we can rise to new life in a new order of existence—one with radically different practices and values. Baptism means participation in the cross of Christ. The culture of the new millennium will probably be no more comfortable than that of the past one in dealing with the reality of sin. The optimism of the decades of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries suffered heavy blows from the realities of two world wars and a worldwide depression. And yet, in a time of scientific marvels and technological wonders, we are still tempted to fall back into the old Enlightenment notions of human nature. But the blunt truth is that, far from getting better and better every day in every way, as the cliché says, the depth and pervasiveness of sin have never been more apparent. Sin is not a list of infractions of a moral code, whether that code is based upon the Bible or some other authority. Sin is a condition that pervades and perverts human existence at all levels. By Water and the Spirit, the official interpretive document on baptism for The United Methodist Church, expresses it this way:

Our very being is dominated by an inherent inclination toward evil which has traditionally been called original sin. It is a universal human condition and affects all aspects of life. Because of our condition of sin, we are separated from God, alienated from one another, hostile to the natural world, and even at odds with our own best selves. Sin may be expressed as errant priorities, as deliberate wrongdoing, as apathy in the face of need, as cooperation with oppression and injustice. Evil is cosmic as well as...
God's gift of grace in baptism enables us to be freed from the burden of such sin. This is powerfully expressed in the first question asked of persons presenting their children or coming themselves to receive baptism: "On behalf of the whole church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?" (UMH, 40). Without such renunciation of that which opposes God Christian ministry is impossible.

The second vow in the baptismal ritual continues this theme of turning from sin and begins to delineate the shape of the ministry to which the baptized one is being ordained: "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?" (UMH, 40). Note that the capacity to oppose that which is wrong lies not within the human being but is given by God and accepted by the baptized. The use of the terms injustice and oppression signals immediately that the ministry of the baptized is to be one of social action. Such an emphasis is in accord with the message of the Hebrew prophets who repeatedly called God's people not only to care for the needy but also to overturn the systems that exploit some for the gain of others. Many prophetic voices were particularly condemnatory of those who mask social, political, and economic injustice in the disguise of pious religiosity. Thus, in Amos God thunders against religious festivals, solemn assemblies, and burnt offerings done in the absence of justice. What God requires, instead, is for justice to "roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

In his inaugural sermon in his hometown, Jesus made plain that he understood himself as continuing this prophetic task; his ministry was to be one of healing and social justice: preaching good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:16-21).

Our progenitor in Methodism, John Wesley, both proclaimed and exemplified the necessity of such ministry. In the preface of his List of Poetical Works, Wesley writes, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness." As fervent an evangelist as he was, Wesley could never be accused of caring only for people's souls. Deeply concerned about the plight of England's
poor, Wesley had offerings gathered and given regularly to those in need. He set up employment agencies, credit unions, medical dispensaries, poorhouses, orphanages, and schools. He was among the earliest voices in England calling for the end of slavery and for prison reforms. Other social evils, such as prostitution, gambling, and alcohol abuse, were targeted in his wide-ranging efforts to improve the lives of God's people.

In the sacrament of baptism we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit through whose power alone the work of Christian ministry can be accomplished. In the beautiful Thanksgiving over the Water, God is asked to “pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless this gift of water and those who receive it...” (UMH, 42). Immediately after the administration of the water in the name of the triune God, the pastor blesses the baptized person saying, “The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ” (UMH, 42). At the time of confirmation and other reaffirmations of the baptismal faith, the same words are used, with only a change of verb tense. These words are accompanied by the laying on of hands by the pastor and perhaps others, such as family members.

The action of laying on of hands has long been understood as commissioning for ministry. When done by a bishop in the ordination of clergy, it is always a powerful moment. Numbers 27:22-23 recounts the ceremony of the laying on of hands through which Joshua was designated as Moses' successor. New Testament examples include Acts 6:5-6, which relates the commissioning of Stephen and other deacons, and Acts 13:2-3, in which the church at Antioch laid hands upon Paul and Barnabas before they began their missionary journeys. Similarly, the laying of hands upon a baptized person portrays the action of the Holy Spirit commissioning that person for ministry. In the ancient practice of God's people, oil was used as a sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit's setting an individual apart for ministry. In the Old Testament, both priests and kings were anointed with oil to signify that they were designated for some particular service to God (for example, 1 Sam. 16:1-13 and Exod. 30:30-31). Surely this anointing for priesthood was in the minds of those who shaped 1 Peter 2:9-10. Baptism is our anointing into priesthood. Our ministry is the living out of that call.

The phrase priesthood of all believers is sometimes understood too narrowly. It doesn't only mean that each of us is able to come before God without the need for a mediator save Christ. It also means that each of us has the responsibility and privilege of being priests to one another.
The Vocation of the Baptized Christian

The word *vocation* derives from the Latin root meaning "call." Thus, our vocation is not our job or profession or career. It is not that for which we are educated or by which we earn our livelihood. Rather, our primary vocation as baptized Christians is to be ministers of Christ in service to God’s people—a royal priesthood. The best of our talents, time, and energies should be devoted to this task. The work at which we earn our livelihood is to be lived out within this greater role of being priests. For Christians, with few exceptions, every line of work, every career and profession, can be our vocation from God.

Clergy persons, and especially candidates who are seeking ordination, are often asked to describe their call to ministry. Some tell dramatic stories of radical, life-turning points; others speak of finally yielding to a call which had been present but denied for years; still others state that they simply became unequivocally aware that God is calling them to professional ordained ministry. The United Methodist Church expects its clergy to have both an inward and an outward call. The inward call is that which is experienced by the individual in ways such as those just mentioned. But simply feeling and believing oneself to be called to ordained ministry is not enough. Knowing that individuals cannot always accurately assess their own subjective experiences, the church requires that the inward call be tested, examined, and ratified by the church. This is done by and for the church through an extensive process of qualification: educational requirements, voluminous written papers, probing interviews, even psychological tests.

It is right and good that the church evaluate its candidates for ordained clergy so carefully. Clergy persons function as representatives both of Christ to the church and of the church to the world. Those who enter this representative ministry have great influence over the effectiveness of the church’s work in the world. But I contend that the church should be much more concerned than it appears to be at present in enabling all Christians to find and follow their calling. Too few baptized persons receive intentional guidance by the church as they make decisions about their lifework. Young
people, particularly those in their high school and college years, need this kind of direction. Unfortunately, decisions about fields of study and of work are commonly made, even by committed Christian youth, without any sense that God may have an opinion and should have been consulted in the matter! Currently (and probably increasingly true in the new millennium) few persons spend their entire lives in the same position or even the same area of work. Longer work lives, changes in the economy, social and economic mobility, rapidly expanding opportunities as technology creates new needs—all of these factors, and more, contribute to the reality that people no longer choose their lifework once and for all. Indeed, futurists tell us that most people in the new millennium will spend years of their working lives in occupations that do not even exist today. The church has an essential duty to assist persons of all ages as they make decisions about work. We can begin by consistently placing before our people these two truths: (1) As a baptized Christian, your primary task is to be a priest. Through your baptism, you are ordained to the work of Christian ministry. (2) As a baptized Christian, no matter how you earn your livelihood, you should view your work as that to which God has called and commissioned you.

How then should God’s baptized people go about determining their call? Usually we choose vocations that correspond to our abilities and talents; so one clue is to examine deeply and honestly the gifts God has given each of us. While we acknowledge that we deserve no credit for these gifts, we should recognize that they bring with them substantial responsibility. Frederick Buechner’s definition of vocation merits the frequent quoting that it enjoys: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” We usually experience “deep gladness” when we do things that we are good at and that we know are meaningful, both in our own lives and in the lives of others. The “deep hunger” of the world is manifold—the scope and diversity of needs are so great that any one of us can hope to ameliorate only a tiny fraction of it. Therefore, we should choose with care and prayer where we can best invest the gifts that God has given to us.

Not all of us will experience the kind of dramatic, inescapable call that came to Moses in Exodus 3 and 4, but his story can offer us a paradigm. Recall that Moses had grown up in a palace of privilege, as do most of us in comparison with the rest of the contemporary world. His anger at the mistreatment of the Hebrew people had
caused him to commit a murder and forced him to flee from Egypt to avoid punishment. For many years Moses apparently lived a peaceful and satisfying life in another land. He must have been haunted by the memory of his people’s suffering and perhaps by the feeling that he had allowed his own weakness (his temper) to separate him from them, rendering him unable to help them in their plight. But God did not allow Moses’ mistake to render him useless in God’s cause. Note that the dramatic call experience came to Moses not when he was in a time of retreat actively seeking God’s will or even in a time of prayer. Instead, God’s call came in the midst of Moses’ daily routine of work—as he tended the flock of his father-in-law.

God first confronts Moses with the reality of his people’s need: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings” (Exod. 3:7). Baptized Christians in the new millennium can hardly avoid knowing of the needs of God’s beloved human creatures. Advanced communication media bring the deep needs before us at our dinner tables and in our family rooms. Our interactions with varieties of people in all times and places confront us with the range of human problems and pain. We cannot avoid God’s call by claiming ignorance. Second, God makes Moses aware of the divine intention to deliver the Hebrews: “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . .” (Exod. 3:8). Moses must have been delighted to learn that God was finally going to act to rescue the Israelites. If we are honest, we have to confess that there are instances when we too think, Why doesn’t God do something about the situation I’m in? But God’s next words must have chilled Moses to the bone: “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (3:10). Now the good news of God’s intervention collided with the realization that he, Moses, was to play a central role in this deliverance. God’s answer to our questions about human need may well be, “I have done something about it. I have sent you to minister there.”

Moses’ response, here and throughout the conversation with God as recorded in Exodus 3 and 4, is well known: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (3:11); “O my Lord, please send someone else” (4:13). Protracted conversation, with great patience on the part of God, was required before Moses acted to fulfill his call. Indeed, Moses’ excuses are too
familiar to us, for we have used some of them ourselves: "Who do we think we are to claim to be doing God's work? How do I know that it is really God who is calling? I don't have the abilities and talents required to do this. I am weak and scared; I need help!"

Interestingly, Scripture does not record any verbal acceptance of the call by Moses; but we do know that he went, though fearfully and reluctantly. We know, too, that God accomplished great work for human good through this weak and reluctant servant.

Baptized Christians are called and commissioned to a vocation of ministry to God's needy people in the new millennium. Our baptism is in itself our call; we need wait for no other. In baptism we have been given our identity and our mission; we have been told by God who we are and what we are to do. Each of us is to recognize and accept God's vocation. There are words of truth and healing that will never be heard unless you and I speak them. There are deeds of courage and compassion that will never be witnessed unless you and I do them. There are actions of peace and justice that will never occur unless you and I undertake them.

**Made a Royal Priesthood by the Sacrament of Radical Equality**

The new millennium will confront the church with both problems and blessings far beyond our ability to imagine. It does seem quite certain, though, that most of the personal and social dilemmas of the late 1990s will continue to challenge us. Unprecedented affluence has not made a decent standard of living available to all. Indeed, the economic chasm between rich nations and the Two-Thirds World continues to widen. The United States, which has long prided itself on the prosperity of its middle class, finds that wealth is currently being concentrated in the hands of a few, while quality of life for the majority of its people is actually declining. For all the marvelous tools and wonder drugs of medicine, the infant mortality rate in the United States continues to exceed that of many other countries. Futurists tell us that the computer and other artifacts of technological genius will shape life in the twenty-first century. But huge numbers of Americans have no access to such sophisticated tools and little hope of acquiring them. In underdeveloped areas, refugee camps, and "killing fields" around the world, online access is not only unavailable but also is irrelevant and meaningless. While proclaiming devotion to our children and rever-
ence for education, we send these children to decrepit school buildings to be taught by ill-paid teachers overwhelmed by the multitude of tasks required of them. While the super rich barricade themselves in mansions, many neighborhoods are ruled by violence, which even invades our schools with deadly consequences. Popular culture has sunk to levels of crudity and excess that warp the values and violate the mores upon which true community must be grounded. Our society would rather preserve its "right" to possess and use guns in such numbers and of such kinds that they have no legitimate place in civilized culture than to protect its children from becoming senseless killers and hapless victims. Our personal relationships, especially the most intimate ones, are so diseased that the most dangerous place for women, children, and the elderly is in their own homes. Underlying and pervading much of life in the new millennium is, and likely will continue to be, the sin-sickness of the human spirit, which finds itself alienated from the natural environment, from other human beings, from its own authentic self, and from God.

This recital of woes is far from complete; it's not even comprehensive. I am simply seeking to evoke a sense of the malignant setting in which a contemporary "royal priesthood" is called and ordained to minister. Our vocations as baptized Christians must be lived out in the realities of the world as it now is. Note that the various societal and cultural ills cited above have in common their grounding in attitudes and conditions of inequity, injustice, and oppression. One of the clearest manifestations of our sinfulness is our unquenchable thirst to be, or to at least believe that we are, superior to some other people. This thirst has been manifested throughout human history as individuals and societies have unrelentingly sought and repeatedly found persons and groups to objectify and demonize.

A cursory survey of the history of the United States illustrates the point. In the early years of exploration and settlement, European conquerors and colonialists subjected the Native American peoples to oppression, brutality, and slavery. This treatment was justified on the grounds that such "savages" had no intrinsic worth, no souls. They had value only as they could be exploited and ravaged; this was their God-given role. Beginning in 1619, people from Africa were brought into the American colonies to provide much-needed labor. Africans soon were regarded as slaves with no rights; their sole purpose in existing was to serve the white race. Despite the domination to which Native Americans and Africans were subjected, they were objects of
fear to the Euro-Americans, who often believed them to be instruments of the devil. Women whose actions or abilities, or even appearance, were somewhat unusual might be charged with witchcraft, which was punishable by death since it involved intimacy with evil powers. During the nineteenth century, this role as scapegoat for society’s ills was imposed by the dominant culture upon various minority groups. Foreigners, abolitionists, labor unionists, women’s rights activists, Roman Catholics, Jews, Darwinists and other intellectuals—all these at one time or another, and often several at the same time, were blamed for the ills afflicting the country. They were depersonalized and demonized.

The twentieth century saw these victimized groups joined by others, similarly hated and feared. Government propaganda portrayed Germans as such monsters that the German language ceased to be taught in many U.S. schools; dachshunds were kicked in the streets; German music and musicians were banned. Suffragists and flappers evoked misogynist fear and rage. The Bolshevik takeover of the government of Russia in 1917 initiated a terror of “Red” sedition and irrational suspicion of foreigners, liberal politicians, reformers, professors, preachers, and whomever else might be thought to secretly disseminate the poison of Communism. African-American civil rights leaders and feminist activists were vilified as Communist agitators. The fall of the Soviet Union and the decline of other Communist states in the latter decades of the twentieth century threatened to leave a vacancy in the essential role of demonized object of fear and antipathy. But, fortunately for the fiction of conspiratorial evil, a new candidate for demonization was found—the homosexual. The last decades of the twentieth century featured escalating hysteria, imaging gay and lesbian persons as dangerous to the very foundational institutions of United States society. Such attitudes continue to plague us in the early years of the new millennium.

The ministry of baptized Christians must confront such prejudice and challenge such bigotry. In living out our call to this ministry, the sacrament of baptism offers us guidance and power. Christian baptism is the sacrament of radical equality. This truth was ritualized in the ancient church practice of baptizing candidates naked. All persons, regardless of attributes or achievements, must come to God to receive grace. There is no other way through which we can be freed from the strictures of our sinful natures, forgiven for our personal acts and attitudes of sin, initiated into Christ’s body, restored
to authentic selfhood, and brought into loving relationship with God and with one another. The most profound significance of the baptism of an infant may be its unmistakable portrayal of that truth. When an infant is presented for baptism, there is no question of reward, no possibility of merit. All human distinctions disappear, reminding us that all of us, irrespective of age or station, come to God as helpless infants, totally unable to do anything to accomplish our salvation.

In baptism we are initiated into an inclusive community bound together by mutual love. These words from Ephesians express the idea well: “For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:14, 19). Because of this identity, the church is charged to be a community where all are welcome. Because the church is the household of God, God alone determines the standards for admission. This means that if the church is to carry out its mission it must always be open to accept, even to welcome, the stranger—the one who is different, perhaps so different as to make others uncomfortable.

Baptism admits us into a community of equality. Paul emphasizes this important point repeatedly: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). Not only does the community include all baptized persons, it also includes them on an equal basis: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28). The identity which we are given in baptism supercedes all human distinctions. There can be, then, no categorizing of people, no stereotyping.

The inclusiveness and equality of baptism into the church is incompatible with human efforts to exclude and discriminate. Indeed, such actions can be nothing less than sin, because they seek to impose human criteria of judgment upon those whom God welcomes. Perhaps this reality can be illustrated by looking again at infant baptism. When in baptism a baby is received into the community of faith, the congregation welcomes the child with joy and thanksgiving. There is no footnote in our ritual qualifying that acceptance with a phrase like “unless he or she turns out to be gay or lesbian.” If the church means what it says in baptism and is faithful to the God who bestows grace
through the sacrament, it must love, welcome, and accept all persons. If the church will not do so, then it needs to require that a note be pinned to every child's baptismal garment saying, "None of this applies if this child turns out not to be heterosexual!"

Baptism is the Christian's ordination to ministry—his or her anointing to service in the royal priesthood. This ministry—sometimes called the "general ministry"—is the privilege and responsibility of all the baptized. It is, then, a denial of the meaning of baptism when categories or classes of baptized persons are barred from representative ministry. When the church says that women or homosexual persons cannot be ordained to positions of professional leadership, it usurps the prerogatives of God. It denies the authenticity of God's call. It dismisses God's valuing of persons in favor of its own narrow judgment. It replaces divine love and acceptance with human prejudice and rejection. It is dangerous to presume to speak for God while speaking contrary to what God has already said in baptism.

The devaluing and demonizing of homosexual persons is, unfortunately, not the only manifestation of the "evil, injustice, and oppression" that baptized United Methodists promise to resist. The church still struggles to banish the remnants of sexism that continue to plague it. While much progress has been made, women continue to encounter obstacles and insults, in both the church and the secular society. An aspect of our resistance to this evil is, I believe, the responsibility to speak out boldly against the treatment of women by other Christian bodies. Our sisters in Roman Catholicism and some other denominations are still denied ordination. During the same week that I am writing these words, the Southern Baptist Convention—the largest Christian group in the United States—has augmented last year's demand that women be subject to their husbands by pontificating against the ordination of women. Of course, if we are to be able to witness to others, we must be careful to have our own house in order!

The "people called Methodists" have experienced something that John Wesley feared: we have become rich. Our middle- and upper-middle-class membership has largely lost our founder's passion for the poor. I have been struck by an entry in Wesley's Journal for January 4, 1785, in which he speaks of the need of the poor in London for food and clothing. He describes how for five days he himself walked the streets of the city and begged for alms, stopping only when he developed a "violent flux." Pray that during the new
millennium, the United Methodist people might be renewed in their commitment and revitalized in their service to the poor. But let us never forget that our ultimate challenge is to bring the poor into our communities of faith, so that we may truly minister both to and with them and receive their ministry to us.

The third vow in the Baptismal Covenant speaks of the church as being open "to people of all ages, nations, and races" (UMH, 40). United Methodists are called to minister to and with all persons and groups that are oppressed, marginalized, and disempowered. Perhaps our first effort must be to identify these persons and groups, and then to scrutinize our own relationships with them, both as individuals and as a church. Remorseful and repentant, we can then go forward to serve, not only through offering spiritual succor and material sustenance but also through revolutionizing the systemic structures that perpetuate injustice, discrimination, and violence.

Being a royal priesthood in a new millennium must not be construed as a position of dominance and privilege. The ministry of baptized Christians is to be a continuation of the ministry of Christ. It must combine humble service to a hurting world with vigorous efforts for renewing change.

Endnotes

4. Wesley's sermons are filled with references to such works of "social holiness." See, for example, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse Four" and "The Reformation of Manners," in The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 1, ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 531-49; see also ibid., Vol. 2, 300-23.
Thomas E. Frank

The Future of Ordination in United Methodism

On a warm, sunny morning this past June, I pulled into the parking lot of the small convention center in which my annual conference sessions were being held. My adrenalin was rushing, not because I had any responsibilities or deadlines but just because I had not seen most of these people for a while. As an ordained elder under appointment to extension ministries in another conference, I don’t visit the territory of my conference very often. But the rhythm of anticipating and attending annual conference every year in late spring is in my bones. I feel a tug to be “at conference” where I belong.

Annual conference sessions have become like a family reunion for me. So with a mixture of excitement and dread, I braced myself for the “How are you?” and the “Are you still at Candler—how’s it going?” Stepping into the lobby, I immediately ran into a lay leader from a church I once served as pastor, a retired elder I have known since I was seven years old, and then a colleague and friend with whom I was ordained elder in 1978. Over the next few hours, between conversations about churches and appointments, teaching and the state of the seminaries, I was told by one retired colleague, “My, I think you’ve gotten even taller,” and by an older laywoman, “I remember you better when you were five and pretending to conduct the choir.” To a man over fifty like myself, for better or worse, these are signs of being home.

Thomas E. Frank is associate professor of Church Administration and Congregational Life at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia.
Soon it was time for the retirement ceremony. Sitting with friends from the last church I served (which is still my charge conference), I listened as one of my former district superintendents spoke his thank-yous and farewells. He was followed by a journeyman pastor who reported that in over forty years under appointment he had lived in eighteen parsonages and conducted about six hundred weddings and a like number of funerals. Next was a woman who was among the first to break into the itineracy of that conference, with the scars and the grace to prove it.

As the retirees—all ordained elders—came to the microphone one by one, I noticed how many of them acknowledged the person who encouraged them to go into pastoral ministry or named the bishop who ordained them. Almost every one of them spoke of service, most often as a privilege but always as a calling. They framed their service in terms of the mission of the church, with their emphases varying among preaching the gospel, making disciples, and working for social justice. The wife of one retiree, slowed in speech by a stroke, said simply, "We have had forty great years with you. Thank you for everything." By now I was not the only one wiping away tears.

At the end of fourteen retirement speeches in an hour and a half, we stood and applauded. Then, in a brief ceremony of "passing the mantle of leadership," a retiree removed a red stole from around his shoulders and placed it around the shoulders of a woman newly ordained as elder. We sang a hymn and were dismissed for lunch.

I walked away wondering whether the retirement service is a symbol of an outmoded form of church receding into the past or, to the contrary, the carrying forward of a vital form of the church's communal life. A case can certainly be made for the former view. In the past five years most annual conferences have had a notably large number of retirements. For the most part this marks the passage of the postwar generation of clergy who flocked into seminary in the 1950s, flush with the national sense of pride and responsibility for making a good society and shaped by an ethos of service. Almost all have been men for whom ordained ministry has been their career.

The profile of persons ordained into ministry since 1974 is strikingly different. As Rolf Memming has shown in one of the few studies of these trends, the number of men under thirty seeking ordination has declined dramatically. While the number of women has...
increased, retention rates for women are disturbingly low. The average age of ordinands of both genders has climbed even as retention rates have fallen and early retirements increase. The concept of ordained ministry as a lifelong vocation, and particularly the local church pastorate as the locus of one’s life work, seems to be fading.

The culture in which the church forms its mission and ministry is also changing at a dizzying pace. North America enjoys an affluence inconceivable to earlier generations. Individualism and mobility are prime values working against an ethos of covenant, sacrifice, and lifetime commitments. Information technology has had a leveling effect as specialized knowledge once in the hands of professional elites becomes widely available. Manners have changed, particularly the words and gestures that marked a deference to office. Whatever affect of mystique and special honor once clung to the pastor seems largely to have dissipated.

The models of church gaining the most influence in recent years are based on very large, often independent congregations led by charismatic, entrepreneurial pastors who seem adept at taking advantage of these cultural changes. While such churches usually have well-organized programs for involving laity in small groups and mission activities, many of them have not yet had their second pastor, making it difficult to determine how dependent they are on a particular personality or style. In any case, the education or ordination of the pastor seems to matter far less than his or her ability to perform engagingly on the platform, to market the congregation’s image effectively, and to attract the time and energy of lay staff and volunteers to carry out extensive programs.

All these factors support the possibility that retirement ceremonies mark the passing of an outmoded form of church. The United Methodist Church itself seems to be moving consistently away from inherited structures, titles, and offices. The 1996 Book of Discipline (hereafter, BOD) continues to mandate that local churches and annual conferences create administrative units such as boards of trustees and committees on nominations. But organization for ministry and mission has moved into a more fluid and flexible systems approach emphasizing tasks, processes, and outcomes instead of more static structures. Many annual conferences now have teams instead of boards, and local churches may name representatives of ministries to their councils rather than chairpersons (BOD, ¶254.1, 607.1). Nothing symbolizes this shift more than the editorial decision to...
remove all capitalization of names other than constitutional bodies in the Discipline, thus emphasizing tasks over the identities of particular units. (For example, the Council of Bishops is still capitalized—a constitutional body—but the church council of a local church is not.)

II

To these changes must be added a new fluidity in United Methodism's understanding of ordained ministry. When the retirees were ordained in the 1950s and 1960s, they were elected by an "executive session" of the annual conference including only elders in full connection who shared a covenant of itineracy. Ordained first a deacon and then an elder, these persons bore the charge and identity of both orders throughout their ministry. As members in full connection, they then expected to vote on the qualifications and conference relations of new classes of ordinands as well as their colleagues in the conference.

This self-perpetuating covenant body of itinerant elders in full connection was altered dramatically by the 1996 General Conference. The deacon is no longer associated with probationary membership in a conference but with full membership as a nonitinerant clergy member in a ministry of Word and Service. Deacons in full connection now vote in the clergy session alongside elders, even though they do not share the covenant of itineracy (BOD, §324). The board of ordained ministry now includes up to one-third laypersons as voting members, who also have full participation and vote in the "clergy" session (§633). Nonitinerating local pastors, both full-time and part-time, are also now clergy members of the conference, though they cannot vote on conference relations of clergy (§340.6).

These changes could be viewed as an expression of United Methodism's effort to honor and enhance the ministry of the laity. Since its beginning in 1968, the denomination has, with other denominational traditions, founded its theology of ministry on an affirmation of the ministry of the whole people of God. In harmony with documents of the Second Vatican Council and ecumenical statements such as the World Council of Churches' *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, United Methodism declares that all ministry grows from the ministry of Christ, which is given to all Christians in their baptism. Through the Holy Spirit, the baptized receive their vocation and the gifts with which to carry it out. They share one calling in witness and service to the reign of God; they live out many callings through the varied gifts the Spirit bestows (BOD, §§104, 106).
Whatever the role of this theological stance in generating lay ministries, certainly the role of the laity in the churches has been foremost in recent years. The flourishing of Bible study, the involvement of thousands of laypersons in mission teams, the abundance of small groups, and the visibility of lay leaders as liturgists, caregivers, teachers, mission interpreters, and regular speakers in conferences are all signs of a fresh sense of lay ministry. United Methodism’s initiatives in polity and practice, such as making General Conference and annual conference governing bodies two-thirds lay and one-third clergy or providing for lay representation in matters of ordained ministry or developing a consultation process for itinerant clergy appointments that includes the lay committee on pastor/staff-parish relations or establishing a regular slot for “state of the church” addresses by lay leaders in conferences—all are ways of expressing a greater authority for lay ministry.

The 1996 Discipline goes even further toward providing a theology of ministry that will undergird this authority. All Christians are called into servant ministry, grounded in Christian growth and maturity as a disciple, the Discipline declares (BOD, ¶112–114). Some are called to be leaders in the Christian community, offering servant leadership modeled on Christ’s service. While the church “has traditionally recognized these gifts and callings in the ordained offices of elder and deacon,” the Discipline goes on to emphasize that “laypersons as well as ordained persons are gifted and called by God to lead the Church” (¶111). Servant leadership, in other words, rather than differentiating a clergy office from lay ministry, is the name for all leadership among the whole people of God.

The 1996 Discipline drops much of the language of differentiation originally adopted in 1976, particularly the ambiguous but ecumenically recognized references to ordained ministry as “representative.” Any risk of elevating the priesthood into roles of representing the people before God or representing Christ to the people, potentially implicit in this term, has been eliminated, along with the term itself. Likewise the term office seems more associated with the past (as in ¶111, quoted above) than with present understanding. Certainly the assertion of United Methodism’s first Discipline in 1968 that there are “certain ministries which the whole Church can perform only through ordained ministers” (¶309) seems rigid in the contemporary context.

While the ordained are still “called-out and set-apart for ministry” (BOD, ¶305), what distinguishes their leadership from the
laity’s leadership has more to do with focus or style than with substance. The Discipline’s verbs reveal the most about its theology of ministry. The ordained lead, equip, personify, focus, articulate, exemplify, and embody ministries on behalf of the whole community of faith (¶303, 310, 319). The community has a share in all ministries, which come to focus most clearly in the “specialized ministries” (¶116) of the ordained.

The clearest differentiation of ordained and lay ministries currently seems to derive not from office or function, then, but from how one spends one’s time. “Ordained ministers are called by God to a lifetime of servant leadership in specialized ministries” and to “devote themselves wholly to the work of the Church” (BOD, ¶116). This same language could be used in a broad sense to describe a committed layperson. Yet the Discipline here seems to say that for the ordained church work is their job—how they spend their lives and employ their time. “Deacons are persons called by God . . . to a lifetime ministry of Word and Service” (¶320). “Elders are ordained to a lifetime ministry of Service, Word, Sacrament and Order” (¶323). These are persons whom the whole church recognizes as having given their lives in service in an exemplary way.

Whether this is the particular kind of recognition the retirees at my annual conference had in mind when they retired I cannot say. But there is strong evidence that the church into which they were ordained has shifted dramatically toward a heightening of lay ministry, a leveling of set-apart ministry roles, and an expectation that all Christians will have a vital place in shaping the church’s ministry and mission. “No ministry is subservient to another,” the Discipline declares (¶108). The worry expressed in the Connectional Process Team report to the 2000 General Conference that the denomination may be a “clergy-dependent” church seems dated, the kind of leftover anxiety that gets expressed after a major change has already occurred. United Methodism has already established itself as a church of the laity.3

From another perspective, however, the retirees may have recognized many of these contemporary emphases as essential elements of the tradition into which they were ordained. Certainly, as I reflected further on the ceremony, I came to a much stronger sense of continuity. What stirred my tears, I realized, was not so much the farewell as the going on—a sense that while this generation has stepped aside,
United Methodist ordained ministry goes on as a vital form of communal life that has guided the movement from the beginning.

Methodism began as a mission movement for evangelical preaching and spiritual growth, and basic elements of its polity are still grounded in those origins. Methodism did not ordain at all in its beginnings in England and America. John Wesley selected and approved the movement’s preachers mainly from among laity who showed “evidence of God’s grace for the work” and who “edified” believers with their preaching (BOD, §305). Ordination came only under exigent circumstances in America and Scotland when Wesley recognized the shortage of Anglican priests and could not persuade an Anglican bishop to ordain for the Methodist people (whom he assumed mainly to be Anglican in heritage). Even then, Wesley’s ordinations were presbyteral, not episcopal, in nature—an elder ordaining other elders—and have remained so in the sense that United Methodist bishops are elders charged legislatively (not constitutionally) with ordaining other elders as well as deacons.

Moreover, Methodist ordinations retained a contingent character even after the movement constituted itself as a church in America. Ordination as an elder served as a seal of one’s prior election to full membership in the itinerating body of what the Discipline has called through most of its history “traveling elders in full connection.” Even today the clergy session of an annual conference first elects candidates to full membership and then elects them to be ordained. Therefore, ordinations have always been intrinsically connectional. The most visible sign of this is the norm of holding ordination services at the annual conference session. Ordination seals membership in a conference for both deacons and elders; the conference also constitutes the only locus of their church membership. The corporate mission of this connectional conference, expressed through the service appointments of deacons and the pastoral appointments of elders, is the primary foundation of United Methodist ordained ministry.

One cannot ignore what created the exigent circumstances of Methodist ordinations, namely, the ecclesiological stance that administration of the sacraments ought to be reserved to an ordained priesthood for the sake of the good order of the church. Wesley and Methodism shared a deeply Anglican sensibility that Baptism and Holy Communion would be endangered as sacramental means of grace instituted by Christ were they to be administered without proper authorization, preparation, and ritual action. Yet Methodism in
America was content to let this sensibility travel with the connection, so to speak. Authority to administer the sacraments derived from ordination, to be sure, but more broadly from appointment by a bishop—an officer of the connection—to serve as pastor of particular local churches. This localized authority has continued in various forms since 1812, when the Methodist Episcopal Church began ordaining “local elders.” Since 1976 The United Methodist Church has granted sacramental rights to “local pastors.” The church has reinforced the status of the ordained not by reserving sacramental rights to them but by reserving to them the right to vote in the conference on clergy relations, clergy delegates, and constitutional amendments. Thus again, conference membership and the distinctively connectional rights and responsibilities that go with it are prior in authority.

Under today’s Discipline, anyone with a license as a pastor can administer the sacraments in the charge to which she or he has been appointed by the bishop (BOD, ¶340.1). This license is related not to ordination but to pastoral role. The breadth of this understanding of pastoring creates numerous conundrums in the paragraphs on “Responsibilities and Duties of a Pastor” (¶¶331–332). For example, it is “the duty of ordained ministers before baptizing infants or children to prepare the parents,” but it is not their exclusive duty since anyone serving as a pastor is expected to fulfill this requirement. Similarly, all pastors, ordained or not, are charged with administering “the provisions of the Discipline” in their charges, even though an earlier paragraph defining elder’s orders refers to “administration of the Discipline” as a defining element of that order (¶303.2). These pastoral duties also accrue to commissioned ministers who are on probation to become ordained elders.

If ordination as elder cannot be clearly defined by function, neither can the order of deacon in full connection. Here again, conference membership and authorization for ministry is prior. “Deacons are accountable to the annual conference and the bishop for the fulfillment of their call to servant leadership” (BOD, ¶319). Their service is differentiated from the ministry of the laity not in function but in the locus of their church membership in an annual conference. If deacons serve on a local church staff, for example, little may distinguish them from nonordained staff members who may also assist in worship as well as doing their jobs. But the deacon still has the distinction of belonging to the annual conference, with all the rights and responsibilities that come with that membership. This is quite parallel to the
polity and practice that has governed elder's orders in relation to the 
ministry of the laity for generations.

To this continuity should be added the way The United Methodist 
Church and predecessor bodies have used educational requirements 
to set apart their ordained ministries. Since 1956 in the former 
Methodist Church, the norm of preparation for elder's orders has 
been bachelor's and master's degrees—seven years of education after 
secondary school. While the denomination has never built enough 
seminaries to offer a Master of Divinity to the needed number of 
candidates and thus has never tried to restrict candidates to attend­
dance at United Methodist-related schools, it has generally insisted 
on this degree as the standard requirement for ordination. Candidates 
for deacon in full connection may face an even more rigorous stan­
dard: they need a master's degree in their particular field of special­
ization as well as advanced theological coursework. Few laity seek 
theseological degrees, thus making this professional preparation a 
major mark of distinction between ministries. Little wonder that what 
seminaries do and how they do it is the focus of so much attention 
and struggle between theological parties in the church.

The current profusion of roles and lack of distinctions in United 
Methodist ministry raise numerous questions that can settle out only 
over time. Take just the newest order, for example, the Order of 
Deacons. Deacons in full connection are the first nonitinerating order 
in Methodist history. If deacons cannot find a job (and the bishop has 
no obligation to find them one), in what sense does their church 
membership still reside in the annual conference? Deacons are 
ordained to Word. Does this mean that they are authorized to preach; 
and, if so, how is this authority different from a pastor appointed to a 
charge? Deacons can conduct marriages and bury the dead. According 
to the Discipline, these are duties of pastors (BOD, §331.1.i] and k]). 
In fact, what compelling reason is there not to give a pastoral license 
to a deacon when he or she has already taken the title of "Reverend" 
and is ordained to everything pastors do except administer the sacra­
ments and the Discipline—when even these duties can be done by 
anyone, elder or not, appointed pastor by the bishop? The only reason 
is an argument from theological integrity, that the church must keep 
intact a certain identity and focus of deacon's orders distinct from 
elders in particular and pastors in general.

This head-spinning confusion, though, is hardly new to Methodist 
tradition. One can reasonably argue that the confusion is intrinsic to 

THE FUTURE OF ORDINATION IN UNITED METHODISM
Methodism. Methodism’s profusion of ministries has been precisely its means of carrying out a diverse and comprehensive mission now active in many nations, through hundreds of institutions and over 38,000 local churches in The United Methodist Church alone. Methodism has never been as concerned with ecclesiological distinctions as with inclusive mission, never as preoccupied with ordered ministry as with prolific preaching and organizing.

The United Methodist Church has asserted its mission more explicitly than ever in recent years, basing it on words from Matt. 28:19-20 and naming a mandate to “make disciples of Jesus Christ” (BOD, pp. 114-15). This is now the primary task of local churches and the fundamental purpose of the annual conference (¶601). Many voices in the church continue to criticize membership declines and the lack of baptisms and professions of faith in congregations, but this criticism can be heard as a relentless effort to whip up the troops for their mission. Other critical voices (including my own) have argued that “making” is a metaphor easily distorted to fit a model of church as productivity system with “disciples” as the church’s “product.” This approach seems to emphasize what human beings do rather than the fruits of God’s grace in holiness of life—the older Methodist language. But no one can argue that the contemporary church has not been forceful in naming a mission and thus continuing its character as a mission movement.

Moreover, Methodism has been a distinctively lay movement all along, from the foundational role of the class leader to the emergence of local preachers in frontier mission outposts across America, to the proliferation of lay associations for mission in the nineteenth century, to the predominance of lay membership in church governing bodies today. United Methodism includes traditions such as the Evangelical Association and the Methodist Protestant Church that were founded on lay initiatives and that bore an almost ant clerical bias at times. While many Pentecostal pastors and laity left the Methodist Episcopal churches after 1900, a substantial contingent of charismatic holiness lay Methodists remain active in The United Methodist Church. They continue to find a home in the denomination because their views of the empowerment of all God’s people through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, regardless of education, preparation, or ordination, are not all that theologically incompatible with Methodist practice in the United States.
Methodist bodies in the United States have generally been content with minimal definitions of the biblical and theological foundations of ordained ministry. They have debated the subject and issued many studies and position papers, but relatively little has found its way into church law. The 1996 Discipline may refer to ordained ministry as "apostolic," but it does not assert by this term any claims to apostolic succession from Peter to the present (§303). It defines elders as ordained to "Word and Sacrament" and refers to the "historic work of the presbyterem in the life of the Church," but makes little of this connection to the larger priesthood of the Western churches (§310). The tradition tends to adopt terminology from the ecumenical church for the purpose of adapting it to the movement's mission and unifying its diverse ministries. A parallel might be found in The United Methodist Church's refusal to write and approve a contemporary confession of faith, which would also entail strict definition of terms and assertion of distinctions the movement is loathe to make. 

This flexibility and instability of definitions is the fruit of Methodism's character as a movement, synthesizing ecclesiological elements of many traditions. As William Lawrence has argued, The United Methodist Church does not lack a theology of ministry. In fact, it has many theologies of ministry. Methodism and its ministries are Anglican in ordaining persons to Word and Sacrament, Reformed in ordaining persons to Order, Catholic in creating a covenant body of traveling preachers not unlike a religious order such as the Dominicans, Pietist in expecting pastors to lead their people in personal spiritual growth through small groups, Orthodox in teaching that the telos of the Christian life is going on to perfection in love, and Evangelical in making preaching the primary task of the pastor. Now, reaching back to the early church and resonating with many specialized ministries across the centuries, The United Methodist Church also authorizes an order of deacon to embody the connection of church and world through specific forms of service. Thus many different traditions find a friend in Methodism, even though they may wonder at times whether anybody in Methodism can really sort out and define the elements of this synthesis. 

Maddening as the synthesis may be for them (or for me as an ordained elder who sometimes has to wonder what exactly distinguishes my office of ministry from anyone else's), I must admit that this breadth, flexibility, and adaptability expresses a theological
temperament in which I find a home. Its very ambiguity can be its strength. United Methodist ministry offers an astonishing range of possibilities. Just when I think the Order of Deacons is hopelessly ill-defined and out of keeping with the traditions of itineracy, I read the new book by Margaret Ann Crain and Jack Seymour, in which the deacons they interview are so articulate about their bridging ministries that I am persuaded that the church must give this order a chance to grow. Just when I find myself questioning the sacramental rights and now conference membership provided even for part-time local pastors, I think of local churches spread all over the landscape of the U.S. and other countries, providing witness and service with a coverage not equaled by any other Protestant body.

Characteristically Methodist as all this flexibility of ministries may be, however, the church is not well served today by the lack of depth and precision in its theological definitions of ordained ministry as represented in the Discipline. United Methodism has already established itself as a church of the laity, continuing its particular heritage as a lay movement. It has adopted a compelling theology for the ministry of the whole people of God. It has appealed for servant leadership, both lay and clergy, to guide its congregations and institutions into the future. But the church has not stated definitively what constitutes ordained ministries.

The enormous attention the church gives to pastors deemed successful in building the membership and program of local churches is one sign that The United Methodist Church continues to seek effective clergy. But the church does not articulate a theology of ordination sufficient to anchor the ministry in the tidal changes of the commercial marketplace. What is to keep ministry from degenerating into mass-media popularity ratings, competition to build the largest "worship centers," or advocacy of "virtual" faith, if the church's own capacity to articulate Christ's ministry in the world is not rooted deeply in the wisdom of the churches across the centuries? Where in United Methodism's teachings can persons look to discern what the church expects of its ordained ministers that may distinguish their practices from those of other traditions and teachings in the religious market? The attention to process, function, and productivity currently typical of the Discipline does not provide adequate grounds for the church's act of setting apart ordained leaders.

More carefully worded paragraphs on ordained ministry in the Discipline would help immensely. They would provide a basis for
balanced theological interpretation of ordained offices, a common
ground for examination of candidates for ordination, and a structure
for evaluating the work of the orders in an annual conference. The
1968 Discipline had a brief sentence on each term constituting elder's
orders at that time—Word, Sacrament, and Order (§309). By exten­sion, today's church would benefit from a paragraph on the biblical
roots, traditional forms, and church practices of each of the current
constitutive terms—Service, Word, Sacrament, Order. The same
could be done for deacon's orders, which would show how Word and
Service may differ in some ways between the two orders (a greater
emphasis on preaching for elders, a stronger theme of teaching and
interpretation or of living the Word in the world for deacons).

The current Discipline is not explicit, for example, about what is
meant by ordination to Order (already a confusing term since ordina­tion to Order is part of ordination to an order). A paragraph on Order
might begin with reference to biblical images of the gift of adminis­tration, building up the body of Christ as living stones in a spiritual
house, fitting the saints together for the work of ministry (1 Pet. 2:5;
Eph. 4:16). The paragraph would continue with references to the
historic roles of the priesthood in administering discipline within the
Christian community. It would add grounding in Wesley's heritage of
organizing Methodist people for spiritual growth and mission. It
would conclude by bringing together in one place various existing
sentences that charge the elder with administering the Discipline,
organizing and ordering the church for mission, and equipping the
people for ministry. All the material on Order could then be summa­rized as authorizing persons to take primary responsibility for stew­ardship of the community of faith.9

United Methodism draws on themes of many traditions in a
synthetic theology of ministry. Attention to the defining elements of
ordination will help keep that synthesis balanced. Ordination to Word
expresses Methodism's traditional focus on preaching and resonates
with its evangelical heritage and practices. This must be balanced
with ordination to Sacrament, emphasizing the centrality of the
means of grace as spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. These
must be balanced with ordination to Service, exemplifying the fruits
of Christian preaching and disciplined living in service to the world,
especially the poor. All these must be balanced with Order, attending
to stewardship of all the gifts of God's people so that no one gift is
emphasized to the neglect of others.
All these elements are authorized and practiced for the sake of the whole Christian community, for they are elements that constitute the church itself. The people of God gather around the Font and Table where God's grace is promised and known in the sacraments. They read, study, and listen together for the Word of God. Gifted by the Spirit, they go out to serve, their ministries ordered for the upbuilding of the community of faith and the effectiveness of the church's witness and service in the world. These elements in balance give the people of God their identity and mission. If they are tempted to stay in private communion with the Lord, Christ's call to service draws them into the world. If they start to think of themselves solely as a human service organization, Christ's grace and presence pulls them back to the mystery of the Table.

The report of the board of ordained ministry at my annual conference had a mind-boggling proliferation of questions for all the different statuses of ministry authorized under the 1992 and 1996 Disciplines. This reflects the diversity and range of the church's mission. Yet the challenge to the church now is to bring coherence to this profusion of ministries based not on secondary considerations of who does which job or how functions are carried out for the highest productivity, but on primary theological grounds. A common theological vocabulary about ordained ministry will contribute to a more balanced and consistent identity not only for the ordained but also for the whole church.

Endnotes


4. The 1996 Discipline includes "Wesley's Questions for the Examiners," presum-
ably a historical document that connects contemporary practices with Wesleyan heritage—except that the word preaching at the end of subpoint 3 has been changed to service (§305.3), thus altering the historical context so significant in the formation of the Methodist movement.

5. Margaret Ann Crain and Jack Seymour are adamant that deacons must not be appointed pastors, terming this "a violation of sacred trust between the deacon, God, and the church." See A Deacon’s Heart: The Ministry of the Deacon in The United Methodist Church (Nashville: Abingdon, forthcoming), chap. 7.


7. Lawrence, "Theology," 75.

8. Crain and Seymour, Deacon’s Heart, chap. 5.

Ronald J. Sider

Poor in the Midst of Plenty:
Toward Holistic Social Holiness

American Christians, especially followers of John Wesley, face a historic opportunity. After decades of increasing marginalization of religious organizations by public policy elites, our society has in the past few years turned to faith-based organizations as a new hope for solving some of our most desperate social problems, especially the poverty and brokenness at the heart of our great cities.

Why has this happened? Neither liberal nor conservative agendas of the past four decades have ended the scandal of widespread poverty in the richest nation in human history. The United States has greater poverty than any other industrialized nation. At the center of all our cities exists devastating poverty, and our best policy experts increasingly realize that they do not know what to do. In a speech a few years ago at Harvard, where he outlined the inadequacy of U.S. social policy of the past several decades, Senator Daniel Moynihan said, "No one has a clue as to what it would take for public policy to be sufficient."1

At the same time that policy elites became increasingly desperate for workable solutions, information began to trickle up that faith-based organizations are achieving stunning results in some of our most desperate inner cities. The story of Wayne Gordon's Lawndale Church and Community Center offers a striking illustration.

Thirty years ago, the Lawndale community was discouraged and

Ronald J. Sider is professor of Theology and Culture at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania.
broken. It was one of the twenty poorest communities in the United States. Almost nobody from Lawndale’s awful schools made it to college. The infant mortality rate was virtually at Third World levels.

Over the past twenty years, however, Lawndale Community Church’s (LCC) social ministries have grown into a $10 million a year holistic program. They have built or remodeled millions of dollars of low-income housing. The health clinic boasts twenty-two full-time doctors. The college-prep program has assisted and enabled one hundred Lawndale youth to graduate from college. Fifty of them have returned to inner-city Lawndale to offer the same hope to their younger siblings and friends that LCC gave to them.

The health clinic is so successful (even though the doctors receive only one-third of a typical doctor’s salary) that the infant mortality rate has dropped by 60 percent, making headlines in Chicago newspapers. The federal health officials in the Chicago region came to LCC to ask if they could fund some of LCC’s enormously successful programs. Now the federal office requires all its regional staff to read Wayne Gordon’s book, Real Hope in Chicago, about LCC’s amazing success.

There are many reasons for LCC’s success: outstanding leadership, good funding, help from the Chicago Bears. According to Wayne Gordon, however, the single most important reason for their success is faith. “None of this would work the way it does,” Wayne says, “apart from the vibrant faith in Christ that motivates all our staff and the active relational evangelism that has led hundreds and hundreds of Lawndale residents to personal faith and transformed lives.”

LCC staff do not cram religion down people’s throats. But sensitively, carefully, the staff openly talk about the way faith in Christ transforms broken lives.

The story of Cassandra and Showen Franklin shows how holistic ministries like Lawndale work. Ten years ago, Cassandra was a single mom on welfare. Pregnant again and desperate, she visited a Christian medical clinic at Circle Urban Ministries. The doctor provided excellent medical care, but he also sensed a spiritual need. He encouraged Cassandra to talk to the pastoral counselor. She and then her boyfriend started attending church, and soon they came to personal faith in Christ. For months, people at the church and community center walked with Cassandra and Showen in tough love as Christ and their loving community transformed their lives. Today they are married and off welfare, and Showen manages a business.
established by the community center that in a recent year had twelve employees and cleared a profit of $50,000.¹

Tragically, if Cassandra and Showen had come to some of our churches, they would have been asked, "Are you born again?" but not been offered medical and economic help. And if they had come to some other churches and church-related social ministries, they would have received a bag of groceries and a tract on how to lobby government, but they certainly would never have been told about the fact that personal faith in Jesus Christ can transform broken people. Fortunately, they came to a place that knew what John Wesley knew: people need Jesus and a job.

Wesley talked about and worked for social holiness. He knew evil social structures needed to change. But he was equally clear that merely changing social structures was not enough. Sin is deeper than unjust social systems. Persons are also twisted and fallen, and they need to experience personal conversion through a living faith in Jesus Christ the Savior. Tragically, so many church-related social ministries today are really not much different from secular agencies. They may have a chaplain and a few religiously motivated staff, but their programs are almost identical to those of secular agencies. They would never dream of combining evangelism, prayer, Bible study, and dependency on the Holy Spirit with the best of the medical and social services.

Why? Because they are no longer certain about what the church has confessed over the centuries; namely, that the Carpenter from Nazareth is truly God and truly human and that his life, death, and resurrection offer the only way to salvation. And because they talk a lot about social sin but overlook personal sin. The result is dying congregations, declining denominations, and ineffective, nominally religious church social ministries.

If we want to reverse denominational decline and run effective social programs that can truly seize the historic opportunity this society currently offers Christians, then we must return to the biblical balance of John Wesley. That means embracing evangelism and social action, an understanding of personal and social sin, orthodox theology and orthopraxis. Elsewhere I have developed theological arguments for that kind of biblical balance.⁴ Rather than repeat that here, I want to show concretely how this holistic approach would work in overcoming poverty in the United States.⁵

We could end the scandal of widespread poverty in the richest nation in history. We could seize one of the most significant oppor-
unities in this century for Christians to transform society. We could avoid the growing danger that terrible devastation in our inner cities will explode in violence and repression.

I know that some people like Robert Rector at The Heritage Foundation argue that widespread poverty in the United States is a myth. But the facts prove him wrong. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 34.5 million people in the United States live at the poverty level or below. That is the highest poverty rate of any industrialized nation. (Forty-four million people also have no health insurance.) The welfare rolls have dropped dramatically (46 percent since 1994), but the poverty level remains stubbornly high.

The official poverty level is $16,660 for a family of four. A staggering 34.5 million of our neighbors try to survive on that or less; in fact, 40 percent of those 34.5 million have incomes under 50 percent of the poverty level. Imagine a family of four living on $8,330 a year!

Suppose you were at the very top of the 34.5 million U.S. Americans living in poverty. How hard would it be for your family of four to get along on $16,660 a year? You could rent a two-bedroom apartment for $525 a month and use public transportation or buy an old car ($47 a week). You could wear thrift store clothes ($385 per person per year). You would need to design a diet with about one dollar a meal per person and forget about eating out. Monthly utilities would cost $65 and payroll taxes would gobble up the rest of the budget. This budget does not include any money for “luxuries” like visits to a doctor or dentist, household appliances, vacations, sports, church, or Christmas gifts. Obviously, poor people do have some of those things. Somehow they manage to spend even less on the basics I outlined.

Any volunteers? What do you suppose the God of justice thinks about that kind of widespread poverty in the richest nation on earth?

Things are improving somewhat for most of us, but the poor have actually lost ground in the past two decades. From 1974 to 1996, the bottom 20 percent lost 10 percent in real dollars (after inflation). But in those same years the income of the richest 20 percent actually went up by 39 percent! For the top 5 percent, the gain was 65 percent!

United States society is becoming more and more unequal. In 1974, the richest fifth enjoyed seven times as much income as the poorest fifth. Twenty years later, when the poor were worse off, the rich had eleven times as much!

If we compare wealth rather than income, the inequality is even more extreme—and getting worse. In 1997, the richest 20 percent had
84 percent of all the wealth in the U.S. In fact, the richest 1 percent own more wealth than all the rest of us in the bottom 90 percent. The U.S. has the most unequal distribution of wealth of any industrialized nation.

That would not be as serious if this growing inequality were actually helping the poor. But the opposite has happened over the past two decades. While CEO salaries have escalated, the working poor have lost ground. In 1965, the average CEO made about 44 times the salary of the average factory worker. Thirty years later, it was 209 times and by 1998, about 400 times! If the average factory worker had received pay raises comparable to CEOs in the years 1980–1995, they would have earned $90,000 by 1995 and the minimum-wage worker would have enjoyed $39,000 a year instead of less than $10,000. In reality, the minimum wage is worth less after inflation than thirty years ago. The average CEO makes 1,000 times more than the minimum-wage worker. That means that in two hours the CEO makes what minimum-wage workers earn working full-time for a whole year.

What should we do? Is there any comprehensive strategy that could dramatically reduce poverty in the U.S.?

A New Vision

We need to evaluate the basic strategies of the past four decades, using both biblical norms and factual data to develop a new vision and approach.

The fundamental biblical norms for this evaluation are clear. God created persons as body-soul beings made for community. Made in the divine image, we are to be co-workers with the Creator, creating wealth, promoting the common good, and caring for our neighbors. Work is our joy and responsibility. God wants every person and family to have access to the productive resources they need in order to earn their own way and be dignified members of their community. Because sinful people with power regularly oppress the weak and poor, the God who loves everyone equally actively sides with the poor, demanding that God’s people correct unfair social systems so that everyone enjoys genuine opportunity for a decent life.

How well have our policies in the past four decades measured up to this standard? In 1962, Michael Harrington published a now-famous book called *The Other America,* which significantly influenced the Kennedy-Johnson War on Poverty. Rejecting private
charitable approaches as unworkable. Harrington, like other liberals, placed all his hope in better government programs. For a decade or two, the brightest and best liberal thinkers in Washington and the universities believed the right government policies could end poverty.

This strategy did not really work. Of course, a number of government programs worked quite well, giving the lie to the sweeping claim that all government programs have failed. In 1997 only one in ten elderly U.S. Americans were poor, thanks to a government program called Social Security. Without that program, about 50 percent of all elderly folk would have been poor in 1997.

But one stubborn fact remains: The poverty level has remained high. The terrible poverty in our inner cities has grown worse.

Biblical faith helps us understand what went wrong. Secular liberals thought they could end poverty merely by governmental modification of the external environment. But people of faith know that persons are not just material beings responding to economic incentives. We are also spiritual beings who make wrong choices. From a biblical perspective any approach to ending poverty that neglects personal moral and spiritual causes and solutions is bound to fail.

By the early eighties, the liberal dream of ending poverty had collapsed. In fact, conservative analyst Charles Murray argued in *Losing Ground* (1984) that the big government programs had made things worse. According to Murray, welfare grants, food stamps, and other programs had undermined the family and destroyed responsibility and work. His solution? Different government policies! Abolish welfare payments, he says, and force the poor to work. While conservatives did cut some government programs for the poor, they never enacted Murray's drastic proposals. Consequently, the number of people in poverty remained high in spite of a growing economy.

In 1992, evangelical journalist Marvin Olasky suggested a new approach. He argued in *The Tragedy of American Compassion* that we ought to substitute private, charitable faith-based programs for government antipoverty measures. While this suggestion is only half-right, it contains a crucially important truth. Persons are body-soul beings; so if we work only at the material, economic side, we are dealing with only half of the problem and get at best only half a solution. Olasky is right that we need a greatly expanded emphasis on the role of faith-based agencies in overcoming poverty.

The tragedy of Olasky's book is that he neglects the structural causes of poverty, emphasizing only the moral and spiritual causes.
and solutions. In his view, government has at best a very small role to play in combating poverty. That is as one-sided and unbiblical as Harrington’s secular liberalism. Biblical faith and careful analysis of recent social history suggest that we need a comprehensive, integrated vision that understands that poverty in the U.S. results both from wrong personal choices about things like drugs, sex, marriage, and work and from unfair economic structures.

One recent study tried to determine the relative importance of these two factors in the ongoing persistence of U.S. poverty: Is it due primarily to economic factors like falling wages for low-skilled workers or to the drastic decline in two-parent families? The study found both factors to be culprits, and in roughly equal proportions! That means we cannot end poverty either by simply creating better economic arrangements or by merely renewing stable two-parent families. We need both.

People of faith are not surprised. The Bible talks about both personal and social sin, thus calling for both personal spiritual renewal and genuine economic opportunity. People need Jesus and jobs.

A balanced biblical perspective also helps us answer the hotly debated question of how much should government do to overcome poverty. Many secular liberals want government to do almost everything. Libertarians (including some conservative Christians) want it to do almost nothing.

At many points in the Bible the first responsibility for helping needy people rests with the family. In Leviticus 25, the next of kin in the extended family is the first place to look for help (Lev. 25:25, 35). The New Testament repeatedly places great emphasis on the church’s responsibility to care for the poor (Acts 2, 4). Family, church, and neighbors ought to be the first to offer assistance to the needy.

But the Bible also clearly teaches that government has a role. In the Jubilee text, if no family member is there to help, the poor person has a legal right to get his land back at the next Jubilee (Lev. 25:28). Repeatedly, the Old Testament talks about the responsibility of the king to help the poor: “The LORD ... has made you king to execute justice and righteousness” (1 Kings 10:9; Jer. 22:15-16). Careful exegesis of these two words—justice and righteousness—shows that they refer both to fair legal systems and to just economic structures. Psalm 72 (one of the royal psalms that discuss the role of the king) declares: “May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor” (v. 4). The
oppressor in this text who needs crushing is not some totalitarian governmental structure but rather powerful, oppressive people whom the state needs to restrain in order to bring justice to the poor.

Simple arithmetic also demonstrates that private charity cannot do it all. There are about 325,000 religious congregations (churches, synagogues, etc.) in the U.S. If they took over just four basic government antipoverty programs—welfare, food stamps, Supplementary Assistance for the Disabled (SSI) and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)—each congregation would have to find another $289,000 per year. If they also took over just the federal government’s share of medical care (Medicaid) for the poor, the annual figure would be $612,000 per congregation. That would be difficult since the present median annual budget per congregation is only $50,000–$60,000! Government has a crucial role to play—but not the only role, and often not even the primary one.

One of the most important public policy developments in years is the stunning new openness to the role that religious faith and religious agencies must play if we are to overcome poverty. In his 1993 book The Culture of Disbelief, Yale law professor Stephen Carter accurately describes (and laments) the way religious faith has been dismissed or marginalized in elite circles, including government, for decades. By 1998, the Reverend Eugene Rivers was on the cover of Newsweek as part of a story that explored the possibility that churches might be able to succeed in the battle against urban poverty and violence where others had failed. Increasing evidence showing that faith-based groups like Teen Challenge are far more successful than secular programs is convincing public policy experts to welcome a much-expanded role for religious service providers. Religion, and its role in overcoming poverty, is a hot topic at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. Government now eagerly welcomes people of faith to play an expanded role, especially in combating poverty. Christians today face a historic opportunity not enjoyed in decades.

What we need is a new holistic vision and strategy that embraces this expanded role for religious faith and shows how families, churches, businesses, the media, the schools, and government can work together to play their proper role. This expanded role for what is often called “civil society” (family, church, etc.) is crucial, because faith-based social service agencies can deal with the whole person, combining spiritual renewal and material aid, in a way that government agencies simply cannot and should not. Fortunately the
Charitable Choice legislation originally proposed by conservative evangelical Republican Senator John Ashcroft and very recently endorsed by Democratic Vice President Al Gore opens the door to a much-needed expansion of faith-based programs in the battle against poverty. If we can do that and at the same time insist that business, the media, unions, and government also do their part, we could dramatically reduce poverty in this nation in the next two decades.

I want to apply this holistic strategy to four critical areas for overcoming poverty: 1. A living wage for everyone who works; 2. renewed two-parent families; 3. healthcare for everyone; and 4. schools that work for everyone, especially the poor and minorities. In every case family, church, media, business, and government will need to play a part, although the specific mix will vary with the issue.

A Living Wage

People who are able have an obligation to work. When they do that responsibly, they should not be poor. Tragically, millions of our neighbors today in this rich nation work full time year round and still remain mired in poverty. More than one-third of poor children in the U.S. live in families where at least one parent is working full time, and still they are poor. Forty percent of Black and Latino single mothers work full time without escaping poverty. The same is true for 22 percent of Black men. Also problematic is the fact that even at the peak of our booming economy, five million workers in the U.S. want full-time work but can only find part-time employment.

We should decide as a society that everyone who can work should work, that all who want to work will have a full-time job, and that any family in which parents collectively work at least 40 hours a week will receive after-tax compensation equal to 120 to 130 percent of the national poverty level. To reach that goal, six things are needed:

1. Expand the refundable Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Currently, a person with children who works at low wages receives a federal tax credit worth 40 cents for every dollar earned, up to a certain level. Importantly, if this person's income is so low that he or she owes no taxes, the person still gets the money from the government. The EITC rewards work and strengthens families. We should expand it.

2. Strengthen the food-stamp program. We must insist that all legal immigrants are again eligible for food stamps and also raise the cap.
on the value of a car owned by a person eligible for food stamps (it is currently $4,650—just $150 more than in 1977!).

3. **Raise the minimum wage.** I am glad to let economists decide on the most effective mix of EITC, food stamps, and minimum wage. Most economists today, however, believe that a modest increase in the minimum wage would help the poor. It is currently $5.15 per hour. Even if we raised it to $5.50 it would still be lower (when adjusted for inflation) than thirty years ago.

4. **Change and expand the Dependent Care Tax Credit.** Workers with dependents currently may receive a tax credit for part of the cost of their childcare. But it is not refundable, so poor families (who owe no federal taxes) do not receive a cent. Only middle-class families benefit. This tax credit should be refundable. Further, two-parent families in which parents collectively work at least 40 hours a week should be eligible. Currently only two-parent families in which both parents work outside the home are eligible. Consequently, families that treasure parenting so much that one parent stays at home with young children subsidize the childcare for families where both parents work! Every pro-family group ought to endorse an expanded, refundable dependent-care tax credit.

5. **Make the Child Tax Credit ($500 per child) refundable.** Since it is not now refundable, the poor do not get a cent.

6. **Guarantee a job for everyone able and willing to work.** Even at this moment of unusually low unemployment, 5.9 million people were looking for a job in January, 1999—and could not find one. It is a violation of biblical justice for a wealthy society to fail to offer a job to everyone willing and able to work. The government as employer of last resort should guarantee a job to all who cannot find regular employment (the wage should be 10 to 15 percent below the minimum wage so regular employment is always preferable). If conservatives are right that plenty of jobs are available and therefore government-guaranteed jobs are unnecessary, then no one will apply; and it won’t cost a cent.

All six of these measures are public policy initiatives, but that does not mean that other sectors of society have no responsibility. Business leaders should not wait for government to pay a living wage or create job-training programs for the least advantaged. Faith-based agencies like Jobs Partnership can offer job training that nurtures both spiritual and moral renewal and expanded technical skills. Government-run job-training programs have not been
very successful, according to careful evaluations. But faith-based job-training programs report excellent success rates. Just a few years ago, Leslie Brown was a single mom with three children and a live-in boyfriend. She barely scraped by on welfare and public housing. Fortunately, Leslie heard the gospel and became an active Christian. Her boyfriend, Tony, also started attending church and soon became a Christian. Spiritual transformation, however, did not improve their awful financial situation.

Joining Jobs Partnership made the difference. Jobs Partnership began in 1996 in Raleigh, North Carolina, when a Christian businessman, Chris Mangum, met inner-city pastor the Reverend Donald McCoy. The businessman needed workers and the pastor needed jobs. Together they launched what has quickly become a highly successful job-training program that combines technical-skill training, biblical values, and Christian mentors. A local church sponsors each student in Jobs Partnership. Through a personal mentor assigned by the church, the congregation provides transportation, childcare—even housing. More important, the church provides love, encouragement, affirmation, and accountability. Church members walk with the participants for up to two years as they complete training and begin a job.

Two churches surrounded Leslie and Tony as they started the classes. Even before Tony completed the training, he found a job at a Pepsi company. Leslie also found part-time work. Tony and Leslie have been off welfare and out of public housing for over two years and are now married. Promoted four times, Tony is a foreman. Together, as a community, we must insist that government, business, unions, and faith-based groups all work together to make sure that all who work earn a living wage.

Renewing Two-Parent Families

Princeton sociologist Sara McLanahan puts it bluntly: “The more single parents, the more poverty.” In the U.S., children in one-parent families are eleven times more likely to experience persistent poverty than children in two-parent families. The poverty rate for two-parent families is only 8.7 percent; for single-mother families where the mother never married, the rate is 59 percent, and 28 percent if the mother is divorced. Unfortunately, the U.S. has the highest divorce rate and one of the highest rates for out-of-wedlock births.

One sociological study after another demonstrates that the conse-
quences for children are devastating. Children in single-parent families are 75 percent more likely to fail a grade and twice as likely to be expelled from school. Three out of four teen suicides occur in single-parent homes. A recent study by scholars at the University of Pennsylvania and Princeton University carefully documented how much of this difference was due to other factors, like parents’ income or education, race, neighborhood, etc. Even when all these factors are taken into account, fatherless boys were twice as likely to go to jail as boys living with both parents. In fact, for every year spent in a non-intact family, the odds of time in jail rise by 5 percent! Ethicist Dave Gushee is right. The single parenthood resulting from divorce and out-of-wedlock births is one of the most important economic justice issues of our time.

What can be done? To answer this question, we must be clear on the complex causes of escalating single-parent families. Conservatives are right to place significant blame on the sexual revolution of the sixties and the popularization of sexual promiscuity on TV, in movies, high school textbooks, and popular heroes. In a superb new book, War against Parents, Sylvia Hewlett and Cornel West rightly add business and government to the list of culprits. To maximize profits, corporations pressure their managers for ever greater productivity, with little regard for the way long hours undermine family life. Government was far more family friendly in the 1950s than in the 1980s and 1990s. The $600 tax exemption on the IRS return for each dependent adopted in the late-1940s would amount to $6500 in 1996 dollars (the 1996 deduction was only about $2600).

It would be silly to think that government is the primary place for solving this problem. The primary responsibility for renewing stable, wholesome, two-parent families lies with the church! Eighty-four percent of the people in this society claim to be Christian. We need massively expanded programs in the churches to persuade moms and dads to keep their marriage vows. Michael McManus’s Marriage Savers (the book and the program) and the Southern Baptist-sponsored movement, True Love Waits, promoting virginity until marriage, are the kinds of things we need. Unless our preachers and prophets renew people of moral integrity who keep their promises to their children and spouses, all other efforts will fail.

The media could also make a major contribution if they would drastically reduce the amount of sex and violence they disseminate. Parents should demand a rating system controlled by parents for TV
and movies. Businesses could voluntarily expand the opportunities for flexible working arrangements (time and location) so that parents can more easily meet family responsibilities.

Even government can play a secondary but significant role. States could change no-fault divorce laws and adopt a Louisiana-type two-tier marriage arrangement. We could also make it easier for poor families to own their own homes. How about a refundable Home Ownership Tax Credit of $1500 a year for every low-income working family? We already give middle-class and wealthy homeowners a $66 billion tax break with the mortgage interest deduction for federal income taxes. In fact, fully half of that—$33 billion—goes to homeowners with incomes over $100,000 a year. Might it not be more just to switch some of that tax break to poor families struggling for the stability that comes from a home to call their own? A living wage, universal health insurance, and quality education for all would also reduce the pressure that weakens families.

We need all of the above and more if we are to correct the decay in our families that contributes so much to poverty. Our only hope is a holistic, comprehensive approach.

Health Insurance for Everyone

Over 44 million U.S. Americans lack health insurance. Thirty-one percent of all people below the poverty level are uninsured. Half of all poor people who work full time are uninsured. More than 22 percent of African Americans and 35 percent of Latinos lack health insurance. Tragically, the number of uninsured goes up year after year.

Studies show that the uninsured are four times more likely to report that they needed medical care but did not get it. When they do see a doctor, they receive inferior medical care. As a result, 3.5 million people go to the hospital every year without insurance, and the resultant $7 billion in bills exact a heavy financial and emotional burden. Studies show that the poor have more illness than the non-poor and also die younger.

The U.S. spends substantially more per person on healthcare than any other nation. We are also the only industrialized nation that does not guarantee healthcare to every citizen no matter how poor. When it comes to medicine, the richest nation in history has the highest cost and the worst access in the modern world.

One often-overlooked fact is important. Although the percentage is
slowly dropping, most of us (about 65 percent) receive health insurance as a tax-free fringe benefit from our employer. That tax break for the middle class and above is worth about $600 per family, for a total of $60 billion a year! Left out of this are not the very poor, who receive government-funded Medicaid; rather, it is the working poor who get hit—twice. They are not eligible for Medicaid, and they cannot benefit from the tax subsidy on job-related health insurance.

We must tell our legislators that having 44 million uninsured people in the richest nation on earth is a moral outrage we refuse to accept. I wish every congregation would initiate a letter-writing campaign demanding that within four years legislators have in place some workable scheme that guarantees health insurance to every person in this wealthy land. How can pro-family Christian political voices not demand health insurance for poor families?

**Quality Education for All, Even the Poor**

The schools are simply not working for millions of poor U.S. Americans. Jesse Jackson is right: One child is programmed for Yale, another for jail.

Sixty-three percent of all non-urban students can read at what specialists define as a "basic level." Only 46 percent of urban students can do that; and in high-poverty urban areas, the number falls to 25 percent. Minorities suffer the worst. Only 20 percent of white U.S. Americans but 50 percent of African Americans attend urban schools. Minorities make up 88 percent or more of public school students in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Houston, and Washington, D.C. Twice as many blacks as whites and four times as many Latinos drop out before finishing high school.

We live in an information-driven society in which knowledge is the most important capital. Poorly educated people are seriously disadvantaged. The unemployment rate for high school dropouts is 20 percent, for college graduates a mere 2 percent. Inferior education is one of the primary causes of economic injustice today. Interestingly, studies show that poor schools have a greater negative impact on disadvantaged children than on others, but good schools have a stronger positive impact on disadvantaged children than on others. Quality education is the best way to empower the poorest children. Educational opportunity is the new civil rights struggle of our time.

The causes of the inferior education received by poor and minority
children are many and complex: lingering racism; unsafe, drug-infested neighborhoods; dysfunctional families; malnutrition; oversized administrative bureaucracies; unresponsive teachers' unions; and peer pressure that mocks academic success. There is no quick fix for this litany of problems.

Increasing numbers of people, however, think that educational vouchers, at least to lower-income families, would help significantly. More than 86 percent of African Americans between the ages of 26 and 35 (i.e., those with school-aged children) favor vouchers. Private schools do more with less and seem to be more successful, especially with minority children. According to the president of the NEA (the largest association of public school teachers), about 40 percent of all urban public school teachers send their own children to private schools! As the liberal signers of the recent “Progressive Call for Public Scholarships” said, “Devastating problems demand daring experiments. . . . Inner-city public schools are a disaster.”

Others strongly prefer reforming the public schools with smaller classes, better qualified teachers, more equitable funding, more emphasis on the basics, and stricter graduation standards. The list of good reforms is lengthy.

I do not think we know enough to favor one or the other of these proposals. We certainly need more testing before any widespread adoption of a voucher system, but I believe the time is ripe for a major test. Why not conduct a five-year program in which we spend roughly equal amounts on two parallel tests in a dozen places each: one test for school vouchers and another test for the best “reform the public schools” proposals. Especially important for everyone concerned with justice will be the impact on poor and minority children. If the test demonstrates that vouchers help these children, widespread adoption would be warranted. If vouchers hurt them, I will help lead the battle against vouchers.

For millions of poor children, effective educational reform is a matter of despair or hope. For far too many children it is literally an issue of life or death.

I have sketched a comprehensive holistic framework in which all the different institutions in society—family, church, media, unions, business, and government—do what they do best. It is time to get beyond the silly argument between liberals and conservatives about whether it takes a village or a family to raise a child. It takes both—and more.
Is there any realistic hope that this society would really implement this kind of vision in the decades to come? Several questions arise. Is it too expensive? Will the divided Christian community be able to work together? Most important, are there enough people who care?

Can we afford the public policy side of this proposal? The federal government alone currently spends $125 billion on largely unnecessary corporate welfare. Earlier we saw that $33 billion in tax savings for home-mortgage interest goes to homeowners earning over $100,000 a year. And the middle and upper classes save $60 billion in taxes from untaxed health benefits. We could use a major part of this $218 billion in tax breaks for the non-poor without adding a cent to total government expenditures. The wealthiest nation on earth could afford some new, effective initiatives to empower the poor.

Will Christians work together? There are growing signs that we might be able to do that around the issue of poverty. The century-long debate between liberals one-sidedly emphasizing social change and evangelicals focusing almost exclusively on evangelism has largely ended. The Call to Renewal has drawn together a vast range of Christians from Catholic, mainline Protestant, and the historic Black, Latino, and White evangelical circles. As Rich Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals said after one meeting, “The Cold War between religious groups over the poor is over.” What would happen if people like Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus joined with folks like Jim Wallis and Eugene Rivers in a new Christian coalition embracing the “least of these”? One can only hope and pray.

Central to a new approach would be an expanded role for faith-based agencies, because they can minister to the whole person in a way government cannot. Good Samaritan Ministries (GSM) shows how that works.

In 1996, the State of Michigan invited GSM to be a partner in their pilot project to move welfare recipients to jobs and self-sufficiency. Government contracts provide about one quarter of GSM’s budget; the rest comes from private donations.

GSM does not try to be either the government welfare agency or the local church. Rather, it is the bridge between them. The government administers the welfare programs, interviews applicants, and refers them to GSM’s Relational Ministries. GSM links the welfare family to a congregation-based Relational Ministry Team. The team has been carefully trained in “transformational relationships.”
concept which includes a mixture of love, regular contact, emotional support, prayer, and individualized care that government agencies cannot provide.

The ministry team establishes a close friendship with the welfare family, providing physical, social, emotional, and spiritual support for up to a year. The team is careful not to make the family dependent on them, but they offer whatever assistance is needed—help in finding an apartment, untangling legal problems, fixing or finding a car, obtaining emergency food and clothing, finding a job, improving work skills, and budgeting. Most important, however, the team provides friendship. The church team is careful not to impose their beliefs, but they pray regularly for their new friends; and after earning the right by gentle caring, they freely share their faith and talk about the way that God can transform a person’s values, character, and life.

It works! Ottawa County became the first county in the U.S. to put every able-bodied welfare recipient in a job. Governor John Engler says the church mentors have been a crucial component.

Mentoring programs similar to those in GSM are springing up in many places. One of these, Bridge of Hope, is a church-based mentoring program that has helped more than 75 homeless women find hope and security.

I am convinced that in the first five to ten years of the new millennium Christians in the United States have an unparalleled, historic opportunity to address poverty. Dismayed by repeated failures to reduce poverty, secular policy elites are astonishingly open to faith-based proposals and contributions. With some old fears and battles resolved, the widely divided Christian community shows increasing signs of readiness to work together to empower the poor. With more empirical evidence emerging every year, faith-based approaches look increasingly attractive. It is realistic to think that a biblically based, empirically grounded, holistic vision and strategy could become widely influential and dramatically reduce poverty in the next decade.

That will happen, however, only if a large movement of Christians and other citizens join together around a common vision and agenda. And that can happen only if we are ready to work hard and sacrifice narrow self-interest. And this is only possible if God mysteriously blesses us with inner renewal and spiritual revival that transforms millions of comfortable Christian materialists into passionate champions of the poor.
One fear haunts me. Do enough Christians really care? Suffocating materialism and narcissistic individualism have wormed their way into so many Christians' hearts and into congregations. I fear that most Christians may sleep through one of the greatest opportunities in our history. We have more material resources than ever before. Tragically, we are also more materialistic and more focused on individual self-fulfillment than ever before. Will we take the path of generosity and justice? Or will we slip slowly into ever greater self-gratification?

The path of self-indulgence defies God and threatens democracy. A large number of poor, angry, disenfranchised youth with no stake in society and no hope for the future live in the heart of all our great cities. Unless we end their agony, they will shatter our comfort. On the other hand, if enough Christians and others of goodwill join together with a new holistic vision and strategy, we could end the scandal of widespread poverty in the richest nation in history.

Endnotes

2. Wayne Gordon, Real Hope in Chicago (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).
3. Circle Urban Ministries is a sister ministry to Lawndale; see my Cup of Water, Bread of Life (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 86-87.
5. The concepts and data that follow in the rest of the article summarize many of the key ideas of my Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999).
Emerito R. Nacpil

Rethinking Ministry for a New Century

I begin with two assumptions: First, there is such a thing as Christian ministry. Second, certain aspects of Christian ministry provide it with an identity and purpose that withstand the inevitability of historical change. This enduring identity and purpose distinguish Christian ministry from other forms and styles of service. Rightly and effectively carried out in any human condition or historical circumstance, Christian ministry can make a difference for good, both in the Christian community and in the world.

In what follows I examine the enduring identity and purpose of Christian ministry. I also take serious account of the context in which ministry happens—that is, the Christian community as well as the wider human community in their sociocultural and historical milieu. The motive for this account-taking comes from the missiological nature of ministry. And that partly means that profound changes in the context of ministry may require some change in the specific tasks and forms of Christian ministry if the church is to discharge its work responsibly and is to remain faithful to the enduring purpose and identity of ministry.

Achieving a working balance in the tension between a Christian ministry striving to preserve its enduring identity and purpose, on the
one hand, and the changing context in which it operates, on the other, is always a problem. When successful, there emerges a style of ministry that seems fit for its time. I say this well aware of the fact that the style of ministry shaped by liberal Christianity (a style that seemed appropriate in the twentieth century) does not seem adequate for the twenty-first century. Liberal Christianity as a historical form has run out of steam and is coming to an end, and so does the style of ministry that it shaped. What would the style of ministry look like in the new century? What would shape it and give specific form to its enduring identity and purpose? What specific challenges must it face in the context of the new century? What change should it undergo to meet those new challenges? Let us address some of these questions.

Ministry and the Turn of the Ages

Paragraph 301 of the 1996 Book of Discipline says that "ministry in the Christian church is derived from the ministry of Christ... and all Christians participate in this continuing ministry." The Discipline goes on to say that from this common ministry of all Christians, God sets apart some people for leadership as ordained ministers (§302). The conviction that Christian ministry—both the ministry of all Christians and of the ordained—derives from and continues the ministry of Christ defines the nature and purpose of ministry. But first I examine the eschatological vision that frames and gives substance to the ministry of Jesus Christ and to the Christian ministry that derives from and continues it; for it is this eschatological vision that is the enduring frame and context that shape Christian ministry.

The life and ministry of Jesus were connected with the coming of the reign of God in "the age to come." According to Jewish eschatology, life in this present age is so saturated with evil that only God's intervention—God's reign of judgment and salvation—could save the world. It was this judging and saving reign of God that Jesus served with complete dedication. He envisioned it, lived for it, preached and taught it. He demonstrated its power in saving acts of healing and forgiving, restoring people to their freedom and dignity as God's people. At the same time, he condemned the hypocrisy, self-righteousness, injustice, corruption, and unbelief that perverted life and alienated people from God.

As an aspect of his messianic ministry, Jesus called and formed together a band of disciples to follow him and to be sent out by him
to participate in his ministry. He shared his vision of the kingdom of God with his disciples and taught them its secret and way. He made them participate in his ministry and shared with them the authority to do it. The reign of God demonstrated its power also through what the disciples said and did (Mark 6:7; cf. Luke 10:1-12, 17-19). Jesus held the Twelve together by his trust in them, in spite of the fact that they were slow in understanding what he taught them, engaged in unfriendly rivalry among themselves, and sometimes betrayed their Master. In spite of all this, it is the life of discipleship that is the appropriate response to the nearness of God’s kingdom and the way to participate in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus died for the kingdom of God. His death was seen not just as a martyr’s death but as an act of compassion and atonement for the salvation of God’s people and of all humankind. His death, therefore, like his life and ministry, is a demonstration of the saving power of God’s reign.

Jesus’ resurrection was God’s vindication of Jesus and proved that from the beginning God’s reign was already at work in Jesus—through who he was and what he said, did, and died for. Jesus’ resurrection is at the same time God’s action of condemning systemic evil and forms of sin that Jesus exposed and proscribed and which in the end brought him to the cross. The resurrection of Jesus overturned the human verdict on Jesus and his death and so is a demonstration of God’s reign whose power not only calls into being things that are not but also gives life to the dead (Rom. 4:17).

The New Testament bears witness to the truth that the saving reign of God that is expected to come at the end time and the close of the age has indeed already come near at hand in the midst of this world, in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The “age to come” has already come in the history of Jesus Christ. By becoming a disciple of Jesus, together with others in a life together in him, one enters the sphere of the Kingdom, lives in it, and shares in its joys and its work. Discipleship is the “now” of salvation in Jesus Christ. In him the end is now!

If this is true, then the history of Jesus Christ simultaneously puts an end to the history of this present evil age and inaugurates the history of the age to come. Life in the age to come has become possible in this present age and is lived in faith in the life and community of discipleship. Moreover, the history of the future age looks forward to its completion and fulfillment when the reign of God is wholly fulfilled and God reigns eternally, thus bringing the
history of the age to come to its final consummation. The life of discipleship hopes for and moves toward this final consummation by participating in the mission and ministry that anticipate it, move toward it, and realize it propheticallly (and thus provisionally) in the possibilities of life in this present age. In the history of Jesus Christ a new future—the future of the age to come—has dawned in this present age, awaiting its fulfillment in the consummation of God’s reign when God shall be all in all.

Thus, the history of Jesus Christ in relation to the kingdom of God makes the ages turn. The coming of the age to come in Jesus Christ turns the reign of God toward the world in its present evil state, breaks into it, and pushes it to its end at the same time that it inaugurates the world’s history of salvation. In this meeting a turning of the two ages is opened up: the Now of the day of salvation, the Now of the End!

The turn of the ages in the history of Jesus gives discipleship an approach to temporality that expresses itself in three dimensions. These dimensions can be distinguished, but they do overlap. One is the dimension of “no longer.” Discipleship is the no to life in this present evil age, saying to it, “No longer.” Another dimension is the “from now on.” Discipleship is the yes to the history of Jesus Christ. It seeks to stand in his Now by following him, being with him, being with others in him, and being sent out to participate in his mission. “From now on” indicates the incompleteness and provisionality of salvation in this present world—salvation is “already” and “not yet.” The third dimension to discipleship is just this “not yet” dimension, which looks forward to the completion of God’s reign. The life of discipleship moves steadily with the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit in the “from now on” (which is both “already and not yet”) away from the “no longer” toward the end when God shall be all in all. It is this overlap of the ages in discipleship that gives it its peculiar joy, its struggles and dignity, its difference in the world, and its future glory.

Messianic ministry, then, is the ministry of making the ages turn. It is a ministry that makes possible the advent of God’s kingdom, opens up a new lifestyle—the life of discipleship—and begins the remaking of creation and humanity in fulfillment of their destiny in God’s kingdom. This eschatological vision shapes Christian ministry and gives it its enduring identity. Liberal Christianity lost this vision and deprived ministry of its distinctive and enduring identity.
The Mission of Making Disciples

What does it mean to say that Christian ministry is derived from and continues the ministry of Jesus? Based on the New Testament witness, this derivation does not follow logically as a conclusion from a premise. Rather, the derivation is by a commissioning act. This means that there is a basic difference between the ministry of Jesus Christ and the ministry of all Christians. The ministry of Jesus is uniquely his own, given him by his Father to accomplish (Mark 1:38; Luke 4:43; John 20:21). And he accomplished it in his own unrepeatable way, once and for all. The advent of the Kingdom, the entry into its sphere in a life of discipleship, the beginning of the renewal of all things, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit to make all this possible in him—all these would not have become possible except through the unique, once-and-for-all ministry of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' act of commissioning signifies that a new form of ministry is being inaugurated. The One who was once sent (the Son) is now the One sending. The One who was sent was the Incarnate and Crucified One; the One now sending is the risen and reigning Lord. Of course, it is the same Jesus Christ crucified and risen, but the mission of the crucified Jesus is different from that of the risen Christ (although they coinhere and one continues the other). Moreover, those sent out by the risen Lord are his own disciples, who on being sent become his apostles. The life of discipleship is life in the sphere of the Kingdom; and Jesus' resurrection confirms it as the appropriate life response to the nearness of the Kingdom. Discipleship life in the sphere of the Kingdom is therefore already, and yet still provisionally, resurrection life. Apostleship is an expression of discipleship. As the Incarnate and Crucified One is the agent of the Father's mission and his ministry is his obedience to this mission, so the apostles are now the agents of the Risen One, and their apostolic ministry is their obedience to the mission of the Risen One!

And so the question arises: What is the mission of the Risen One for which he commissions his disciples as agents and so authorizes them to carry out a ministry of their own in obedience to and participation in the mission of the Risen One? The answer, according to the New Testament, is simply (but profoundly): to "make disciples of all nations." This mission continues the discipleship-making that Jesus did as part of his messianic ministry, except that now it is the Crucified and Risen One who is the Lord of discipleship. Discipleship
is an eschatological reality and belongs to the new creation inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The disciples were sent out to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom and demonstrate the signs of its nearness by the way it heals people, liberates them from demon possession, forgives their sins, and restores them to the dignity proper to them as children of God. Thus, “mak[ing] disciples of all nations” means that the apostles are to bring people into the sphere of Jesus’ resurrection lordship and thus into the sphere of God’s saving rule.

Making disciples of the crucified and risen Lord is the most radically significant event that can happen to humanity and to the world. We have already seen that this event is possible only at the turn of the ages in Jesus Christ. Moreover, in relation to God its significance is that discipleship through the Spirit unites people to Christ the Son of God and enables them to participate through the Spirit in the Son’s filial relationship to the Father. Discipleship makes people children of God; “and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,” allowing them to cry “Abba! Father” (Rom. 8:15-17). Discipleship is life under the rule of the Trinitarian God.

In regard to the world, discipleship is the only alternative lifestyle that has a future in the kingdom of God. We noted how the turn of the ages provides a threefold temporal standing ground for discipleship in the Now of the day of salvation. But what are the implications for discipleship as an alternative lifestyle in the world? Consider Paul’s advice to the church in Corinth as it struggled to live the life of discipleship as an alternative to circumcision and uncircumcision.

First, with respect to the dimension of “no longer,” Paul instructs the Corinthian Christians “not to desire evil” as some of the Israelites did in their journey in the wilderness. Examples of evil are idolatry and promiscuity (1 Cor. 10:7, 8, 14; cf. Exod. 32:4, 6). A lifestyle that celebrates sexual promiscuity as an expression of concupiscence coupled with idolatry is a form of evil that must be absolutely avoided by a Christian lifestyle. To it, disciples must say “No longer,” because “the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Christian discipleship can now resist the seduction of a way of life that provides temporary enjoyment and revelry but that will surely if imperceptibly end in decay because of its emptiness.

With respect to the dimension of “from now on,” Paul advises the Corinthian Christians to adopt the attitude and practice of “have . . . as though they had none” in relation to the institutions and values of culture (1 Cor. 7:29-31). This advice covers activities like the
following: “having wives” (marriage); “mourning” (disease, misfortune, broken relations, death); “rejoicing” (play, festival, good fortune, success); “buy[ing] . . . and selling” (economic activity); and “deal[ing] with the world.”

It is obvious that these are institutions, values, and activities that one needs and must engage in. But now, since “the appointed time has grown short” and “the form of this world is passing away” (vv. 29, 30), their necessity and value have been relativized. One must not care for them and have them as though they are absolutely important. Something genuinely ultimate has arrived, namely, “the affairs of the Lord” (v. 32). The right ordering of things is that of “unhindered devotion to the Lord” (v. 35; cf. Matt. 6:25-33).

Finally, with respect to the “not yet” dimension leading to the “end of the age,” Paul gives an instruction that seems contrary to the one just mentioned. He says, “So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor. 3:21-23). This piece of advice is motivated by the eschatological turn of the ages (1 Cor. 3:18-19).

Paul’s advice here needs to be seen in the light of Rom. 8:38-39. There, Paul claims that nothing can separate “all things” from the love of God in Christ Jesus because in that love they have been created, saved, and destined to be fulfilled. All things belong to Christ, including the Christian community; it cannot belong to itself, since it has been bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23). Because Christians have been freed from sin and now belong to Christ in discipleship, they are free for the world; the world belongs to them, and they must claim it in Christ. Paul is here reversing the reason for the Greco-Roman claim that “all things belong to the wise man” because he “alone knows how to use all things.” It is not the “wisdom of this age” that confers the right to own all things but God’s love for all things in Christ. To claim all things for Christ is to transfer them into the sphere of his risen Lordship and so to transform them into the new creation in him. This claiming of all things in Christ is an aspect of the mission of making disciples.

Thus, three elemental factors are essential to the lifestyle of Christian discipleship: renouncing evil, having the world as though one does not have it, and claiming all things in Christ for God. Together in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, these three
elements constitute discipleship as an alternative lifestyle in the world. Discipleship is thus a relationship with two sides. One side consists of a filial relationship with God through Jesus Christ; the other side is a relationship with the world expressed in an alternative lifestyle. The latter relationship depends for its realization upon the former, while the former depends for the expression of its transforming power in the world upon the latter. The relationship with God is expressed in saving faith, the relationship with the world in self-giving love. Faith working through love and love demonstrating faith, mutually reinforcing each other, is the modus operandi of Christian discipleship in the world, of making disciples. It is the most radical and far-reaching event that can happen in the world, requiring for its possibility no less than the turning of the ages in the history of Jesus Christ and for its actualization—both provisional and final—no less than the action of the Trinitarian God.

As the original band of disciples-apostles faded into history, the mission given to them continued and remained unchanged; namely, to make of all nations disciples of Jesus Christ. This mission was passed on through history and throughout the world to the Christian community that grew out of the apostolic ministry. Is it any wonder, then, that The United Methodist Church has adopted the same mission as its own mission—to make disciples of Jesus Christ?

**The Ministry of Elder in the New Century**

Thus far I have described the enduring nature and purpose of Christian ministry. The question now is this: how do we fulfill the same ministry in our time? The ways of doing ministry developed by the apostles and the early Christian community are summarized in the 1996 *Book of Discipline* under the heading "The Process for Carrying Out Our Mission." Some aspects of this process have been given to the ministry of the Order of Elders as its special responsibility (¶ 302, 323). In what follows I discuss the issue of how to carry out the mission of making disciples in the new century in relation to the ministry of elder in The United Methodist Church. The shape that the ministry of elder takes in the new century will have decisive implications for the way the ministry of all Christians is carried out.

The purpose of the ministry of elder is to build up the local church and equip it for the mission of making disciples in the world (cf. Eph.
4:11-13). From New Testament times, the local church has been the most concrete and visible manifestation of the church as God's people and as the body of Christ. The activities that constitute the church—Word and Sacrament, the life of discipleship under the Lordship of Christ—are universal. They create the local church and are present in the world concretely as local church. The local church embodies visibly the wholeness of the church and so exists in the deepest connection with all local churches. These churches are members one of another individually and corporately as the one body of Jesus Christ. Precisely for this reason, the local church provides "the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs."3

In The United Methodist Church the elder is ordained to fulfill the task of building up the local church and equipping it for the mission of disciple-making. The elder is ordained to the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order. In this ordination, his or her ministry reflects the threefold office of Christ; namely, the prophetic (Word), the priestly (Sacrament), and the kingly (Order). It is the eschatological and messianic ministry of Christ that is at work in the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order. How can this ministry be carried out in the prayer and hope that it is indeed Jesus Christ who is at work in and through it?

To answer this question it is necessary to take account of the possible implications of the new century that is now with us. Obviously I cannot do justice here to this subject, but I will nevertheless venture a few observations under the general rubric "postmodern." Whatever else the new century will be, it will most likely continue to be postmodern. There are salient factors of postmodern culture that have implications for the work of the ministry of elder.

The intellectual climate of postmodernity celebrates the breakdown of the Enlightenment project of discovering truth objectively, rationally, and universally. The effort to organize human experience rationally is also judged to have failed. Instead, postmodernity sees the perception of truth as perspectival and constructive, and thus fragmentary and relative. Reasoning is from within a tradition; and there are many traditions of reasoning, giving rise to a plurality of forms of reasoning. Knowledge is socially conditioned and tainted ideologically. The postmodern style of searching for truth is deconstructive; it destroys any totalizing efforts—as in metaphysics, for example. Thinking without foundations is the intellectual style of postmodernity. What implications does this have for the ministry of the Word?
The cultural climate of postmodernity is multicultural and multi-ethnic. The postmodern world is a melting pot of peoples and cultures encountering one another "up close and personal." There cannot be one dominant culture. Cultures instead relativize, fragmentize, and borrow from one another. This results in the relativization, fragmentation, and pluralization of norms and values. There can be no common good; politics is nothing but the power tool of vested interest. There is no ethics in politics; economies determines what is right or wrong in terms of what is profitable or not. The "fitness of things," insofar as this is perceived at all, is aesthetically formed, not morally structured. What does this mean for the ministry of the sacraments that intends to create fellowship and build community?

The deep emotional thrust of postmodernity is to celebrate the spontaneous, the ephemeral, the immediate, the fragmentary, the free and unbound. It seeks to de-objectify, destabilize, desystematize, and deconstruct. It exults in chaos as primal and denigrates cosmos as a mere secondary construct designed to control and dominate. There is no such thing as progress, only process. The postmodern mood is apocalyptic and regards nihilism as a possible mode of life—but for how long? Given such a mood, it is illusory to think one can shape human life and experience into some form of order or style.

What possible implications do these features of postmodernity have for the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order? Let me risk some suggestions. But first I want to make a general observation. There seems to be sweeping abroad in Western culture today an iconoclastic spirit that is destroying cherished certainties and venerated idols in almost all aspects of this culture—philosophy, art, politics, economics, and ethics. Nothing is sacrosanct. From a biblical perspective, the shattering of idolatries as an expression of divine judgment has a cleansing effect upon human life and history. One could also regard this phenomenon as an irruption of what Paul Tillich calls "the Protestant Principle," which occurs in cultural life when the symbols that yield meaning have become exhausted and can no longer make sense of life and its experience. When such a profound clearing of the decks takes place, there is the possibility—just a mere possibility—that a new search for meaning can be launched that will give birth to new icons that might illuminate the ultimate and the sacred. Nihilism is a cul-de-sac; but it could be the place for the power of negation to negate itself and so to give rise to the possibility for existence to emerge—existence meaning to "stand
out” of the nothing! In the milieu of nihilism, it is quite possible that
God can become a “live option” (William James) again and that
God’s Word might again secure a hearing. And why not?

Now for the concrete suggestions. First, about the ministry of the
Word. In Christian faith, the Word mediates the truth of God’s saving
action in the gospel and is the power that shapes life and its experi­
ences in discipleship. In a postmodern milieu, truth cannot be
presented as a matter of certainty but initially only as a truth claim.
This makes truth a matter of debate. Paradoxically, debatability is a
characteristic of truth (Pannenberg). And so is the truth of God. The
existence and location of God and the incarnation, crucifixion, and
resurrection of Jesus Christ all are debatable truth claims. In
presenting truth as a truth claim, one must be committed to it, confess
it publicly and sincerely, argue for it, defend it, and submit its valida­
tion not to rational judgment alone but also to the test of making
sense of life in all its manifold relations and experiences. In arguing
for the truth claim of the Word, one must be prepared to exhibit its
full range of meaning. For the Word is not only rational; it is also
revelatory, performative, experiential, soteriological, and cosmic in
scope and eschatological in provenance! Disciple-making requires
the truth of God in all its multidimensionality as mediated by the
Word. The truth of God is so large and so rich that it requires the
process of disciple-making to validate itself fully. This means that the
audience of the Word is both the congregation at worship and the
missionary public that is prepared to listen and debate—and be
persuaded! In short, the intellectual climate of postmodernity is the
appropriate missionary context for the proclamation of the Word.

If Word mediates the truth of the Trinitarian God, then the sacra­
ments mediate the divine presence for fellowship with God and with
others. Baptism incorporates us into Christ and in him into filial rela­
tion with God. It is a dying with him to this present evil age which is
under the thraldom of evil, sin, and death so that one can say to it,
“No longer.” It is also a rising with Christ to the new life of the
Resurrection, enabling one to say, “From now on.” Last, it is looking
up to him for the fulfillment of the “not yet” in God’s consummated
kingdom. But Christ does not exist in isolation. He is with the Father
in the Spirit, and the Father is with him in the same Spirit. To be in
Christ in baptism is to be adopted filially into the trinitarian fellow­
ship of God.

Just as baptism incorporates us into Christ, so the Eucharist incor­
porates Christ into us. Christ’s body is broken for us and is distributed to us so that we may receive him and be in fellowship with him and he with us. His blood is poured out for many in a new covenant sealed with his blood so that we may live in him from the heart and thus be bound to him and he to us in a love-relation that even death cannot break. To receive Christ and to be in him in the Eucharist even as he receives us and dwells with us in Baptism is at the same time to receive the Father who wills to be with us and in us and beyond us through the Son in the Spirit. Thus the Eucharist mediates God’s presence so that we may live in the fellowship of God’s presence, coram Deo. Those who are incorporated into Christ and Christ into them are constituted his body, the fellowship of believers whose head is Christ; they become members one of another in the Spirit who dwells in them. It is the truth of God mediated by the Word and the presence of God mediated by the sacraments that constitute the church. Discipleship is life in both the truth and the presence of God.

In a postmodern situation, the old ties that bind people are cut and people are set loose. These are the ties of blood, tribe, race, nation, culture, and associations formed around common interests or causes. As these ties are cut, the communities they have reared and sustained break apart; and the people who have been bound together in them are set adrift, away from one another. Postmodernity is life without ties that bind into community.

But in a sea where people swim by and for themselves, they encounter one another “up close and personal”—at least inter alia as they acknowledge one another as either total strangers or fellow drifters in search of new ties that could bind them into friends and new communities. Postmodernity is life in search of new ties that bind into life-fulfilling communities.

It is not long, however, before one discovers that life in community is life lived outside of oneself and in and with and for another. The tie that binds must be strong enough to hold together in unity commonalities and differences and diversities. Postmodernity is a search for a community that holds together in unity not only what is common but also what is different, diverse, even conflicting.

It is in this postmodern milieu of no community, of search for new community, of discovering a community strong and broad enough to hold in unity the common, the diverse, and the conflicting that the Christian sacraments are administered and celebrated by the community constituted by them. Now, is it not the nature of genuine com-
munity to be open, to attract, expand, and include, and so to invite; to be hospitable, to receive and welcome others into its fold? And is not the Christian community, constituted by the sacraments, such a genuine community, and so must be built up in inclusiveness? Discipleship is life with and for others in Christ. These others are really “other”? There is room for a Zealot and a tax collector in the community of discipleship. If this be so, then postmodernity is the proper milieu for celebrating the sacraments and discovering the Presence that makes for community and also the proper setting for debating the Word and coming to acknowledge the truth it mediates.

We come now to the issue of Order, finally. In my opinion, order has to do with the “fitness of things.” It concerns the relation of things to one another and to the whole that constitutes them. The problem of order is the problem of right relations and of their fitness together. This is a problem, because order is won out of chaos—out of non-order—and so there is no order that does not contain chaos. Order is always accompanied by chaos, by nonorder. Only when there is already order can one speak of disorder. Disorder is with reference to order, as order is with reference to chaos or nonorder. Disorder takes place when order can no longer contain the nonorder in it. As a result, there is disruption and disorder. When this happens, the relation of parts is distorted, the parts themselves become perverted, and the whole of which they are a part is broken up and destroyed. Thus, the generation of order that seeks to contain nonorder and prevent and overcome disorder is a continuous process. There is in the order of things a built-in, iconoclastic process that can break out as relative forms of order become inadequate and exhausted. It is this situation that postmodernity celebrates and promotes by its deconstructive dynamism. But for how long? Where does it end? It could end in the abyss and silence of nihilism. The trouble with deconstructionists is that they offer no alternative to their iconoclastic work and its results.

The ministry of order today takes place in the swirling giddiness that is stirred up by staring down at the silent emptiness of nihilism. In what does this ministry consist? This ministry mediates the order of the new creation inaugurated in Christ at the turn of the ages. As we have seen, the coming of the age to come in the history of Jesus Christ puts an end to this present evil age, so that one can say “no longer” to it. But it also inaugurates the new creation that looks toward the new future for its completion. The new creation is a process of restoring the order created by God and transforming it for
completion at the end of the age in the fullness of God’s kingdom. At bottom, the new creation is the setting right of distorted relations so that the parties in relationships are redeemed from their perversions and restored to their integrity and dignity, and the whole is healed and renewed. The ministry of order celebrates the fitness of things in God’s truth as mediated by the Word and in God’s presence and fellowship as mediated by the sacraments. The new creation is the order of life and the fitness of things in God’s truth, presence, and fellowship even as it prays “Maranatha” for its perfection and completion. And discipleship is quite simply life in the new creation—in the new order of things—as it anticipates the glory that is yet to come. Discipleship requires no less than the advent of the new creation at the turn of the ages, and making disciples is no less than living in the order of a new life that awaits a glory yet to be revealed. Is it any wonder that disciple-making is the mission of the church and the elder is ordained to the ministry of building and equipping the church for mission through Word, Sacrament, and Order?

In this article we have attempted to recover the eschatological frame and substance of Christian ministry and to set it missiologically in the context of the new century, understood as a postmodernizing epoch. We have thus widened considerably the horizon of Christian ministry, including the ministry of elder. We need to take this widening of horizon seriously, for it entails a new vision that has to be seen in a new milieu.

Endnotes

3. Ibid., 114.
For many people in our churches today, the Book of Revelation is either frightening or so peculiar as to be avoided or discounted. The reason for these attitudes to some degree lies in the number of books and movies that appeared as we neared the year 2000, describing how various details of the Revelation of John were being fulfilled in our time, and therefore we could expect the rest of the details—including the battle of Armageddon and the various plagues—in the immediate future. Such books may have heightened the aversion to Revelation, but the avoidance has been with us much longer than the past few years.

It therefore may come as a surprise to many congregations, and perhaps even to some preachers, that the major use of Revelation in the lectionary is in the season of Easter. It is used here precisely because of its joyful and reassuring character rather than because of the fearful tone most of us have come to expect. For this reason alone, it would be helpful to preach on these texts. By so doing, a congregation might come to a far greater appreciation of both the truth and the real meaning of this portion of God’s Word.

The Writing

The Book of Revelation was written probably at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, at a time when there was a
serious persecution of both Jews and Christians in the eastern Roman Empire, particularly in what is today Turkey and Syria. Whether the Empire knew the difference between Jews and Christians or whether Christianity was assumed to be some form of Judaism, the two groups were viewed as dangerous to the state. The reason was most likely a feared Jewish uprising against the Empire which was not to be tolerated. However lenient Rome may have been to various cultures and religious practices among the peoples it had conquered, it was a military government that would not tolerate any attempt at dislodging its power. Its famous roads and ease of travel, which the church used for its own purposes, had been created so that Roman armies could be dispatched to any place that presented a challenge to the government.

There are several characteristics of this letter that set it apart from the rest of the New Testament. First, it is written to several churches, not just one; it therefore reflects a wider situation than that presented by one congregation. In fact, the situation is that of recent or anticipated persecution. It is this tone that gives rise to the fearfulness of the book in the minds of many. Second, the book is the description of a vision given the author. It therefore is not a neat description of the historical events in which the church is living, but rather it is fantastic and dreamlike. As in a dream, scenes shift without warning, there is no easy time sequence, and creatures we have never seen in real life appear and disappear. Even the conscious writing down of the vision is made more complicated by the persecution itself. The writer may well be speaking in cryptic language so that the Roman officials, should they see the letter, would not understand it and would not have even further reason to persecute the Christians.

The churches to which the letter is addressed are all in the area of what is today western Turkey. By the end of the first century, the still new and struggling church was strongest in that area. Churches were small but growing. They met in homes, with perhaps several house churches in a city. On Sunday, the day of the Lord’s resurrection, all of the house churches in a city would meet together to celebrate the Eucharist. The Book of Revelation is intended to be read in these gathered services just as it was written by John of Patmos on the Lord’s Day while he was evidently separated from the churches he knew and loved. For this reason, the book has a liturgical quality about it. Not only is the book liturgical but the content of its liturgy is decidedly the victorious message of Easter.
The writer is well aware that the Christians in these churches are under threat of persecution. He also is sure that the persecution is going to get worse before it ends. That sounds negative and offers a good reason for fear. But the basic message of the book is not fear; rather, it is that the Christians do not need to be afraid, no matter what happens, for their ultimate victory is absolutely certain. Jesus Christ has already won the decisive battle. The enemies of God, who are therefore their enemies, are doomed, no matter how strong they seem at the moment. The writer calls for faithfulness in the midst of the coming times of trial, but does so with the constant note of the victory that is guaranteed to the faithful.

John is sure that many Christians, accustomed to times without persecution, will find it easy to accept compromises to protect themselves and remain comfortably part of the wider society. If they do not avoid these little compromises, then when the difficult times come, they will fall by the wayside, unable to cope with the serious compromises they will be forced to make in order to save their lives. He calls on them to be vigilant, to recognize the little compromises that will face them every day and to refuse them, so that they will be ready when the greater challenge comes. Yet in the midst of the call to faithfulness there is the constant cry of ultimate victory that awaits them. Revelation is not concerned simply with how Christians act in terms of private behavior but also with the compromises necessary to be a part of the ordinary economic and social life of the Empire, where the danger of idolatry lurks in every transaction, and faithlessness is nearby in every interaction.

When we look at the book in this manner, it is clear that our times are not all that different. We do not face physical persecution as Christians in this society, but we clearly see the signs that the wider society is not sympathetic to Christian values and often finds Christians peculiar if not dangerous. In a society where looking out for yourself is seen as more central than looking out for others, where the bottom line of profit or loss is decisive for what should be done, where violence is increasingly a way of life, where getting ahead is seen as a "reasonable" goal for everyone, it is difficult to read words about losing your life in order to find it or words about loving your enemies. For us, as for those ancient churches, the ability to discern the temptations to faithlessness depends on realizing that the powers against us are already defeated through the work of Christ, even though they seem so strong. We do not have to overcome them. Our
task is to overcome *joining* them. Victory is assured. Not seeing the danger, not recognizing the compromises we make—these are the problems we face, just like those Christians in the seven cities in Asia Minor.

**The Writer**

The writer, who calls himself "John," is usually considered to be John of Ephesus. He makes no claim to be the apostle John; and his connection with the author of the Gospel of John is not evident. What can readily be said is that Revelation and the Johannine writings share many themes and images, but the language and writing style differ enormously. A common milieu or teacher and student could account for some of this.

**May 6, 2001—Fourth Sunday of Easter**

Rev. 7:9-17  
Acts 9:36-43  
Ps. 23  
John 10:22-30

This is a glorious resurrection passage. It is excellent for the post-Easter season because it clearly connects our hope for own resurrection with the work of Christ. No matter how often scholars speak about the difference between the Greek concept of immortality and the Jewish and Christian understanding of resurrection, many in our congregations continue to hold to a belief in life after death that is a given independent of anything that Christ has done. In the gospel, the ones to receive this promised resurrection are those who have been joined to Christ. There is a reference to the faithful, who are clothed in white robes. This may well represent a pattern that was just being established, that baptism on Easter Eve included being robed in white. Baptism engrafted one to the body of Christ; and in the resurrection pictured in these verses in Revelation, the faithful are now fully joined to their Head. The cross is not neglected, since the robes have been made white "in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14). This passage therefore helps a congregation continue to explore the meaning of Holy Week in its fullness.

The people robed in white are the ones who were faithful in the midst of persecution. They refused to compromise their faith. This
vision is held up to those faithful back in Asia Minor, urging them to remain faithful so that they too can join the chorus around the throne. There is a danger that this passage could be used to support a simple salvation-by-works theology: if you are not faithful in all things, you will be “damned.” There is too much in the rest of the book that points in a different direction, including calls to repentance, to do this. However, it is helpful to see this passage as a call to faithfulness to Christians in all times. Of course there is forgiveness of sins, even for our unfaithfulness at various times. But the whole purpose of this book is to keep Christians on their toes, to remind them that being a Christian in the midst of a sinful world means always being aware of temptation. Those who slip into comfortable lives, assuming that only the serious persecutions will test them, fail to see the daily temptations they are already ignoring. In this way they become habituated to the evils and will not be able to resist when a serious testing comes.

Worship is central to Revelation. There are constant scenes in John’s vision of worship in heaven, complete with choirs. Our own worship is a joining with this heavenly form. Whether the congregation is large with ample choir and music, or small with a struggling choir, we are not alone. Our music, our worship, grand or not by human standards, is pale in comparison with the heavenly worship to which we are joined. Furthermore, all congregations are joined to one another when they engage in worship, since all are part of the worship around the throne. Whatever the composition of the congregation, the gathering in heaven represents “all tribes and peoples and languages” (v. 9). This passage can help a congregation catch a glimpse of what worship means that goes far beyond what they can see around them. Worship is something a congregation must take very seriously. It is not only a local matter.

For the Christians who first heard John’s vision read in the midst of small house churches—perhaps several of these churches gathered together on the Lord’s Day, with no permanent place for worship, no choirs, no stained-glass windows (an insignificant gathering in the midst of the powerful Roman Empire)—these words showed them what they really were. They were gathered to worship around the throne of God. What they were doing was ultimately more significant than whatever Rome was doing. Nor were they really the paltry gathering that human eyes might see. Such an understanding could give them the courage and the strength they needed to be faithful in their day-to-day lives. Faithfulness is both difficult and easy. It is difficult
because it can mean suffering and going against the grain of our society. It is easy because Christ has already gone before us, has overcome the powers that could ultimately defeat us, and is with us as we follow him.

If the liturgy uses all of the lections assigned for this day, several themes appear more than once. Both Psalm 23 and Revelation refer to water: the still waters, the water of life. The theme of the shepherd leading the flock to the desired goal will be obvious. The psalm includes the Lord as faithful shepherd, security in the midst of the danger of death, and the goal of dwelling finally in God's house. All three of these themes are picked up in this passage from Revelation. The Gospel lesson, John 10:22-30, includes the guarantee that Jesus is our shepherd. He leads us to eternal life, and no power can take us away from him. Again, these are echoed in the text from Revelation. We ourselves could turn away, at least enough to follow the ways of the world rather than the Shepherd. However, this does not mean that the Shepherd will not seek us out or that we cannot return by means of repentance.

The congregation is at least to read these three lections; then, preach from Revelation. This would make it clear that Revelation is not totally different from the rest of the canon but rather faithfully picks up themes that are common in the rest of Scripture. It is a two-way street. Not only does Revelation pick up on themes found in the rest of Scripture but it also adds its own voice and helps us understand better the more familiar passages.

May 13, 2001—Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. 21:1-6
Acts 11:1-18
Ps. 148
John 13:31-35

Many Christians read this passage as though it were the beginning of a description of what heaven is like. No matter how symbolically the description is taken, it still for many has a timeless quality. What heaven is, it is that now and will be when, hopefully, we join the heavenly chorus there. However, chapter 21 makes clear that heaven also has a history. It is *not* now what it *will* be. The heaven in which the multitude appeared, dressed in white robes, in last week's reading is referred to here as the first heaven. Our old earth is the first earth.
God has promised that all things will become new. That has not yet happened, but it will.

Christians also often have a very narrow view of the work of Christ and, therefore, of the meaning of Easter. This passage from Revelation expands that view as well. Christ’s battle culminating in the cross and his victory seen in the Resurrection have set the stage for the totally new world that God has promised. The work of creation has not yet reached its goal, and it could not without the glorious work of redemption. Easter is the beginning, and the faithful are the first-fruits of this new creation.

Many contemporary Christians also have difficulty imagining a new earth. Eternal life is traditionally pictured as so otherworldly as to have no place for earth. Yet here there is a new earth. This means we need to take the earth very seriously. It is not only God’s good creation but, in a totally renewed fashion, it has a place in God’s eternal plans. To this degree, Easter has something to say about our concern for the earth. Paul also writes that we are still part of the groaning creation waiting until all is revealed (Rom. 8:19-23). In Isaiah there is a similar promise: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth... I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people” (Isa. 65:17-19). It would be helpful to show that what Revelation here describes is more dramatically stated but still not unlike other, more familiar, parts of Scripture.

In this brief passage are four other themes that are typical of other parts of the canon. First, the passage concludes with the words about the water from the spring of the water of life. This was mentioned in last week’s reading as well. Second, bridal imagery is used for the people of God. Bridal imagery is found frequently, not only in both the Old and New Testaments but also in the history of Christian mystical writings, especially in the West. While in our day we may dislike some of the hierarchical concepts often connected with it, we need to see the value as well. The West has preferred bridal imagery in which God and the individual or the whole people are brought into a very intimate, covenantal relationship to more unitive imagery in which the human element loses its individuality and is swallowed up in the divine. Bride and groom may become one in some ways, but they also remain two. The covenant, the intimacy, the two-ness—these have been the important elements in the use of the marriage analogy. Here the new city of Jerusalem is beautiful to behold, like a bride on her wedding day. The reason is that she is about to be united.
with her husband in an eternal covenant in the consummation of a long courtship.

The third is the theme of Immanuel: God dwelling among us. Not only does this passage tell us more about the meaning of Easter, it also takes us back to Christmas. There is a parallel between the incarnation—the birth of Jesus, who is Immanuel, God with us—and this new holy city on earth, which will be the dwelling place of God with mortals. The promise of Immanuel is completely fulfilled here. There is a very interesting passage in 1 Kings 8:27-30, with parallels in 2 Chron. 6:18-21. It occurs in the middle of Solomon's prayer of dedication for the new Temple in Jerusalem. In it he says, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). He then goes on to remind God of God's promise "to set your name" in this house, so that those who turn to that place in prayer can be sure that God will hear. The Temple was this promised place for God's name to dwell, but it was obvious that God could not dwell on earth. The incarnation of God in Christ changed that. For thirty or so years, in a different way than in the Temple, God did dwell on earth, among mortals. Now in John's vision of the final, new creation, the full Godhead will dwell in our midst. All the rest was preparation leading to this. The Temple (and we could go earlier to the pillar of cloud and fire and the Tabernacle), Christmas, Easter—all are necessary steps on the way to the new Jerusalem, in which "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them" (Rev. 21:3).

Finally, there is the use of the term "Alpha and Omega" for Christ. This occurs at the beginning of John's vision (Rev. 1:4-8, which was the lection for the second Sunday of Easter in this cycle). Therefore, it stands at the beginning and the end of this book, rounding out the vision. But it also refers to the whole work of redemption of which Christ is the beginning and the end. With the vision of the final new creation, all is accomplished. The words of Jesus here in John's vision repeat Jesus' words on the cross, "It is finished"—words to be found only in the Gospel of John. On the cross his work was finished. In the Resurrection what he accomplished begins to be seen. In the vision of John, with the final new heaven and new earth, the fullness of his accomplishment is glimpsed. We stand between the first "It is finished" and second. Our tendency is to be satisfied with the first. John reminds us that there is still much more to come.
Verse 10 introduces John’s vision of the new Jerusalem. The verses omitted from the lection, verses 11-21, contain the description of the city and its walls and gates, all made of precious jewels and gold. It is just as well that these verses are omitted, since the lengthy detail could be overwhelming to a listening congregation. It would be easy to lose sight of the rest of the passage. However, it may be well to mention what it is that is not being read.

If the typology of the Temple was mentioned last week, it could be built on very well here. What needs to be clear is that the reason no temple is needed in the Holy City is because God is actually dwelling in the midst of the people. Sometimes Christians think that the whole idea of a temple rests on the mistaken notion that the presence of God can be located in a place. The passage in the Gospel of John, where Jesus tells the woman at the well that true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth, not needing a temple (John 4:19-24), is interpreted to mean that the truth always had been that no temple was needed. However, what is meant is that because Jesus himself is God in our midst, the Temple is no longer needed, although it was God’s promised presence before the incarnation. In the New Jerusalem no temple will be needed because there is no need for any mediated presence of God. In fact, in Rev. 22:4 we are told that we will see God’s face. In Exod. 33:20 it was made clear to Moses that no one can see God’s face and live. But in the New Jerusalem this will be possible. Furthermore, Jerusalem will play the role always intended for it—to be a blessing to all the nations, teaching them about the true God. For that reason all the nations will be directed by the truth from this city. Though the city will have walls, its gates will never be closed. Peace will reign throughout the whole creation. The glory of God will be so bright that no sun is needed. Therefore, there will be no night. All of this makes quite clear that a new earth will be radically different than the old one. At the same time, it will be the earth.

It is appropriate that Revelation is the last book in the canon. That these last chapters of Revelation pick up on imagery to be found in the first chapters of Genesis reinforces the understanding that the final
Go to the history is not the end of creation but rather its fulfillment. In the reading for last Sunday, there is a reference to Christ as the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega. In this week's reading that idea is made even clearer. Overtones of Eden abound in this passage. There are the tree of life and a river. Fruits are ready for eating without labor. But there is an obvious difference. In Genesis the Garden of Eden is clearly a pastoral scene. With only two people one could hardly have a city! In Revelation, however, the garden has been reduced to more of a city park in the heart of the New Jerusalem. The river runs through the middle of the street. The tree of life plays a different role in the Holy City than it did in Eden. Now there are many nations, many of whom have a history of enmity with others. These were not present in Eden. The fruit may be for eating, but the leaves are “for the healing of the nations” (22:2).

For the ancient church, particularly in the area of Asia Minor where Revelation had its home, the Genesis account was understood in a way very different from how we usually understand it. Irenaeus, for instance, believed that Eden was indeed the beginning of God’s creation, but it was only the beginning. God fully intended that populations would grow and cities would develop. Sin corrupted this process, but we still can see signs of the original design. What we have in Revelation is the goal God always intended, finally free of the burden and effects of sin. Furthermore, the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the pre-incarnate Son of God, was the one who “walk[ed] in the Garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Gen. 3:8). The incarnation was always intended. Originally it was for the purpose of the further development of humanity. Because of sin, the cross and the work of redemption were added to the plan. Always Christ was the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and goal of creation. Christ’s birth marked a very significant stage in this plan, but the call of Abraham, the development of Israel as the people of God, the Exodus, the Tabernacle, the Temple—all were stages in the preparation for the incarnation. The incarnation itself was preparation for the development of the church, all leading to the final goal of the Holy City.

This comprehensive view, which is typical of the early church, especially in the area of Asia Minor, stresses a history which from beginning to end is led by God. The particular agents of God’s action are God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. They have always been at work in human history, from creation to the final fulfillment.
Therefore, the eschatological perspective is something not introduced later but, rather, is there from the first moment of creation.

Our congregations may find the images in this section of Revelation quite strange. There are several impediments to their really understanding what is meant here. First, we live in a society that has little use for history. We look to Scripture for statements about eternal truth, not descriptions about a process of redemption for the whole of creation. Second, we live in a society that is highly individualistic. When we think of salvation, we think of our own, or our friends' and family's. We do not usually consider the people of God as a unit. We prefer to think of ourselves one by one rather than as a whole community. Finally, we have a very difficult time considering the nonhuman creation, especially the earth itself, as an object of redemption. We have enough trouble imagining our bodies as redeemable without going on to trees and rivers! All of this means that the preacher needs to be aware of how difficult it is for contemporary Christians to understand the full meaning of this astonishing picture John gives us in his vision. He helps expand our imagination and our hope. It makes the work of Christ and the significance of his cross and resurrection far greater than we may have thought. That is an appropriate message for the Easter season.

Psalm 67 is assigned for this day. It carries out beautifully the theme of the salvation of the nations as well as thankfulness for the earth and the food it provides for us. It ties in well with this passage from Revelation.

May 27, 2001—Seventh Sunday of Easter
Rev. 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21
Acts 16:16-34
Ps. 97
John 17:20-26

This is the very end of the book of Revelation and, therefore, also the end of the New Testament. There is a certification that the vision is true and comes from Jesus, not just from the angel who has been John's guide through much of the account.

The preacher, even one who uses the lectionary faithfully, will need to make an important decision about this Sunday. Between the sixth and seventh Sundays of Easter comes Ascension, always on a Thursday. For that reason, many churches may omit the lessons here.
and instead use the lections for Ascension, which do not include any passage from Revelation. The next Sunday is Pentecost, taking us beyond the Easter season. If the lessons for the seventh Sunday are used, it will be necessary to make the bridge from Easter to Pentecost, which Ascension does. That is quite possible. The emphasis in this passage from Revelation is the nearness of the second coming of Christ. The end—the Omega—has been proclaimed, and soon the earth itself will see it clearly. The second coming assumes that Christ is now "at the right hand of God." Revelation, along with the rest of the New Testament, holds that this is not the final stage.

We are separated from Jesus now, but there will come a time when we will be with him. This is not simply an announcement about Christ's coming. We also are invited to come, to come to the waters of life if we are thirsty. This plays on an image in the Gospel of John—Jesus offering the living water to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-15).

There is a word of judgment in this passage, but it is overshadowed by the joy of expectation. The images we have seen in earlier lessons in this season are present: robes made clean, the tree of life, the gates of the city, the Alpha and Omega, the water of life.

The work concludes appropriately with poignant words of anticipation. Jesus declares that surely he will come soon. The Spirit and the church cry out in hope that he will come. As we saw on the previous Sunday, the culmination of creation is the presence of God's people, face to face with God and the Lamb. These cries of "Come!" and "I am coming soon!" show the great desire that exists on both sides, the tension that is there when faith really holds to the promised future. It is seen in the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come!" It is the eager longing and the groaning of creation that Paul describes (Rom. 8:19, 22). Precisely the hope and anticipation lead to the work of the Spirit, who keeps the faithful yearning for the promised future and yet also gives them a foretaste of the power and joy of the new creation. It is this that will be celebrated the next Sunday on Pentecost.

For reasons that were mentioned in relation to last week's lection, many Christians in our culture will find this yearning strange indeed. They could assume that someone whose present life is painful may want the end to come, but most of them generally hope that the kingdom, the City of God, will wait quite awhile to arrive. Furthermore, they assume this City already is somewhere; and after
death, hopefully, they will, individually, be added to it. The whole drama of the coming of the Kingdom to us at the end of this old creation, and not our going to the already existing Kingdom, will not be easy to interpret.

The last two verses need to be considered very carefully. The words of benediction here parallel words used at the end of most of Paul's letters, especially in 1 Cor. 16:22b-23, where he writes: "Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." If the letters from church leaders such as Paul and John were expected to be read in the midst of the worship of the community, and if such a reading occurred immediately before the Eucharist (which it very well may have), then more is meant here than we realize at first glance. It would mean that in some way the presence of the risen Christ with his people is foreshadowed in the Eucharist. The promised coming of the Lord is carried out in a hidden, not visible, way in the Lord's Table on the Lord's Day. John's vision occurs on the Lord's Day. His letter would probably be read on the Lord's Day. It is the same understanding of Communion that we find in the hymn "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," which comes from the fourth century. Not only is our worship linked to the heavenly celebrations; the ascended Christ also comes down in a hidden way to be with us as we gather at his Table. The Eucharist is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet; it is the present way in which the promised coming of Christ takes place even now.

For several generations many, if not most, Christians in the West—both Protestant and Roman Catholic—connected the Eucharist with the upper room, Good Friday, and the cross rather than with Easter, the Resurrection, and the coming Kingdom. That common view has lessened the eschatological sense and supported the individualism already rampant in our society. It will be difficult to hold the eschatological tension at Easter if it is not present the whole year. The celebration of Communion is a central place where this yearning and hope can be nourished, if it is based on this eschatological view. The newer eucharistic liturgies, based on early church texts, do this well.

Conclusion

These lessons from the Book of Revelation for the last four Sundays of the Easter Season can help a congregation understand the significance of Easter that not only is for these few weeks but also is
directly tied to the Christian life in all seasons. Our lives are to be lived with the sense that we are part of the whole people of God, waiting in joyful expectation for the end, and knowing that what the future holds is the fulfillment of all God's promises. Such an awareness allows us to distinguish in this present life what is in accord with God's desires for creation and what is in opposition. To live on such a basis is to court conflict with the world around us, which lives by other assumptions. At the same time, such faith gives us the strength to face conflict and to be victorious.

There is no better collection of texts for helping a congregation regain a sense of the eschatological significance of Easter and, therefore, the long-range significance of our own Christian lives here and now. The use of these texts, especially if the last one is used, also could increase a sense of the importance and meaning of our gathered worship as a community that longs for a future we know will happen. In worship we are also given a foretaste of that future even now.

By hearing in sermons that the themes of this book are not out of line with the rest of Scripture, the congregation will also be able to appreciate the whole biblical message. Sermons can accomplish this by bringing in at least brief references to more familiar parts of Scripture whose meaning can be enhanced by seeing them in this fuller eschatological context. The preacher will need to be constantly aware of how the whole eschatological sense is at great odds with the presuppositions by which we usually live our lives. All of this cannot be accomplished in four weeks, but at least it gives a base from which to work. Pentecost can then be understood as the sending of the Spirit to keep us moving in this direction.

Endnotes

1. The best source for Irenaeus's views on these issues is his book Proof of the Apostolic Preaching, trans. by Joseph P. Smith (New York: Newman Press, 1978); see especially sections 10-12 (pp. 54-55).
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