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**Journey With A Purpose:**  
**Leading the Traumatized Church into Abundant Life**

Approved by:

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Advisor

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Reader

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Director of Doctor of Ministry Program

**Journey With A Purpose:**  
**Leading the Traumatized Church into Abundant Life**

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of

Perkins School of Theology

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

by

Walter A. Prescher III

March 31, 2023

## **ABSTRACT**

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Date: March 31, 2023

Journey With A Purpose: Leading the Traumatized Church into Abundant Life

The modern church is in bondage from years of trauma rooted in the Post-Christendom decline. As the church has responded to the trauma it is enduring, it has responded by becoming stagnant as it seeks to maintain any relevance it still has. What the modern church is going through has strong parallels with the Hebrew people who were in bondage in Egypt and were delivered through the wilderness into the promised land of Canaan. Following this example, this dissertation walks church leadership through an understanding of the traumatized church and presents a what a modern-day Exodus journey could look like in creating space for the church to reclaim its identity, process through its trauma, and reclaim its relevance in a hurting world.

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## Introduction

### **Statement of Purpose**

Through four appointments in the Rio Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, I have noticed a consistent trend. These churches encounter a myriad of challenges: loss of identity, financial crises, declining membership, and an inability to change with the world around them. Further, in talking to my peers and listening to their stories, this is a pattern across the conference. My question is, why?

Worse, than just experiencing a state of decline, many of these once vibrant churches have gone into survival mode and have turned their focus inward. Because of the nature of their decline and the challenges they face, many are demonstrating various symptoms that mimic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on a congregational level which has placed them in a form of bondage to the trauma they are enduring. Which has resulted in the church being in bondage to their fears and trauma. In the pattern, I have noticed there are strong parallels between the modern church and the Nation of Israel in the book of Exodus. Both have been forced into a form of bondage and have experienced collective trauma. The major difference, however, is that the Israelites were led through a journey in the wilderness that restored their collective identity and prepared them to move forward into God's promise. What would it look like for a modern-day church, to take a similar journey of hope, that allows them to reclaim their identity, mission, and vocation and lead a vibrant life.

In many regards this is a book on church revitalization. However, it is different in that it uses the well-known story of the Israelites fleeing bondage in Israel as the model for the church to flee from its own bondage, addressing the root problem rather than its symptoms, and grow into what God has called the congregation to be.

## Chapter Outlines

The first chapter focuses on the nature of trauma. This chapter seeks to build a foundational understanding of what trauma is and what affects it has on both the individual and the collective. In developing this understanding, the reader will develop a deeper understanding of the church's history of trauma, how scripture reflects the nature of trauma, and what this means for the church community. Finally, this chapter takes a firm look at the sociology behind how collective trauma affects a community and what is required to help the community move forward.

The second chapter is unique in that it draws heavily on the parallels between many of the causes of trauma in the local church and the ten plagues of Egypt. This section not only outlines the plagues but serves to call out the idols that the plagues were oriented towards. Likewise, this chapter looks at the nature of the modern days "plagues" or traumas the church is enduring and unpacking how in many cases these traumatic challenges are caused by the idolatry in the modern church.

Chapter three focuses on the Exodus from bondage in Egypt. What does it look like for the church to experience freedom from the plagues? In fleeing the bondage of the past there are certain obstacles that must be overcome for them to successfully make it to the wilderness where they can reform. This draws parallels from Exodus by comparing the anxiety of the people facing challenges early on in their departure, what it means to deal with the crowd's demands to return to Egypt, and the role of the pastor to follow the example of Moses to be both a prophetic voice and a shepherd to a hurting people. This chapter uses family systems to better understand the nature of anxiety in the system and what it means for the pastor to speak prophetically to call out unjust systems of power and deal with those who are abusive in the church; along with the



pastors role to be a transparent historian who hold up a mirror to the congregations past allowing them to reclaim that which is good and grow past what is harmful.

The fourth chapter is oriented towards the wilderness journey and what it means for the church to reclaim their identity, vocation, and mission. In order to do this the pastor has to help the church reclaim their ecclesiology, heart for worship, and spirituality back into order using the parallels of the Israelites having to learn to worship God whose presence was ever with them. Second, they are called to reclaim their calling and vocation, which parallels with receiving the Law at Mount Sinai. Finally, drawing parallels to Moses appointing the Judges over the tribes of Israel what does it mean to get the churches leadership in sync to be the most effective moving forward. This section looks at how the pastor, staff, and board all function together to allow the church to move in response to its calling and vocation.

Finally, the fifth chapter looks at what is necessary for the church to move forward into fruitful ministry. Much like the first chapter, this chapter shies away from scripture outside a reference to the people crossing the Jordan River. This chapter focuses on what it means for the church to engage its community and put its faith into action outside the walls of the church. This chapter looks at practices for building and sustaining community, social innovation, and a brief introduction to adaptive leadership as it relates to mission.

### **Methodology**

The methodology to deal with the institutional problem of trauma will use the following fields: church history, sociology, psychology, empirical data, and biblical exegesis to develop a theology of trauma and practical intervention that allows the church to reclaim its mission and vocation. Through these fields, I will attempt to demonstrate how the church has historically dealt with institutional trauma while remaining a vibrant body and lay a framework for the

modern church to be an active participant in the Reign of Christ. This methodology will demonstrate how institutional trauma leads to a strength of character that compels the church to move forward into its witness and service to the world.

Concerning the modern church, the methodology will also include an analysis of congregational statistics across the Rio Texas Annual Conference and a few examples of narrative accounts from two of its churches. The purpose of this phase is further to define the nature of trauma within the modern church, and the challenges leaders face in leading congregations through trying times. This will serve as the basis for developing and refining the intervention to transition the church from an insular organization to a vibrant and engaging community of faith.

Each chapter of this work will address different aspects of institutional trauma and an element of healing and renewal. The methodology in the first two chapters is to establish a framework for where we are and where we have come. The methodology for the remaining chapters is to establish a practical intervention for a traumatized church that will allow it to effectively engage a hurting world and live into the Reign of Christ.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Nature of Trauma**

Since the inception of the Church in the first century, there has been an underlying trauma narrative that has defined the nature of the Church. While the World continues to change, the Church remains in bondage, and it suffers from plagues, many of which are self-induced. As a response, the Church, which was meant to be a vibrant community that was an indwelling of the Kingdom of God on earth, has become a stagnant institution focused on self-preservation. A prime example of an organization frozen by its trauma is the Christian Church in America.

The Exodus narrative in the Old Testament itself is not directly correlated to the story of the church; one can draw parallels in understanding the nature of bondage, trauma, and deliverance. In many ways, the story of the modern church follows the Exodus narrative and will serve as the model for transformation from a church that cannot recognize the bondage to its trauma to a more robust church that not only can reclaim its identity but shift to a missional focus living into the purchase of transforming the world.

### **The Traumatized Church**

The church, in itself, has experienced trauma since its inception, both from internal and external sources. Similar to the established trauma narrative found in the book of Exodus, this pattern of trauma has formed a collective identity and has had a direct impact on the foundational history of the church. Further, collective trauma, real or perceived, continues to impact the ability of the church to respond to its collective calling and vocation in the world today. Therefore, let us begin by developing a deeper understanding of the nature of trauma, especially concerning the transference of trauma within the family system.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines trauma in two different ways. The first is an injury or wound to living tissue; the second is an experience that causes long-term emotional or mental problems for an extended period of time. To better understand these definitions, we need to develop an understanding of what is happening as a response to stimuli around us. The field of neuroscience has done extensive research not only into understanding the immediate response to stimuli but the long-term effects of trauma.

A natural ability within the animal kingdom is the ability to determine what is friend or foe or to identify that which is scary or threatening. For example, one could look at a lizard. The lizard in itself is lounging on a rock or branch, probably going to have a fairly simplistic life. It is not worried about things such as schedules, calories, deadlines, etc. Rather it survives primarily on instinct; if a bug happens to cross its path, it will probably flick out its tongue and eat it. Humans, on the other hand, tend to live not by their instinct but by a higher level of cognition; this does not mean that, at times, humans will not regress to functioning on an instinctive level. However, like most other animals, they are wired with an early warning system to help them be aware of threats. This response is located in a small section of the brain called the amygdala. This section of the brain serves to regulate the body's response to potential threats, much like the Identify Friend or Foe (IFF) systems on most military and commercial aircraft.<sup>1</sup>

While this section of the brain is designed to keep us safe. It also has the ability to override the cognitive, rational thought areas of the brain. When danger is present, the amygdala has the ability to force the body to respond first, then process later. This primitive brain system

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<sup>1</sup>Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). 51.

works on a boolean system, or simple yes or no. Asking, “Is the environment safe, or is danger present?” The drawback to this is that the amygdala has no sense of time; threats that are identified early in life are typically carried forward later in life. For the first three years of life the amygdala is the primary location for memory. For example, a young child who had a scary encounter with a dog is much more likely to be reactionary to dogs later in life.<sup>2</sup>

What research has shown, is that persons with an active amygdala have more issues with memory and processing of events because a combination of two factors: first, the amygdala restricts the amount of information available about situation and environment; second, the potential pool of triggers expands to anything that resembles the original trigger. The more the amygdala remains triggered, the more difficult it is to conduct a threat assessment, eventually everything becomes a threat. While an overactive amygdala is problematic, it is a necessary aspect of the brain, without it people or animals would have no fear to avoid harmful situations.<sup>3</sup> When the trauma is severe enough and the amygdala remains active enough, the results can have a more drastic effect on long-term mental health.

Since 2001, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, has conducted studies into the long-term effects of mental trauma, specifically focusing on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition (DSM-5), PTSD is a mental health disorder that centers around a continual fear response to events that either involve actual near death, serious injury, or threat to the physical welfare of others.

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<sup>2</sup> Steinke, *Congregational Leadership In Anxious Times*, 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-4.

Traumatic events included in the DSM-5 includes events that are not uncommon outside of combat zones such as the death of loved ones, chronic illness, sexual harassment, infidelity, divorce, bullying, or extremely stressful events.<sup>4</sup> Typically, a person with PTSD has intense emotional response (intense fear, hopelessness, or horror), a desire to avoid stimuli that trigger these responses (thoughts, places, activities, or people), numbing (diminished interest in participating in activities, depression, or detachment), re-experiencing the trauma (intrusive thoughts, flashbacks and nightmares). Increased vigilance (difficulty sleeping, concentrating, and increased irritability) These long-term effects of trauma can be debilitating. They can make it extremely difficult for persons with this diagnosis to live a normal life.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2011, this study has been expanded to not only understand the causes and effects of PTSD, but to include the concept of Moral Injury. Moral Injury is the concept that transgressions of deeply held moral and ethical beliefs, during extreme circumstances, can cause long term psychological injury. While PTSD and Moral Injury have many of the same symptomatology, they are not the same. PTSD is a mental health diagnosis that deals with the fear response to trauma, Moral Injury focuses on the psychological damage done when a person violates, or perceives to violate, their core moral values. This psychological damage often results in the loss of trust with these core values, especially relating to the ability for anyone to maintain any form of shared moral covenant.<sup>6</sup>

Further studies have indicated that there are high rates of secondary traumatization and compassion fatigue within these military families. The continual stress of caring for a person

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<sup>4</sup> Nash, William P., "Moral Injury: A Mechanism for War-Related Psychological Trauma in Military Family Members." *Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review* 16, no. 4 (December 2013): 366.

<sup>5</sup> Birnbaum, Aiton. "Collective trauma and post-traumatic symptoms in the biblical narrative of ancient Israel." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11, no. 5 (July 2008): 534.

<sup>6</sup> Nash, "Moral Injury: A Mechanism for War-Related Psychological Trauma in Military Family Members.", 368.

with severe and profound PTSD symptoms along with indirectly reliving the trauma with their loved ones exponentially increases the chances of developing symptoms. A study done in 2011 determined that 89.4% of wives, out of a sample group of 190, demonstrated at least one symptom of PTSD. Of that same small sampling 23.7% demonstrated enough symptomology to rate at a moderate level of severity on the PTSD screening checklist. The course of the study indicated that almost a quarter of the women who demonstrated some form of symptomatology indicated that their husband's PTSD was a contributing factor to their symptoms.

A secondary study conducted in 2012 indicated that 40.3% of 154 wives of PTSD-diagnosed war veterans sampled demonstrated criteria for a PTSD diagnosis using the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, compared to 6.5% of a sample of 77 wives of war veterans who did not have symptomology for PTSD. While these are small sampling pools, there is some indication that the negative effects of trauma are not limited only to those who experienced the trauma first hand.<sup>7</sup>

Why is it important to develop an understanding of PTSD and Moral injury? Because as the understanding of trauma became more widely recognized and accepted in the fields of psychology it began to expand into other social sciences. Sociologists began applying the basic understanding of individuals to the collective experiences of people, groups, and organizations to develop a framework for understanding the nature of collective trauma. However, this framework is not nearly as solidified as individual trauma, with two predominant theories emerging that, while different, seek to complement each other.

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<sup>7</sup> Nash, "Moral Injury: A Mechanism for War-Related Psychological Trauma in Military Family Members.", 366-7.

The first, developed by Kai Erikson, states that collective trauma is “ a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community.”<sup>8</sup> The secondary theory, developed by Jeffery Alexander, states that “collective trauma is a social process by which a collective adopts a particular trauma narrative.” This narrative functions as a means to identify the group that is perceived to have undergone the suffering together, describes the nature of said suffering, identifies the agents or causes of the suffering, and identifies the wider audience that will identify with the victim group. This narrative serves as the foundation for the group identity.<sup>9</sup>

While these two theories approach the concept of social collective trauma; differently, they complement each other quite well. Erikson is concerned with the process that fragments the social fabric of the community and social cohesion. In contrast, Alexander’s concerns are focused on the process of (re)constructing the communal identity. Regardless, of which approach is taken in the case of severe collective trauma the social fabric is disrupted. Much like in the case of individual trauma, the impact is outside of the scope of awareness of the individual; in a situation of collective trauma the immediate social effect of the trauma is outside the understanding of the collective. However, similar to the healing process for individual trauma the collective will have to process through the events of the trauma to create a new narrative. While this is the focus of Alexander’s theory, Erikson understands that it is possible for the collective to be so fractured that it is improbable for them to embrace a common narrative.

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<sup>8</sup> Boase, Elizabeth, and Christopher G. Frechette, eds. *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*. Semeia Studies, number 86. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017) 8.

<sup>9</sup> Boase, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, 8.



So, what happens when the community has trouble embracing that common narrative? I would argue that a community that is either unable or in the process of formulating a new common narrative can appear to have multiple identities as cliques begin to form each with their own interpretation and trauma narrative. This would cause the collective to manifest similarities to an individual with dissociative identity disorder, which in itself is traditionally understood to be caused by extreme trauma. In regards to this, the leader in the community must be carefully diligent to seek to cultivate both a sense of safety and basic social bonds, and direct the various narratives towards one common truth. This may be done in a variety of ways including rituals, memorials, texts, media.<sup>10</sup>

The nature and work of the church is such that it has a natural capacity to offer both a sense of safety and cultivate a common ground in rebuilding social bonds. Whether it is through the liturgia (work) of the church in the context of worship or community, the rituals and traditions, or the common ground found in Scripture, the church seeks to bring people together in offering grace, hope, and peace in the midst of trauma. However, the church dealing with its own trauma is struggling to do just that. One of the greatest tools for unifying people seems to be divisive in its own regard, that being the Bible.

The Bible is filled with unsettling passages that describe murder, rape, slavery, genocide, forced displacement, and forced migration. These narratives directly oppose our shared understanding of a moral covenant and, for many, can serve as triggers for experienced trauma, especially in marginalized communities. Instinctively, the church would prefer to avoid these troublesome texts and redouble its efforts to proclaim the grace of Christ, but does that do justice

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<sup>10</sup> Boase, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, 8-9.

to the overall narrative of the Bible. Instead, it is essential to engage these traumatic texts and bear witness to the struggles of particular communities as they seek to live out their relationship with God in a specific era.

While these passages are troubling to read, especially since they are frank in their descriptions and apparent endorsement of violence, they do have a valid place in the canon of scripture. What happens when a person from a marginalized community, who has been hurt by others in the church, approaches these difficult passages only to find more agony than hope? The perceived inclination would be that they would close the book and simply walk away more hurt than before. Perhaps though the response is different through an understanding of the narrative, they may bear witness to the fact that they are not alone in their own suffering and find liberating hope.<sup>11</sup>

This is especially true for the book of Exodus, which serves as our model in understanding the church's response to trauma and ability to overcome it. Specifically addressing the narrative of Exodus, we become aware that the early Israelites suffered significant collective trauma in the forms of slavery, recurring plagues, and were witness to extreme violence as God battled with pharaoh for control over the lives of the Israelites. The trauma narrative of Exodus serves to fulfill two purposes: first, it establishes the collective identity of Israel as God's chosen people, and second, it serves to explain the development of the law to protect them from further trauma after they experience liberation.

The collective trauma of Exodus takes place in three distinct acts: slavery in Egypt (Exodus 1 -2), the psychological trauma of the plagues (Exodus 8 – 12), and finally the trauma of

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<sup>11</sup> Corinna Guerrero. "Costly Scripture. (cover story)." *America* 213, no. 12 (October 26, 2015): 19- 20

the wilderness of testing. In addition to the collective trauma of the Israelites, there are indications that their leader Moses also showed signs of PTSD symptoms. While the focus of the narrative is on the collective identity forged through the trauma narrative, the personal trauma narrative of Moses is not completely independent, but rather is interwoven into the communal narrative. The anxiety of Moses would most likely have elevated the stress and anxiety of the people. Further, there is some indication that this narrative and collective identity passes generationally throughout Israelite history.<sup>12</sup>

Over its 2,000-year history, the church has seen a similar cyclic progression repeat resulting in it experiencing PTSD-like symptoms. While this claim seems borderline anthropomorphic, it has a valid claim. This is a living embodiment of the people of God and the bride of Christ. Given this it is not unexpected, the collective trauma of its storied history has served to cause it to manifest symptoms that resemble those of PTSD. Throughout the church's lifecycle, there exists a pattern of hopelessness, fear, avoidance, numbness to the plight of the world around it, and a sense of detachment. While it would be bold to claim that we live in the Post Traumatic Church, it would not be implausible to say so. The era of persecution and being forced underground in the first centuries served as a basis to develop a collective identity much like the Israelites experiences in bondage and during the plagues. The period where the church was free from persecution and established as a dominant religion in the Roman empire allowed for the creation of the Institution which parallels the creation of the Law in the wilderness. The institution, rather than the law, would seek to protect from further trauma. But has it?

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<sup>12</sup> Birnbaum, Aiton. "Collective trauma and post-traumatic symptoms in the biblical narrative of ancient Israel." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11, no. 5 (July 2008): 536 -40.

The understanding that a major reformation has happened in the church approximately every 500 years indicates that the church is trapped in this trauma cycle. A combination of cultural shifts, church law, and clinging to comfortability causes the church, both universally and in local congregations, to be forced back into bondage where they experience a loss of identity and or purpose. They then experience the effects of plagues and eventually secure their initial deliverance into the wilderness, where through a time of reformation, they enact a new law to try and prevent future trauma.

The ever-changing culture of our world has caused many local congregations to experience a new and ever more challenging form of trauma. The loss of power, prestige, and relevance in modern society has caused a new sense of overwhelming loss. These will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter under the section on plagues. Regardless of the source of trauma, the response is the same whether at the universal church level or the local level. They begin a spiral of responding to a perceived trauma real or imagined, this forces the local congregation to enter the flight, fight, or freeze trauma response, which results in the church entering a state of bondage, while enslaved to this threat, they become more receptive to the traumatic events around them, and often respond in a reactionary way that further expands their problems. However, this is where many local churches differentiate from the universal church, they don't quite get to the point of deliverance before they attempt to establish the "law" or those systems to prevent further trauma. Because of this, they end up deeper in their bondage and are prone to more intense plagues. But why does this happen?

## The Church in Bondage

What does it mean to be in bondage? The Bible provides insight into what it means to be in bondage; there is a running theme in the Old Testament of the people of Israel being held in captivity by a variety of foreign powers, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. In John 8:34 (NRSV), Jesus teaches, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who has sinned is a slave to sin.” For the purpose of our understanding, we are going to blur these two distinct definitions of bondage while focusing primarily on the parallels within the book of Exodus.

The story of the Exodus begins with the descendants of Israel, Jacob, thriving in the land of Egypt. This group of about seventy that came to Egypt in the midst of a famine, only to be saved by the brother they sold into slavery, is thriving. Exodus 1:7 (NRSV) says, “But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” The prolific nature of these people carries with it echoes of the divine blessing of humanity both at the time of creation and after the great flood in Genesis. It also indicates that the people of Israel did not conform to the ways of the Egyptians, but rather lived as a set-apart community within the greater nation of Egypt.<sup>13</sup>

Much like the descendants of Israel settling in Egypt, the church has gained in prosperity and influence since Constantine’s imperial edict in 324 AD, stating that all soldiers were to worship the supreme God on the first day of the week, and following it with the calling of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea a year later gave new authority for the Christian Church. While Constantine did not make Christianity the state religion of Rome, as is often credited to him, the actions allowed the church to move from a period of persecution to dominance during

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<sup>13</sup> Sarna, Nahum M. *Exodus =: [Shemot]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. 1st ed. The JPS Torah Commentary. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 4.

his reign.<sup>14</sup> One of the unpredictable outcomes of this change in status is that the church was able to gain power and influence in the world. Over the past almost 1700 years, much like the Israelites in Egypt, the church has moved from a threatened period into prosperity as it has grown in number, power, influence, and wealth. Even amidst separation and strife through the centuries that followed the Church maintained great influence in the social order of things.

However, if there are any constants in this world, it changes, and the Israelite people experience this in the form of a new King over the land of Egypt. In verses 8 - 22, we begin to understand that the new King, who does not know of Joseph, views the prosperity, power, and influence of the Israelites as a threat to the authority of his rule and the nation of Egypt. In Exodus 1:9b-10 (NRSV) Pharaoh says, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the case of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” In the case of this major change for the Israelites, comes a response to the changing of the regime, this group who had been prosperous, and most likely made significant contributions to the economic prosperity of Egypt at the time is now deemed a threat. The interesting parallel for the church is the way that the King refers to the people of Israel. Verse 9 in Hebrew says “*am benie yisra ‘el*” which is unique, rather than using the word, *goy*, which would be political in nature referring to a nation the word used is, *am*, which has a familial connection. The king, in this case, is identifying a family group as a threat to national security and, as such, determines that they must be oppressed.

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<sup>14</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 1: The Early Church to the Reformation*, Rev. and updated [ed.], 2nd ed (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).140-1.

In many ways, in this post-Christendom age, the church finds itself in its own form of bondage. Since the late 1800s, the power and authority of the church have dwindled. Through a series of events, the culture of the world began to change; through a series of revolutions across the globe, the power of the monarchy across much of Europe waned. In addition, advancements in technology leading into and through the industrial revolution changed the social and political landscape. Further, the age of modernity began, bringing to fruit the intellectualism that began during the Renaissance. The combination of elements meant that the people started to

question and challenge the nature of the church.<sup>15</sup> Much like the people of Israel, whom Pharaoh referred to as *am*, the church is to be viewed in a familial sense rather than a political one. Unfortunately, much of the church's history has revolved around the socio-economic and political aspects rather than developing a cohesive body reflective of a strong ecclesiology.

The cultural landscape has changed in the church causing the church's respective amygdala to go off. It is almost as if the individuals who make up the collective church leadership had their amygdalas in sync. Anxiety is contagious. In the preceding section, this has had a variety of negative effects with regards to the reaction of the collective. As the church goes into danger response, its perception of threats and danger begins to expand. Stimuli, that might not have previously been flagged as threatening, become a major threat to the wellbeing of the institution.<sup>16</sup> The social fabric connecting the church and the world begins to split, and the over compensation of the alert system becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather than respond with a creative solution to the threats around them, the church begins to pull back and turn inward. Causing the collective to demand certainty, in what is known and comfortable, which

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<sup>15</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity. Volume 2: The Reformation to Present Day*, Rev. and updated [ed.], 2nd ed (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 301-4.

<sup>16</sup> Steinke, *Congregational Leadership In Anxious Times*, 53-4.

creates roadblocks to imaginative problem solving. Further when quick fixes do not work, it further develops a sense of helplessness and self-doubt and solidifies defensive behaviors.<sup>17</sup> All of these reactions distort perception, make it harder for them to form a collective narrative, and solidify the nature of their bondage.

For example, in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, there are two United Methodist Congregations within a 3-mile drive of each other; they could not be any more different. Both churches have a significant campus facility, and a robust history in the community, but one church is thriving and the other, while statistically does not seem to have challenges, is struggling. Church “A” according to the 2019 statistical data from the Rio Texas Annual Conference Journal had a pre-covid membership of 1,577 and an average worship attendance of 477. This church had over 300 people participate in missional opportunities and served approximately 7,100 people in the community through their outreach ministries. This is in comparison to Church “B” which is struggling with a membership of 437 and an average worship attendance of 115. And had a total of 12 people engaged in external ministry serving 200.<sup>18</sup> In comparing the two congregations, if all things are equal why is there such a disparity between the two churches? The answer is simple, it relates to the culture of the congregation.

To seek understanding and outline the greater sense of the problematic relationship of the church and bondage, one must begin with an understanding of organizational culture. Aubrey Malphurs defines this culture as “the unique expression of the interaction of the church’s shared beliefs and its values, which explain its behaviors in general and display its unique identity in particular.”<sup>19</sup> One way to imagine this is to consider an apple. The skin is the first thing that

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<sup>17</sup> Steinke, *Congregational Leadership In Anxious Times*, 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> McCandless, Mickey, ed. *Rio Texas Annual Conference Journal 2020*, October 3, 2020, 475.

<sup>19</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *Look before You Lead: How to Discern and Shape Your Church Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 20.



you would notice, this is the outward presentation that would tell you that you were looking at an apple. This is representative of the outward behavior of the organization, these are the outward expressions that an observer might see. What are the church's facilities like, what rituals, symbols, language do they use? For the casual observer, these are often easy to identify but can be difficult to understand without the deeper context of beliefs and values.<sup>20</sup>

The flesh, the interior portion of the apple that is edible, represents the values. Values are the expression of behavior that is driven by the shared values of the church. These values are what is important to the organization, they give shape and define the visible behaviors. They explain why the church behaves the way that it does and why it fails to do what it should. For an authentic church, its values are rooted in putting the shared beliefs into action. Until that happens, there is a disconnect between the beliefs and the outward expressed behavior.<sup>21</sup>

At the heart, you have the core beliefs. Core beliefs are the foundational level of the church's culture; it comprises the shared beliefs on which the church's culture is based. Included in the culture are the church's understanding of historic doctrine, ecclesiology, bylaws, or constitution. Further, it contains how the church views and understands itself and its vocation in the world. These are critical for the church to understand because it sets the foundation for every aspect of church life; the church is belief-based, values-driven, and behavior-expressed.<sup>22</sup>

Understanding the culture of the church is the foundational step to understanding how the church will respond to challenges. A church that has a healthier culture in which the core beliefs define their values and actions will demonstrate more resilience to the plagues of this world. Much like the first church mentioned above, a church with a healthier culture will typically

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<sup>20</sup> Malphurs, *Look Before You Lead*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-2.

thrive even when faced with challenges. While churches with a healthy culture will be referred to, especially in later chapters, to better understand what the promised land looks like, we are more concerned with the churches that in response to external or internal trauma have unhealthy cultures resulting from a disconnect in their beliefs, values, and actions. To further develop an understanding of how trauma affects church culture and furthers this disconnect, let us put this in context.

For the purpose of understanding the culture of a struggling church, we will look at elements of the culture of Church “B”. Using Malphur’s model of defining church culture to put the nature of Church “B” in context is difficult because many of the church leadership have a perception problem. When asking the church leadership to define their culture, these are some of the standard responses beginning with their beliefs, values, and then behaviors. They believe that they are a relevant and timely church that has a connection with their local community. They value relationships and being part of the greater community in the Northern part of the Rio Grande Valley; also, they love their worship space and facilities. This means that their perception of their behavior is that they are warm, hospitable, and outgoing. They will quickly point to two of their primary fundraisers each year as a justification for this behavior. However, is this genuinely accurate to their culture? The answer is a resounding no.

Several years ago, they participated in an external evaluation of the church called the Healthy Church Initiative. This program sought to understand the culture through congregational surveys, interviews, and a "secret shopper" program. A secret shopper program sent paid and volunteer visitors to the church with a rubric to evaluate how the church handled visitors. What the evaluation team discovered was not readily accepted by the church leadership because it was contrary to their understanding. The report indicated that their beliefs were

accurate; however, their values were on internal relationships and their building. They had a strong insider mentality and were composed of several small cliques. It also challenged their notion of hospitality and being a welcoming congregation. Visitors to the church that filled out evaluations strongly indicated that they neither felt welcomed nor wanted at the church and a severe hospitality issue.

Current observations indicate that the culture represented in this report is still accurate. Rather than shift behaviors to be more welcoming or engaging towards new people, they put in a hospitality station with coffee and refreshments before church. Likewise, there are severe issues with the cleanliness and upkeep of the church facilities. The general response to this is to blame the janitor, who is frequently pulled by various church members to do non-janitorial work. Based on these observations and the report from Healthy Church, one could define their culture as this. Church “B” is a church that believes they are relevant and timely; however, its values are inwardly focused. They pride internal relationships, and power, and love their aging campus, which means that their behavior demonstrates that they are exclusively inclusive. Their behavior also reflects one more troubling aspect; they have no ownership of the church's facilities, mission, or vocation. Instead, they expect a paid staff or a handful of volunteers to do the work rather than investing time or energy. This is reflected in their own statistics with only twelve people in the church engaged in mission.

The lack of ownership of the congregation concerning their mission and vocation is at the heart of their decline. By far, the most significant challenge at Church “B” is a broken power system. In *Transforming Power*, Robert Linthicum dedicated a chapter to what went wrong with the people of Israel and why they were in exile. While his examples focus on priestly leadership, many of his correlations apply to the nature of leadership at Church “B” today. There is a

significant focus among the laity to maintain power at the expense of others. Linthicum claims that the priests withheld information that allowed the people of Israel to live in right relationship with God, and that gave them control over the people.<sup>23</sup> A portion of the leadership has idolized their positions and their role in the church. Thus, they maintain control of critical information and access to infrastructure in the church, which makes the transition of leaders nearly impossible. One example is the former head trustee who refused to hand over access control to the church's thermostats and a list of vendors who had previously done repairs. When this was addressed, the person responded in an overly dramatic fashion.

Besides, another challenge faced by Israel during their exile was their political system. In the time of Ezekiel, the political system was supposed to work for justice for all people. Rather than work for justice, the power system of the time served their self-interest and oppressed the people they were meant to serve.<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, one can point to the current systems of power in our own country and the state and national level to prove that this continues. However, inputting this in context at Church “B,” one can make similar claims. While believing their intentions to be true, many of the existing leaders oppress any contrary opinions to their own. These politics of oppression are not limited to their fellow congregants; they equally apply to paid staff, including the pastor. Any attempt to restore the balance of leadership or hold these leaders accountable to the law, whether that be Federal, State, or church law, is met with fierce opposition. Often resulting in personal attacks or emotional outbursts towards those who are challenging the status quo. As a result, many members refuse to accept any leadership role or

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<sup>23</sup> Robert C. Linthicum, *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003)43.

<sup>24</sup> Linthicum, *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community*, 45.

take ownership of the church out of fear. This has further proved detrimental to the health and longevity of the church.

While this is not the only possible example, it is a good example of how a congregation's culture serves to keep the church in bondage. Church "B" is in slavery to a toxic culture that stifles growth and all but eliminates any hope or promise of missional engagement. Much like the Israelites who were in bondage in Egypt, the existing power structure of the Pharaoh kept the Israelites in bondage. In the case of Church "B," the power system that keeps the church in bondage is not external, but in turn, those who feel it is their calling to serve are keeping the remainder of the congregation in bondage to serve their self-interests. One of the recurring themes in the overall cultural context of the church is that perceptions and reality are not aligned, and as such, the outward behaviors are not reflective of their core beliefs or values, although they honestly believe they are. One could assume that many churches in a state of serious decline are likewise in a similar predicament. Within the local church's leadership, there is a disconnect between outward action and the core beliefs and values, which results in the development of entrenched leadership and a toxic culture.

This is not a problem at just the local church among its laity, it exists at all levels of church governance. For example, in the United Methodist Church, a similar problem exists at the Annual Conference. One small bit of negative external stimuli and the need to react is almost overwhelming. This causes conference leadership to jump from one cultural issue to another, all the while, distracting from the mission and vocation of the church. An observation from my home Annual Conference is that in a five-year period they appointed commissions and passed resolutions concerning all of the social issues listed above. Resources were allocated to these issues, all the while the overall average worship attendance declined and more churches were

looking at potentially going to less than full-time pastors. The shifting priorities and knee-jerk reactions to cultural movements served as a distraction and disruption that solidified the bondage and stagnation of the collective body.

Now, I am not claiming that the church has no ownership of systemic problems, one should argue that issues of immigration, racism, and violence in our country are systemic problems that the church has a role in addressing and combating. What I am saying, is when the emphasis is on social issues over the mission of the church given in the Great Commission in Matthew 28: 19-20, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* The commission given to the disciples was one of empowerment and offering liberation from bondage to sin and death. One could argue that this passage points to the Wesleyan notion of personal piety and social justice as being two sides of the same coin.

We are to allow our lives to be transformed and, in that transformation, we seek to change the world around us. It is a “both/and” not an “either/or” and when church leadership only embraces one side of the coin either personal piety or social justice then what you see is the church in bondage to a set of ideological principles. This dualistic approach to discipleship and the resulting ideologies that have developed from it have done more harm to the global church over the past 30 years than almost any other issue. It might be masked under various causes, but overall it is a sincere lack of understanding of the church's overall mission, purpose, and vocation which adds to and further complexifies the nature of the trauma the church endures today. It is as a direct response to the churches lack of identity and understanding of its mission, purpose, and vocation that is undergoing its own series of plagues that are resulting in further trauma and

decline at the local congregational level. The next chapter will look at a variety, although not an exhaustive list, of modern-day plagues that the church is enduring and draw parallels to the plagues faced by the Egyptians prior to their Exodus from Egypt.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Plagues**

Much like the plagues in Egypt against Pharaoh and the Egyptian people, the modern-day plagues serve a dualistic purpose not only serving to provide liberation from bondage by calling out the idols of Egypt but also to show the power of God. When analyzing the 10 plagues, each of the plagues is directly correlated to the pantheon of Egyptian gods and specifically directed at their primary avatar in Pharaoh. At the same time, these plagues also demonstrated the power of God to people who had lost their relationship with the God of their ancestors. As we begin to look at the modern plagues affecting the church, we can see a similar pattern of attacking the idols of the modern church and demonstrating God's power and authority to a people that have lost sight of what it means to be in a relationship with their God.

### **The Plagues of Decline**

When looking at the nature of the plagues, they are sometimes lumped together in sets of threes. The first three plagues of Egypt were turning the water into blood, frogs, and gnats. These three plagues served to disrupt the livelihood and well-being of the people of Egypt. The nature of these plagues caused an initial decline in the health and well-being of those in the region. It is also apparent that the Israelites were not spared from the effects of the first three plagues. When we do a modern comparison, we can see a parallel in the decline of the modern church. The rivers of abundance that the church has prided itself on have turned to blood and the church is experiencing a state of rapid and steady decline. As this has happened the frogs and gnats, the decline in giving and attendance, are subsequent frustrations to the overall decline the church is experiencing.



## Plague 1 - Decrease in Attendance

The first plague is in Exodus 7:14- 25; in it, all the water in the land of Egypt turns to blood. The Egyptian people deified the river Nile as the Egyptian god Hapi. A frequent occurrence during the months of September and October would be a period of heavy flooding due to snow melt and summer rains. This heavy flood would pull the red dirt of the Nile valley and give the water the appearance of blood, at this time the people of Egypt would view these floods as the manifestation of Osiris. While this a great scientific explanation as to how this plague could have been naturally occurring it also served to discredit the polytheistic nature of the Egyptian gods. Regardless of this explanation, the outcome was the same: the people of Egypt had no water to drink, or irrigate fields, and the fish died. Egypt was hit with a plague that began to cause great decline.<sup>25</sup> Similar to this plague the rivers of abundance experienced by the church over the ages appear to similarly have turned to blood.

It is apparent that the Church in America is experiencing a period of significant decline, even before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Pew Research Center indicates that in the decade prior to the pandemic, the number of people in the United States that identified as Christian decreased by 12% to 65%. Of those identifying as Christian, only 44% reported attending church weekly, with only 62% reporting regular attendance at least monthly.<sup>26</sup>

While these pre-Covid-19 statistics are staggering, they are a symptom of a more significant problem occurring in the church. Much like the Israelites, who were in bondage in Egypt, the church is in bondage today. The church's bondage, however, is to the institutions and buildings it must support, systems that are no longer effective, and traditions that have negative

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<sup>25</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 38-40.

<sup>26</sup> "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, June 9, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

impacts. In an age where attendance and giving are continually shrinking, the church is expected to do more with less, which adds to the overall stress of many local congregations experiencing a state of decline. This chapter will explore the nature of the problem by identifying external points of bondage, the nature of the plagues the church is enduring and exploring the culture surrounding the trauma narrative of the church.

### **Plague 2 - Decrease in Giving**

After the seven days the Nile River was turned to blood, the second plague appears: frogs begin to emerge and begin to take over the houses and palaces in Egypt. The nature of this plague seems to be a direct attack on the Egyptian goddess of fertility and helper of women in childbirth, Heqt. It also served as a means to humble Pharaoh as his magicians could increase the number of frogs but could not diminish them. What is notable about the plague of frogs is that they were a major disruption in the land of Egypt; these amphibians were everywhere. Until Pharaoh implored Moses to have God remove them, and they all died.<sup>27</sup>

It is no secret that the local congregation relies on charitable giving in the form of tithes and gifts to support the needs and ministries of the church. As the Nile River turns to blood and the number of people who are attending worship on a given Sunday morning continues to shrink, there is a direct impact on the financial giving that is coming into the church. Even as early as 1994, trends in giving were beginning to diminish, in a study conducted and published for the Religious Research Association, Inc. the data clearly showed that across major religions in the United States the average percentage of income given was 2.0%; however, this calculated out lower at a value of 1.4%. Looking just at mainline protestant churches this number increased

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<sup>27</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 40-1.

slightly to reported giving of 2.4%, with an actual calculated giving percentage of 1.9%.<sup>28</sup> This per household amount is shocking to say the least considering most churches stress the tithe or giving of 10% based on instruction from Leviticus 27: 30-34 and Malachi 3: 8-12, which both establish the commandment and importance of giving the full 10% to God.

While this data is more than two decades old and there are other factors playing into the overall nature of church giving such as changes to the Federal Tax Codes, the rate of inflation, economic factors, and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, we will move forward based on the assumption that overall rate of giving has remained fairly constant at the 1.9% of income per household. If this were true, then it would be appropriate to correlate that as the church has experienced a drastic decline in attendance then the overall giving to the mission and ministries of the church would likewise have decreased. Simply put, the fewer families attending the less that give. This has created a significant problem for many congregations. This is the nature of the plague of frogs in the local church.

Whereas giving appears to have decreased, if for no other reason that people are not attending as frequently or in as great of numbers, the expenses incurred by the church often have not. In many of the congregations I have served, salaries for the pastor and staff have been 50-60% of the annual church budget, and these salaries have been close to the minimum level of compensation required by the Annual Conference. Further, the congregation has to pay utilities, insurance, benevolences to their denominational hierarchy, and maintenance on sometimes aging buildings. This, similar to the frogs in Egypt, accounts for a large number of disruptions towards the mission and focus of the church. Often, these massed bills serve as a unique form of trauma

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<sup>28</sup> Hoge, R., and Fenggang Yang. "Determinants of Religious Giving in American Denominations: Data from Two Nationwide Surveys." *Review of Religious Research*, vol. 36, no. 2, Dec. 1994, p. 123, 10.2307/3511404. Accessed 7 Sept. 2022.

that causes the organization to enter survival mode, resulting in budget cuts, staff and program reductions, and failure to do necessary maintenance.

### **Plague 3 - Itinerancy Challenges**

In Exodus 8; 12-15, the Egyptians are plagued by an invasion of vermin. While this is often translated various ways, it is understood to be various parasitic insects, lice, mosquitos, or gnats. While these vectors in themselves were normally bad in the months of October and November in the Nile region, it is believed that the previous plagues made them even more severe. Regardless of the source, not only are the swarms of insects in this plague annoying but they are a variety of vectors that carry deadly diseases. What is interesting in this plague is that this is the first plague that the magicians of Pharaoh seem to have no response to, they can neither increase nor decrease the severity of these vermin.<sup>29</sup>

To understand just how annoying this can be, it only takes a short time sitting outside on a Texas evening to understand how unpleasant gnats or mosquitos can be. Worse yet, beyond the annoyance factor, these insects, especially mosquitoes, are known to carry a variety of diseases such as the zika virus, West Nile virus, malaria, and dengue fever. In a large enough swarm, they have the ability to send people seeking shelter inside tents or buildings. One of the challenges the modern church faces is the concept of pastoral change. In Episcopal systems of polity such as the United Methodist Church, this means that clergy are itinerant. They serve at the will of the Bishop who oversees a geographic region. While in theory this means that a local church will not simply hire the pastor they want, but rather get a pastor that they might not choose but who has gifts and graces that compliment where they are in their own life cycle and

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<sup>29</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 41.

growth as disciples. This often is not how the system works. Within my home annual conference, a study of the pastoral records in the annual conference journal indicates that the average length of appointment for an ordained elder was approximately three and a half years. Which most experts agree is not long enough for them to effectively accomplish any real or lasting form of ministry. There are of course exceptions to those numbers, usually pastors who are more senior in their respective ministry careers who are able to remain at well paying medium size churches (average worship attendance in excess of 125) to large congregations (average worship attendance in excess of 250), or those who transition to non-pulpit ministries such as working for a non-profit<sup>30</sup>. While this example is specific to a geographic region in one denomination, it would appear that the data is reflective of ministry in general, even in churches with a call system where the local congregation directly hires their pastor.

The question here is why such constant turnover? One of the primary causes is the expense of a seminary education. Depending on the school, seminary can easily exceed \$80,000. This means that most seminary graduates who meet the qualifications for ordination have extensive student loan debt. Congregations that are experiencing the types of decline outlined in the first two plagues, often can barely afford to pay the minimum compensation required by the Annual Conference. This causes pastors to seek larger and higher paying churches in an effort to make ends meet. Another concern is that the notion of high rates of turnover truly become like the gnats of the third plague. Congregational leadership becomes toxic towards the pastors that they are sent or hired because they know they will not be there long enough to affect any type of lasting change. This allows congregations to dig their heels in and stick to “that's the way we have always done things.” This effectively negates the ability of pastors to lead and grow with

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<sup>30</sup> McCandless, *Rio Texas Annual Conference Journal 2020*, 405-448.

their congregations. Further, it can have the snowball effect that pastors who might have been enthusiastic about ministry and had the drive to promote discipleship carry that toxicity with them, which often starts the problem of toxicity in a healthy church, causing it to begin to decline.

### **The Plagues of Pestilence**

The first grouping of plagues focused on the decline of the church in America from a societal or more external focus than directly within the local congregation. The second set of plagues focuses on the pestilence that happens in the local congregation in response to the general decline. Because of the lack of resources caused by the general decline of the church, many congregations are dealing with the internal diseases of wasting away. They give up on maintenance, programming, and focus internally rather than living into their missional calling and vocation. This next section will develop an understanding of how the plagues of pestilence are stripping many congregations of their will to thrive.

#### **Plague 4 - Reduction in Generosity**

Building on the plague of gnats and how disruptive they can be, the next plague impacting the Egyptians was the plague of flies. In Exodus 8:24, we see “*and great swarms of flies came into the house of Pharaoh and into the officials' house; in all of Egypt the land was ruined because of the flies.*” While alternate traditions translate this plague as swarms of insects, it is commonly understood in the Septuagint and Philo to be the dog fly, a voracious biting fly known to carry anthrax and other animal diseases. This is also the first plague to distinguish between the Egyptians and Israelite people; this is apparent due to the Land of Goshen, where the Israelites lived, being spared from this plague.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [Shemot], 42-3.

As the church enters its own form of fight, flight, flee, or freeze, also known as survival mode based on systemic decline it will become defensive. Often this means significant budget cuts to ensure the survival of the organization because well there just aren't the funds available. While these budget cuts are generally across the board, for the purpose of this plague we are going to focus primarily on missional giving and programs.

Usually when a church goes into survival mode because of financial concerns and begins trimming the budget the first thing cut is missional support. Churches that have historically supported international mission projects, missionaries, or regional ministry opportunities begin to cut their support for these programs. After all, if the church is struggling to pay its bills, what good is supporting a village in Africa. Next, they begin to cut their missional support for local missions and any form of community outreach. They begin to justify their actions with statements like "What good does it do to send money outside the walls when we can't afford what goes on inside?" When this mentality is reached, the entire focus shifts from the connection the congregation has with the outside world to care of its members.<sup>32</sup>

Worse yet, as the budget continues to tighten they begin to adopt a mentality of "serve us" rather than "service." As the church leadership begins to feel the pinch of decreased resources, they begin to reallocate their limited resources to serve the population of the congregation that tend to be the largest givers. This means that the first programs that are canceled typically are children and youth. This takes various forms, churches may limit the number of children or outright cancel Vacation Bible School, they might cut youth or children's directors salaries, or convert their budgets from line items to designated funds. As the church tightens its budget, it seeks to put a stranglehold on the very programs that have the ability to

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<sup>32</sup> Phil Maynard, *Shift 2.0: Helping Congregations Backing into the Game of Effective Ministry* (Knoxville, Tn: Market Square Publishing, 2018), 192.

offer revitalization of membership and finances because they fail to take care of the immediate largest demographics or largest donors. In short, every effort made to remain financially viable moving forward revolves around taking care of those already within the organization. Worse yet, the programs that are often kept are specifically geared towards the interest of a select group within the organization. Lovett Weems calls this the “Death Tsunami” which is a situation in which every effort is placed in taking care of the older population that is already at the core of the church. However, this comes at a great cost because this generation will continue to disappear over the next few years due to illness, death, and in many cases force relocation to be closer to family who can assist with care. Because of this, churches are faced with the potential for a significant impact to their membership and financial resources.<sup>33</sup>

### **Plague 5 -Building Maintenance**

God continues to strike at the Egyptians and Pharaoh's hardened heart, following the plague of flies He strikes at the animals of the land. In Exodus 9: 3 it says “*the hand of the Lord will strike with a deadly pestilence your livestock in the field: the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks.*” This plague serves a dual fold purpose, first it strikes at the allusion of the sacred animals in the Egyptian religion, second, it further dwindles the livelihood of the people of Egypt affecting their source of food and means of transportation. However, the Israelites are spared from this plague.<sup>34</sup>

Most likely this plague was the cause of piles of dead frogs from a previous plague rotting and giving space for bacteria to grow. Many scholars believe that this pestilence that so effectively killed all of the livestock may have been a form of anthrax.<sup>35</sup> This is similar to a

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<sup>33</sup> Phil Maynard, *Shift 2.0*, 192.

<sup>34</sup> Sarna, *Exodus =: [Shemot]*, 44-5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 44



pattern that happens in the local church, many churches do not seem to understand that hoarding is not a spiritual gift. They cling to and hold onto anything and everything that has ever been donated. Oftentimes, old Bible studies or decorations that are decades past their prime are molding away in storage closets because “sister Betty-Lou’ donated that in 1960 and we just can’t throw it away.” Unfortunately, this is a plague in itself, in that these old materials serve as a home for insects and other vermin. This is a starting point for the true plague that befalls the church as it fails to do the necessary maintenance to upkeep its facilities.

Church maintenance in a declining church can be extremely problematic; it is estimated that in the average church 20% of the budget is designated for repayment of debt, repairs, and maintenance to church facilities that in many cases are used only a few hours each week. Given that most churches are experiencing a significant decrease in overall giving, this expands on the challenge of keeping up with maintenance, let alone trying to make any necessary improvements. Especially, when the church is already doing everything it can to trim budgets and downsize staff and programming. The tipping point comes when an unforeseen major repair is needed, even normally mild-mannered congregants’ tempers can flare when discussing how to pay for a new air conditioner, roof, or major plumbing issues. When the church reaches this point, their ability to live into their mission and vocation is compromised, they understand that they have to increase their membership and financial giving or continue to watch their buildings decay around them.<sup>36</sup>

I would say it is not that uncommon to walk into many medium to small churches to find them badly in need of cleaning, general maintenance, and sometimes intensive repair. This is especially true with regards to congregations that are in serious decline. Unfortunately, this

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<sup>36</sup> Jimmy Dorrell, *Dead Church Walking: Giving Life to the Church That Is Dying to Survive* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2011). 82.

becomes a spiral of decline, in which the church needs new people and resources to maintain their infrastructure but the declining infrastructure and lack of cleanliness and upkeep serves to drive away visitors. Why would a new person stay if it is obvious that the church does not take care of itself? Many of us, in visiting a new place, look to see how clean and well maintained the building is? More often than not, our initial impression of the facility determines whether or not we plan to return. For example, I visited a colleague at one church in his multipart charge to find a gaping hole in the ceiling of the men's restroom and severe water damage down the main hallway outside the sanctuary. What is the message sent to potential new visitors?

### **Plague 6 - End of Hospitality**

The sixth plague much like the third comes without any warning, and this is the first plague that directly threatens human life. In Exodus 9: 8-9; Moses and Aaron are instructed to take ash from the kiln and to throw it into the sky in front of Pharaoh. There it would become a fine dust that would inflame the skin of man and animal alike breaking out in boils. This plague was intense enough that Pharaoh's own magicians were inflicted to the point they could not respond. This plague was painful and paralyzing to the court of Pharaoh and to the people of the land.<sup>37</sup>

The plague of boils was incredibly paralyzing to the people of Egypt. Boils are extremely painful and disruptive the way one functions. As the plagues continue to build it is understandable that the plague of boils would be one that would have the disruptive impact that it had. Many churches are impacted in a similar way, they are so ingrained with the pain of their own trauma that they cannot even fathom anything beyond what they know. As the congregation continues to process through the "Death Tsunami" the pain of their struggles causes the church

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<sup>37</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 45.

to turn inward. They begin to shift their focus on trying to maintain what they have. Fellowship with those who remain takes priority over living abundantly in the mission and vocation of the church. The church stops thinking beyond its walls, and what remaining programs it has are focused on keeping the faithful who have yet to move on. Even attempts to show hospitality are trivial and empty gestures at best. The focus is on fellowship versus showing any kind of hospitality to their neighbors or those who are seeking a church home. The saddest part in this, the churches do things in the name of hospitality that are self serving and in many cases are off putting to those they feel they are being hospitable towards. Often, churches think of hospitality as offering refreshments or hosting a covered dish luncheon, but is it hospitality if when a new person comes to the church they are pointed in the direction of the refreshments and left alone while the members all congregate together?<sup>38</sup>

Another common occurrence witnessed in churches around the country is that a new person comes in, looking for an opportunity to serve or participate in the life of the church. It only takes one time for a long-standing member to criticize or challenge the energy and enthusiasm of the new volunteer to cause them to never offer to help again. Worse yet, invalidation of an individual's gifts or service can cause them to leave and not come back. In truth, this plague is as much about the inward focus of the church and embracing its own “death tsunami” as it is about eliminating any sense of hospitality because the two are intertwined.

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<sup>38</sup> Phil Maynard, *Shift 2.0*, 12.

## **The Plagues of Destruction**

This final grouping of plagues is the most serious of all, many of these are self-inflicted responses to the challenges of the previous plagues. In this final triad, and the resulting tenth, and final plague, we see the true level of destruction that can happen in response to trauma and fear. In many ways, the congregational response that they feel is trying to save the church at this point becomes the impetus that will cause them to suffer and eventually die, at least to their own identity, if not, completely closing their doors. Churches that are operating in this last grouping of plagues, that are undergoing internal strife and destruction, must be handled with extreme caution and must be afforded appropriate space to grieve and mourn all that they are losing.

### **Plague 7 - Polarization and Conflict**

The first plague in this triad is cataclysmic level hail. Pharaoh and the Egyptians are warned of the level of destruction that is to come, and are given time to take shelter to minimize the damage. Some take advantage of the warning, but many do not, as such the destruction is not ultimate but still carries a heavy toll on the people. This plague demonstrates two aspects of God; first, the compassion of God, in that He warns the people and gives them an opportunity to avoid his coming wrath, second, it demonstrates the power and authority of God over the elements. What is further interesting in this plague is for the first time, Pharaoh admits that he is at fault for what is happening. However, other than begging Moses to plead to God to stop the destruction Pharaoh does not take any long-term action. Rather, as soon as the hail stops, he returns to his stubborn and guilty ways.<sup>39</sup>

As the modern church becomes more aware of the effects of the plagues and the overall devastation they enact, anxiety in the organization increases. This anxiety causes a tightening

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<sup>39</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 46-8.

effect, narrowing the field of vision, and ability to perceive what is happening. This, in turn, leads people to look for quick fixes to the problem or take on defensive behaviors. Increased feelings of helplessness, white horse syndrome, or the I am the savior mentality are also common occurrences.<sup>40</sup>

Much like Pharaoh, the congregation, is most likely aware at this point that they are at least partially to blame for what is happening. However, this is problematic because in their panicked state they are reactionary, turning their entire focus to rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, while patting themselves on the back for the excellent work they are doing.

Unfortunately, the challenges the congregation are facing continue to expand and grow, resulting in polarization in the congregation. Because in their reactionary nature, the leadership loses sight of the notion that “we swim together or we sink together.” Instead of working together for a new solution, the emotional and reactionary nature relating to the problem causes people to take sides on the issues at hand. This means that well intentioned people, often with a more dominant personality type, rally others to their solutions and it furthers conflict in the organization. This conflict is contagious as the goal of any conflict is to win at any cost. The longer this conflict remains in place the more the objective turns from win to hurt. This leads us into the next plague where the nature of conflict becomes a sense of oppression towards any opposition.

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<sup>40</sup> Steinke, *Congregational Leadership In Anxious Times*, 41-2.

### **Plague 8 -Blaming (Internal and External)**

The Hail of the seventh plague decimated much of the land of Egypt, leaving little in the way of crops or trees. The Egyptians had already lost their flax and barley crops to the hail, and at this point, only had their wheat crops remaining (Exodus 9: 31-32). But now, even this crop was threatened with a new plague, the plague of locusts. Locusts are a totally different kind of devastation, in just one square mile of land over 50 million insects can reside and these insects can devour one hundred thousand tons of vegetation in a night. For a country that is already hurting from massive storms and apocalyptic level hail, this is overwhelming. But even in the devastation of the plague, there is a new theme emerging in this plague. This plague serves to divide and mock Pharaoh and his court, which is evident as Pharaoh's officials are beginning to blame Pharaoh for the destruction that is occurring.<sup>41</sup> In any organization or community there comes a point that division and blame become the norm as a response to trauma.

Blame comes in a variety of formats including blaming external factors such as COVID, denominational leadership, and many ways that are happening outside of the walls of the church. While these issues are very real, have a great impact on the overall well being, and ability the of the church to function, the real problem comes from the emotional, reactionary responses of the church leadership. As the congregation begins to further polarize, the different internal factions take the form of locusts all trying to lay claim and devour whatever resources remain to promote their own agendas. Because many of these different groups have embraced a sense of win at all costs or our solution is the only viable one, they become abusive towards any group that may have a contrary opinion. As the anxiety boils over in the system, behaviors become more and more aggressive; there are no longer facts presented but rather the opposing side is shouted down

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<sup>41</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 48.

and belittled. Factions will begin to use whatever techniques they can to unsettle, intimidate, and stack the deck with like minded people to ensure they win. Often this means that they will enlist the support of other factions in the church that might not be concerned with a particular issue, but will offer support in exchange for support in another area.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately, this is often the tipping point that pushes the church towards the final two plagues. At this point any signs of fruitfulness of discipleship disappears, there is no more compassion, humility, peace, or love. Rather, lying and manipulation are the new norm. The group seeking power will oppress their rivals using half-truths, withholding information, manipulating facts and statistics, and full out fabrication of events to ensure they have the upper hand. This behavior which is so antithetical to Christian values, is justified because they are “right.” The very groups that are engaging in this behavior expand on how self-righteous they are, even to the point of claiming that their solution is Divinely Inspired and that God is only on their side.<sup>43</sup>

Pharaoh and the Egyptians blame external factors for the plagues failing to take ownership for the consequences happening to them.

### **Plague 9 - Darkness - When Sheep Attack**

Following the pattern in Exodus, the ninth plague is inflicted upon the people of Egypt without warning. Pharaoh's heart, having been hardened by God again after the destruction by the locusts, results in all of Egypt being immersed in darkness for three days. This darkness was so intense that even during the day people could not see each other. While many scholars believe this was the result of a *khamsin*, or severe sand storm, as it is not uncommon during the

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<sup>42</sup> Steinke, *Congregational Leadership In Anxious Times*, 106-7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

spring that strong winds out of Saharan Africa and or Arabia stir up sand and dust. The resulting dust storm would then persist for days at a time and blacken out the sky. It is believed that this was one such storm, perhaps earlier and more intense than usual. Regardless of the source, this action would have a powerful symbolic impact on the people of Egypt.<sup>44</sup>

This was a direct attack, by the God of the Israelites, on their supreme god. The most worshiped god in the Egyptian pantheon was the sun god. They viewed the rising of the sun every day as proof of this god's victory over the demon Apophis, who embodied darkness, and as such, would have had a profound psychological impact across the land.<sup>45</sup> Similar to the profound impact that this plague had on the people of Egypt, the plague of darkness has a similar psychological effect on the church.

When the anxiety, conflict, and self-righteous behavior of church leadership gets to a boiling-over point, the focus of their ire will shift from the parties of opposition to the pastor. A church that has progressed to this level of darkness, fear, and anxiety can, if nothing else, find a way to rally dissenting groups to securely assign all the blame on the pastor, after all, they are supposed to be the shepherd of the people and in many cases, polity dependent, the chief administrator of the local congregation. So, in their emotional state, it would make perfect sense that all blame should be assigned there.

Unlike the physical darkness of the ninth plague, the modern church experiences emotional and spiritual darkness. One of the strongest manifestations of that comes as direct attacks on the clergy. This is usually instigated by a small, but very vocal, part of the congregation. As they instigate their plan, they will rally more people to their cause.<sup>46</sup> The

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<sup>44</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 50-1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Gene Fowler, *Church Abuse of Clergy: A Radical New Understanding* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020). 77.



question is why? In this case, this is purely a trauma response out of the congregation's helplessness and fear of annihilation. This helplessness has come over time, building up slowly, until it reaches the boil-over point; likewise, this constant helplessness creates a fear that everything that is dear and has meaning within the organization is going to end. As a result, people defend themselves subconsciously against this fear by enclosing the fear and cutting off all sensations through a process called encapsulation. Inadvertently, because of their own fears of losing everything, they surround themselves in darkness.<sup>47</sup>

When this happens, the abusers usually follow a fairly common pattern in an effort to discredit and or destroy the pastor and their family. Usually, this starts with a small group. In our case, we are going to assume that one of the polarizing groups is seeking the power mentioned in the previous two plagues. From within the group, they will seek to promote the most confrontational members of the group to leadership or use them as their spokespeople. Even when the leader of this group has no formal authority, they will act as they do and often misrepresent themselves as representing a large portion of the congregation in their dealings with church leaders.

Next, they seek to discredit the reputation and abilities of the pastor. They understand that perception is reality, and will coerce, manipulate, twist facts, withhold information, and, when necessary, outright lie about the pastor. The ultimate goal is to ruin the reputation of the pastor, and often they are able to tarnish the pastor's reputation past the point of repair. Worse yet, when these direct attacks against the pastor are not successful, they will take a similar approach with the pastor's family using whatever means they have to use to undermine and discredit the pastor and his family. The battle plan for doing this is simple, it is usually

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<sup>47</sup> Fowler, *Church Abuse of Clergy*, 116-7.

orchestrated by maintaining a running list of problems that are never specific, they use generalized statements to acquire buy-in of more people in the congregation, they often distort facts, and feign sorrow or grief over the pastors' actions. Finally, after building up this case and continually pushing the pastor towards a defensive stance, push to put them on trial and seek to push for the pastor's termination.<sup>48</sup>

## **The Plague of Death**

### **Plague 10 -Death of the First Born**

During the plague of darkness, Pharaoh closed the door for any future discussions between himself, Moses, and Aaron. Unfortunately, he does not know what is to come, the final plague to hit the land of Egypt is to be more devastating than any other. For a land that has experienced an already cataclysmic level of trauma, this last plague is horrible. Moses and the Israelites are forewarned of the destruction to come and are given a very specific set of instructions in preparation for the plague. However, the people of Egypt have no idea of the level of destruction and pain that is coming. In Exodus 12: 29-32, God acts by striking down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and animal, so that every household in the land experienced death. It is only through this final act of devastation, that Pharaoh submits and relinquishes his control over the Israelites.<sup>49</sup>

For the traumatized church, which is experiencing the challenges and pain of enduring these plagues, it will most likely take death in some form to get them moving. While in many regards this is the most painful of all the plagues, it is the most necessary. A theme often taught

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<sup>48</sup> Kent Crockett, *Pastor Abusers: When Sheep Attack Their Shepherd* (Prattville, AL: Kent Crockett, 2012). 26-32.

<sup>49</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 61.

in clinical pastoral education is the theme of “memory, story, hope”. Building on that is the notion that, in order to welcome something new, one must first say goodbye to the old.

Unfortunately, churches close their doors, denominations continue to fragment, and the Christian mission is not met. Even in one’s own faith journey, there is a call for one to pick up their own cross, die to oneself, and be resurrected with Christ. What does it look like for this plague to take place in the modern church?

At a bare minimum, the church will have to embrace change. The old ways of being an attractional church, where people in the community will seek you out based on programming and facilities, has changed. The world around us has changed, and much of the reason the church today is dealing with the trauma of the plagues is that the church has not. Denominations, such as the Methodist movement, have lost their identity as Christian movements that move with the Holy Spirit and have embraced an institutional nature. Failure to adapt will mean death, which unfortunately means that some churches will close their doors.

Sometimes, this death means that a beloved pastor, who was a great fit for the church for many years, needs to go. Some churches hold too tightly to their pastor, and in a few profound cases, the pastor’s personality drives the nature of the church. While that raises some concerns, it may not be entirely problematic if the church is still responding to its mission and understands its vocation and calling to be in the community. If this is not the case, then maybe death comes at the hands of a pastoral change.

In some cases, death takes the form of a change in congregational makeup. Too many churches do not look like the neighborhoods in which they are located. In John 15, Jesus talks about being the one true vine, and those who are connected to him will bear great fruit. If the church is going to survive, pruning must happen (vs 6). This pruning is often painful, as we

watch those whom we have been in connection with either move off to other churches, or in many cases, we watch older members pass on to glory.

Recently, I attended a clergy meeting in which one of the attending pastors was celebrating the fact that, after many years, the church had voted to sell the current parsonage and purchase a new one. This had been a debated issue in the church for over ten years. The pastor receiving the new parsonage was posed the question, “How did you finally convince them to purchase a new parsonage?” To which he responded, “Enough of the neigh-sayers finally left or passed away.”

Regardless, in order for the church to become unstuck from the trauma and the overwhelming sensations of the plagues, it must experience some form of death. While we understand that it may take different forms, the remainder of this book, which looks at the self-discovery of the wilderness journey throughout the book of Exodus actually deals with navigating the pain, mourning, grief, and rebirth that comes from this tenth and final plague.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Exodus**

*Exodus Chapter 12:31-33. "During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me." The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country, "For otherwise they said, "we will all die."*

Death is only the beginning for the people of Israel. As the mourning cries go out in the middle of the night, Pharaoh is forced to give in and let the Israelite people go. The people move out by following the presence of God as witnessed in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, The people would know they were not alone, and yet God's movement in the Exodus to and through the Red Sea opens the people to the experiences that will define them as a nation in years to come. This movement is an intentional process that provides the people with space to reform their identity, process their trauma, grieve the old while preparing for the new, and begin to form that, which they will need in order to live, into the promises of God.

### **Anxiety in the System**

The Exodus from Egypt had to be a major shock to the overall system of the nation of Israel. Even though the people had been forewarned it was about to happen and had witnessed the power of God through the plagues of Egypt, the abrupt movement from oppression as slaves into the freedom of the wilderness journey had to be overwhelming. In Exodus chapter 14, we see the Israelite people camping near the Red Sea in the midst of the wilderness. By this time, they had been traveling in the presence of God moving before them as a pillar of clouds by day and fire by night. And yet, in their camp, when they saw the chariots and army of Pharaoh overtaking them, their attitude changed dramatically from departing definitely to fearful for their

lives. They cry out to God and make accusations against Moses that he intentionally led them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness.<sup>50</sup>

This is the same response we will see from the church as they begin the process of reclaiming their identity. They will respond to threats, real or perceived, with reactivity and assigning blame. Their ability to reason and process will be diminished, and they will become stuck, similar to the response they had in the midst of the plagues. It is critical to note that this anxiety did not develop overnight, nor will it be fixed overnight.

One role of the pastor in the Exodus church is to be the mediator of the anxiety in the system. Much like the response of Moses in Exodus 13-14, the pastor is called to respond to and reduce the fear of the people. In order to do this, the pastoral leader must take Exodus 14:14 to heart, “The Lord will fight for you, and you only have to be silent.”

When the anxiety in any given system is high, the resilience of the people will be low. This manifests itself in extreme behaviors, rigidity to ritual and comfortable, which means the thinking process will be muddled and disjointed. While these behaviors are evident in the manifestations of the plagues the church has endured, they will not stop overnight. The pastor has a new role in managing and mitigating the stress of moving from the challenges of the plagues into a time of rebuilding a collective identity and processing the trauma through change. Having a good understanding of what is happening in the system, and realizing that it has been shattered by a combination of ongoing plagues followed by some form of death to at least part of the system. During this time of transition, it is normal for the system to remain anxious and reactionary.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 72.

<sup>51</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006). 47.

During this period, the natural inclination of the system will be to attempt to manage the overwhelming anxiety through triangulation. This means that, for example, a congregation member who has an issue with the pastor will attempt to bring in a third party to bind their own anxiety. An example of this would be a congregant approaching the pastor and saying, “You know pastor, people in the congregation have been saying ‘insert complaint’”.

In this case, no one in the congregation has actually raised a concern. The person with the concern is merely trying to shift the blame to an unspecified person. Triangulation can be a challenge in a relatively healthy system. In one, such as the church experiencing oppression in bondage or its first taste of freedom post-liberation, it can be extremely toxic, especially when multiple sources are all attempting to triangulate one or two key leaders in the system.<sup>52</sup> While the system is stuck in triangulation and assigning blame, it demonstrates that the people are stuck in their reptilian brains. Being that they are relying on instinct, and are reactionary means, it will be virtually impossible for lasting change to take place because they are too busy trying to identify the evil outside of themselves and eliminate it.<sup>53</sup>

The reactionary leaders in a congregation spur the triangulation and blame game. Often seeking to gain and maintain control because they themselves cannot control their own anxiety. This is because they have a very low threshold for pain. Because of low threshold for pain, they have no awareness or ability to maintain healthy boundaries, and as such, they will leak their emotional baggage to anyone they can rally to their cause of self-preservation. Unfortunately, the nature of the church tends to empower these reactionary leaders.

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<sup>52</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 52-4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

These leaders, who often show a continual lack of maturity, motivation, and self-regulation, are the ones who challenge authority the most and are often allowed to maintain their self-imposed authority because no one will stand up to them “in the name of love and kindness.” Which allows these reactionary leaders to basically take the church hostage, and if not dealt with, will drive the church back into the example of the seventh, eighth plagues, and ninth plagues.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Clergy Killers**

We see this pattern emerge throughout the remainder of the book of Exodus. In the books of Exodus and Numbers, the people complain to or about Moses 14 times. Thirteen of these times were after they left the land of Egypt. Every time there was a new stressor or challenge, the reactionary leadership complained and blamed God or Moses, often both, for their new plight. Reactionary leadership is at the core of the challenge to lead a group of traumatized people through their own journey of self-discovery back to a place of health.

The leader has the ultimate responsibility for bearing the burden of their emotional pain and reactivity. Unfortunately, this also means that more often than not, the pastor is the primary target of abuse. Abuse of this type is nothing new. The Old Testament of the Bible is full of accounts of the people perpetuating the mistreatment of God’s chosen servants.

The Israelites took issue with Moses and the other prophets. Jesus even gave a warning to those who would listen, in the sermon on the plain, in Luke 6. He said,

*“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on the account of the Son of Man! Rejoice that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets”*  
(Luke 6: 22-23).

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<sup>54</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 64-6.



Jesus knew that those servants, who were faithful to him, would be abused and mistreated. The pattern had already been set.

Why would anyone do this, especially as they proclaimed to be part of God's family? While there is debate on the why, examples being demonic possession, mental illness, obsessive issues, and unresolved anxiety, the truth is it does and will most likely happen. For simplicity's sake, we are going to look at the pattern of abuse of clergy from the standpoint of unresolved anxiety, trauma, and the fear of annihilation, because this most closely reflects the fears related to overcoming said trauma and the overwhelming fear of change required.

Trauma, as experienced by the church, especially after enduring the plagues and undergoing the intense transformation necessary for survival, leads to a fear of annihilation. This stems from a sense of failed dependency. The person or group experiencing a traumatic event was dependent on something external to have prevented or contained the trauma. One can see this pattern in Exodus 14, Moses was expected to lead the people to freedom, and yet here they are staring down Pharaoh's approaching army and being threatened with annihilation. Where was God and Moses to prevent this traumatic experience? This is usually accompanied by a sense of overwhelming helplessness; the experience of loss, feeling abandoned, and not being able to understand the damage.

Likewise, in the cries along the Red Sea, you can feel the pain of abandonment and damage echo through the people. "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" This builds and manifests into a fear of annihilation. The overarching understanding, as a result of trauma, is that something important is about to be destroyed. This could be physical life, traditions, or a sense of that which is familiar and

comfortable.<sup>55</sup> Regardless, life, as it is known, is about to change dramatically, and this increases anxiety exponentially.

Oftentimes, this response to trauma and fear of annihilation is the spurning point for other motivations to come to the surface. The following are the motivations that arise out of the response to trauma and the overwhelming anxiety in the system. One, church members will often develop unrealistic expectations of their pastors. Because of internal fears and the unwillingness to adapt, the reactive leadership in the congregation creates a set of expectations that no one can possibly fulfill.

The expectations will be that the pastor is to solve all of their problems with regards to declining membership and finances, while not changing anything in the congregation. It is not uncommon for congregants to develop a mental image of the perfect pastor. However, this is not achievable as such “unrealistic expectations produce unreasonable criticisms.”<sup>56</sup> Surgical dissection of the church leader, with fault finding, is often the result. Abusers in this system begin to overly criticize and tear down anything and everything the pastor does, usually resulting in micromanagement. Abusers will openly state they want the pastor to lead, but heed their advice on every decision, no matter how small.

Nothing the pastor does will ever be good enough.<sup>57</sup> They refuse to embrace the need for the congregation to be involved in ministry believing that the pastor must do it all. Worse yet, they hold the pastor accountable for growing the church, while undermining his ability to do so because it changes their understanding of what a church should be. After all, the church is

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<sup>55</sup> Fowler, *Church Abuse of Clergy*, 116-7.

<sup>56</sup> Crockett, *Pastor Abusers*, 39

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

supposed to be an intimate group and small enough that the pastor can care for everyone in the congregation personally, without anyone losing their share of attention.<sup>58</sup>

The second grouping of motivations are the result of idolatry. Three of the major idols in the church today are: struggle for power, resistance to change, and opposing visions. Often, these two go hand in hand within the traumatized church. The reactionary leaders mentioned earlier in this chapter are out for total self-preservation. The most assured way for them to achieve this goal is to be in control fighting vehemently against anything that they feel reduces their power base in any way, especially new members who wish to be active and engaged. The intrinsic fear of annihilation that comes with any new member, especially if there are many, diminishes their power base and affects their ability to maintain control over the congregation. The fear of irrelevance causes them to lash out at anything that could be perceived as a threat, especially the pastor. It may be hard to believe, but one of the major reasons for attacks against pastors that result in them being fired, is success in growing the church.<sup>59</sup>

Change, even when necessary for survival, will bring conflict. This is even more true when the unique skills or vision of the pastor are different than what the congregation is used to. It is common for a new pastor to a congregation to be criticized because the way they do things is different than what the congregation is used to based on the previous pastor.

Many churches are stuck in the mindset of “that's the way we have always done it” preferring to worship the past and reliving the glory days of the past when they were healthy and prosperous. Things were always better in the old glory days. The reactive leadership wants to protect that memory as they have always been. This means that any new vision, new ministry, or

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<sup>58</sup> Crockett, *Pastor Abusers*, 41-2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

desire to change for any reason will be met with the utmost violence. Rather than embrace a vision and vocation of active ministry in the community, the old guard in the church focuses on being curators of the relics of their history, all the while bemoaning their lack of relevance and continued decline. They would rather die holding to the past than risk anything disrupting the established routine of their own comfort. Anything that would propagate change is a threat, and they resist the understanding that the church must adapt to survive. Rather, they work hard to ensure that any pastor, viewed as a catalyst for change, is destroyed.<sup>60</sup>

These motivations and the resulting attacks against the pastoral authority are, in fact, a subconscious response to their trauma. The natural response to trauma is to encapsulate that which is threatening and causes them to have to adapt. This results in aggression and lashing out as church members begin to personify these behaviors. Worse yet, in an effort to avoid the pain of the trauma and the resulting need for change, the congregation often embodies the values and behaviors of the past. The congregation unconsciously chooses to order its life in a way that gives the illusion that they are still the same as they were in their glory days, allowing the fantasy to be maintained that the trauma does not exist or that it is not as bad as some would say. Any attempt to instill change and adapt the congregational structure to ensure survival over the impending annihilation means that the congregation will respond negatively.

The pastor must develop an understanding of these motivations and find a creative way to help the congregation come to terms with the trauma and grieve what they have lost. Without an appropriate opportunity to experience the grieving cycle, the congregation remains stuck and reactive. The role of the pastor in managing conflict and disrupting the cycle of abuse is

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<sup>60</sup> Crockett, *Pastor Abusers*, 45-7.

prophetic in nature in that the pastor is called to both shepherd the people through these challenges while simultaneously pointing them into a deeper connection with God.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Pastor as a Prophetic Shepherd**

With this understanding of congregational dynamics and the need for prophetic leadership, what can the pastor do to shepherd the congregation into resilience? As the pastor begins this process to redefine the challenges faced by the congregation, they take on both the role of shepherd and prophet. In order to fulfill those roles, the pastor has to start from a place of humility.

Unfortunately, one does not have to look too far to find hypocrites in the church. In the days of TV evangelists and prosperity gospel, it is easy to see how some use the title and prestige of being a pastor and public figure to take advantage of others. Too many of these household names preach what Christianity should look like; while not following their own messages, with million-dollar homes and fleets of private jets which is not what the church needs today, rather, the church needs pastors who are authentic, caring, compassionate, and serve with love and humility. This is especially true when dealing with people who have undergone extensive trauma. The authentic pastor, who has embraced their prophetic role, has a deep appreciation for human imperfection.

Through this appreciation of imperfections, an intimate understanding of their own shortcomings, and the knowledge that they cannot walk the path perfectly, they derive the authority to speak to the lives of others. This is demonstrated in the call stories of many prophets including Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. These prophets set the example of how the pastor must

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<sup>61</sup> Fowler, *Church Abuse of Clergy*, 147-8.

act, do the prophetic work of redefining the trauma experienced by the church, and lead people through the wilderness of self-discovery to help them achieve their potential.<sup>62</sup>

To better understand what a humble prophetic leader looks like, let us analyze the call of Moses. In Exodus 3: 1 - 4:17, we can find the call story of Moses. In this, Moses encounters God in the form of a burning bush that is not consumed. (Exodus 3:2). Moses is given clear instructions to return to Pharaoh with a divine message of deliverance and yet, in this process, Moses struggles with his own imperfections, fears, and doubts. He knows his past, and questions “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). After all, he knew his past was a murderer and had settled for a life as a shepherd of Jethro's flocks. Moses doubted the people of Israel, much less Pharaoh, would even listen to him (Exodus 4:1). Especially since he claims to have a “heavy tongue” (Exodus 4:10). While the exact meaning of this is unknown, it is commonly believed that Moses had a speech impediment of some kind. Regardless, Moses knew his imperfections, his flaws, and his failures, and he laid them before God in responding to why it did not make sense for him to be the one called; and yet, that is exactly who God chose to liberate his people.<sup>63</sup>

In understanding the pastoral call to the hurting church and revitalization ministries, the pastor needs to be willing to lay out their imperfections before God, embracing their own weaknesses and shortcomings, and placing their full trust in God’s grace and power to overcome. In the case of Moses, God had a response to every plea and excuse Moses gave. God does the same for the pastor seeking to understand their calling to this line of work. Often, what the

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<sup>62</sup> Jason A. Bemby, *Walking in the Prophetic Tradition*, (Eugene, Oregon, Cascade Books, 2018), 15-6.

<sup>63</sup> Bemby, *Walking*, 16.

pastor thinks might be their greatest liability for the work they are being called to may turn out to be a great strength if they are humble and seek after God.

One other way to look at this is to put it in perspective of a more modern voice. The pastor, in an effort to lead their people through this anxiety and uncertainty, must adopt the concepts of servant leadership and vulnerability. Brene Brown defines vulnerability as the “emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”<sup>64</sup> In her discussions on vulnerability, Brown expresses the need to put ourselves out armor free, willing to embrace feedback.

The very nature of love is to be vulnerable<sup>65</sup> which harkens to the vulnerability demonstrated by Jesus. He had the position of authority with his own disciples, yet takes the role of a servant during a time of uncertainty and great personal risk. Knowing that he was headed towards Jerusalem and imminent death, Jesus could have elected to put on his emotional armor and push away his followers; instead, he drew them closer and demonstrated firsthand the power of love and the greater vision of the kingdom of God. So, what does it mean to be vulnerable?

First of all, vulnerability is not weakness. Rather, being vulnerable requires a great amount of strength and courage. Vulnerability is something we all must face, there is no opting out. A good leader chooses to embrace their vulnerability and understands how it affects thinking and behavior. When the vulnerability is embraced, the leader is able to align with their core values in making decisions. Otherwise, the leader allows fear to have control without input or even awareness resulting in reactionary leadership, which increases anxiety in the system.<sup>66</sup> Vulnerability can be a difficult concept for one to master, especially since one has to be able to

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<sup>64</sup> Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead*, (New York, Random House, 2018), 19.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

trust to be vulnerable and at the same time, be vulnerable to build trust. This trust-building often comes in very small increments over time.<sup>67</sup>

While Brown builds this narrative, defining relationships, trust, and vulnerability through a combination of research and storytelling, it parallels Craig Hill's work on Servant Leadership using the examples of Jesus from scripture. Hill goes to John 4: 19, "We love because he first loved us." Hill uses this to set the example of the self-emptying Jesus who loves wholeheartedly, and out of that abundance, one is able to love.<sup>68</sup>

This love with the disciples took time and effort. The root of this trust-building and vulnerability was love. Jesus hand-picked his closest circle (the disciples), not for what assistance they could provide him, but in spite of those who could offer the greatest assistance to him. Further, Jesus demonstrated his vulnerability with the crowds in the way that he taught and ministered to them. He offered difficult feedback to the crowds, at times alienating his supporters.<sup>69</sup> This understanding of vulnerability gives credit to Brown's understanding of one's response to vulnerability. The disciples, as they built trust, were able to embrace the notion of their own vulnerability and grow in their relationship with Jesus, whereas the crowds, who could not face their own vulnerability, succumbed to fear and turned away from the Messiah.

While Jesus was able to demonstrate vulnerability across a wider margin of people, Brown advises her readers to begin with a smaller, more intimate group called the square squad. This is a list of people that the leader can write down on a one-inch by one-inch square of paper. Now, depending on one's handwriting, this is probably less than ten people. This is your inner circle, those whose opinions matter to you the most. This is not meant to be a list of people that

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>68</sup> Craig Hill, *Servant of All*, (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 32.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 35



will automatically offer support or be the most advantageous to one's agenda. Rather, this list is a group that will ask hard questions, give honest feedback, and will assist in, as Brown calls it, rumbling with one's vulnerability.<sup>70</sup>

What does it look like to rumble with vulnerability? This means being open to listening to those in your inner circle with whom you have trust and are able to be vulnerable. This inner circle will be able to provide clear and direct feedback relating to concerns and provide leaders with a safe place for them to speak openly. Likewise, after listening, there needs to be time to process, and then the group should reconvene to discuss ways to work through and improve the situation. This process allows leaders to embrace their own vulnerability and discover that the source of the issue was their own fear and anxiety and not sharing the larger picture.<sup>71</sup> By a leader examining their own vulnerability, they are able to identify their own shortcomings and develop a plan to move forward in a positive way by collaboratively working to address the shortfall.

Exercising vulnerability is the first step in unbinding anxiety and helping the congregational system begin the process of moving forward toward healing. While meeting with this inner circle and truly listening to their input, they are able to begin to redefine the concerns of the congregation in a creative way. This process should begin within the inner circle of the leader, giving space to the pastor and other leaders to process through the challenges the congregation is facing. This is a process that must be expanded, allowing the congregation to embrace vulnerability, openly tell stories, and process the trauma and anxiety that the congregation is facing.

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<sup>70</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 51.

In cases as severe as a church that has been through the trauma of the plagues, especially when the final plague has resulted in the death of something important to the congregation, the pastor might want to enlist the assistance of a consultant or clergy member that is outside of the congregation to guide the church through a process to redefine their concerns in a way that addresses the problem at hand without directing the issue at any one person, place, or thing related to the original problem. In this, the congregation must learn how to define their relationship, not against one another, but define their relationship to one another. Put simply, the congregation learns to understand the ideology of “we swim together or we sink together.”

The goal in redefining the problem is to allow all the parties involved to look at the problem as a whole, and how it is mutually influenced, and to reduce the overall anxiety in the system. As this anxiety is reduced, it becomes possible for the congregation to begin to reframe their perspective and be more reflective of where they would like to be.<sup>72</sup> Reduction in anxiety and redefining the nature of the problem to see it more holistically allows for the congregation to de-escalate the amount of anxiety in the system removing individual blame and allowing the congregation to see beyond the constructs of blame and guilt to embrace new ways of moving forward. Even as the system seeks to reduce its own anxiety by redefining its trauma and concerns, there is still a need to call out the skeletons in the closet and deal with them effectively for the church to move forward.

One of the challenges in this is that the prophetic leader must carefully and lovingly speak truth to power. Throughout the entire reign of the monarchy in Israel, there were prophets that stood up to speak truth to the power to the king. This pattern arose with Saul and David, and the role of the prophet seemed to diminish after the end of the monarchy. Much like during these

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<sup>72</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 57-8.

times when the prophets were sent to speak the truth of God's word to the kings, the prophets called out abuses and corruption. Samuel, the prophet, anointed Saul as the first king of Israel, and when Saul disobeyed the word of God, was the one to rebuke the king's actions and call out his foolish behavior. Further, Samuel was the one who prophesied the end of Saul's reign and anointed David, his successor.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the prophet Elijah spoke truth to king Ahab, whose wife, Jezebel, encouraged the worship of Baal. Elijah not only called out the corruption of Ahab but provided shelter for the prophets of God against the persecution of the king.<sup>74</sup>

Following these examples, what does it look like for the pastor to take on the mantle of the prophet and speak the truth within their local congregation? First, this is a dangerous proposition. The Old Testament prophets were targeted for speaking the truth and were often oppressed to the point of being put to death. It is also tempting not to speak on behalf of others, but to speak to one's own desires.

The prophets of old were endowed by God to approach confrontations with power in ways that kept with God's will. The pastor, who is called to speak truth to power in the local congregation, must do so in a way that addresses the abuse of power and disruption to the health of the congregation without belittling or attacking individuals in the congregation.<sup>75</sup> One way to do this is to embrace the promise of Exodus 14:14. God will fight for his people if they will just be still. The pastor must be still and know God in order to speak the truth that must be said. They must approach this task with clarity and compassion while naming the demons and the trauma that the congregation has endured.

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<sup>73</sup> Bemby, *Walking*, 30.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>75</sup> Bemby, *Walking*, 46.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus identifies demons in people before they are cast out. One prime example of this comes in Mark 5 when Jesus encounters the demoniac in Gerasene. It is not until the demon responds that his name is Legion that he is cast out into the herd of swine. In order to move past the trauma of the church, the trauma must be named, claimed, and redefined. Unnamed and ungrieved trauma maintains its power to do damage.<sup>76</sup> There is power in naming the source of the trauma, claiming the power that it has held, and mourning what was lost. For the congregation to move forward, that power has to be spoken in truth, and the effects that that power has had must be released with time to grieve and heal.

In some cases, speaking truth to power goes beyond the traumatic event related to the plagues the congregation has endured. Sometimes, it deals with the messiness of church leaders, especially those who are reactive and come across as toxic. How does a pastor deal with those reactive leaders who abuse others to maintain their power? The pastor must tread carefully in these situations. When the pastor discovers the motivations of those who wish to abuse others, there is a series of steps that must be taken to speak truth into power.

First, the pastor needs to rally leaders in the church to stand with him or her. It is imperative that the pastor takes a group of leaders in the church who will defend the authority of the pastor. Being that there is strength in numbers and showing a united front with respected leaders in the church helps to diminish the likelihood that what the pastor says will be distorted. Second, there needs to be a team of prayer warriors interceding on the pastor's behalf. Prayer warriors need to pray for the direction of the meeting, for the pastor to be calm and collected, and to respond in Christian love and humility in the midst of what could be a difficult situation. Third, the pastor must continue to shepherd and care for the remainder of the congregation. It is

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<sup>76</sup> Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 69.

critical to pray for the congregation members, to meet them where they are at, and to minister to their needs. Those congregants, whom the pastor authentically ministers to, will support the pastor after the smoke clears, but might not in the heat of the battle. Often, these sheep have been on the receiving end of the bullying and may be fearful of the attack.<sup>77</sup>

In speaking truth to power, the pastor has to maintain integrity. Those who seek to abuse will do whatever they can to impugn your righteousness and integrity and to prove that they are right. This means that the pastor must maintain appropriate boundaries, be non-reactionary, and always take the high road. It is critical to understand how the abusers will seek to undermine these actions, so it is imperative to set ground rules for how one will manage any interaction with combative individuals or groups.

This includes not just how, when, where the pastor will engage with the abusers in conversation, but the rules for how the conversation is allowed to be played out. Effective boundaries and ground rules will make it easier to keep one's wits and temper if things get heated. Finally, it is imperative to deal with this group following the Biblical model. First, recognize them and keep an eye out for the underhanded work they are doing. Second, rebuke them. Titus 3: 10-11 says "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned." Finally, remove them from the congregation. Every church, in their polity or church bylaws, has a process to remove members.<sup>78</sup>

Another prophetic trait the pastor needs to embrace in order for the congregation to be able to move forward, is the role of the prophetic leader as a transparent historian. We have seen

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<sup>77</sup> Crockett, *Pastor Abusers*, 152-3.

<sup>78</sup> Crockett, *Pastor Abusers*, 155-7.

that a natural inclination of those who have experienced trauma is to dwell in the past. This often means that the congregation clings to traditions and things that are established and comfortable from a point in history when it is believed that things were their best. In the church, this might be the time the church was led by a cherished pastor and the collective memory believes this was the glory days of the congregation. Perhaps this was a time before the plagues began and the church started to decline. Regardless of what the moment was, the collective memory of the congregation points back to a time period when the church was healthy and vibrant, and everything since has been blamed for what is happening now.

When we look at the nature of history, it is apparent that almost every culture does their best to cover up the mistakes of their past. Perhaps, this means they just ignore the more colorful or painful moments of their respective history. Some cultures take a more heavy-handed approach in erasing anything that does not fit the approved narrative. Regardless of how it is done, the natural inclination is to rewrite history to present it in a way that is more palatable, and it is often difficult to be critical of attempts to rewrite the narrative both individually and collectively.<sup>79</sup>

However, examples are presented in the Old Testament of two prophets who served as transparent historians pointing out the truth of the people's history. Jeremiah and Hosea, while born centuries apart, did just that. They were transparent in the ways they called out the sins of the past and the mistakes that led the people to be where they are today. A certain freedom comes in remembering and growing from the truthful representation of history. In the case of Hosea, he was a prophet in the northern Kingdom of Israel, and most likely began his time as a prophet during the reign of King Jeroboam II and ended before the fall of the kingdom to

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<sup>79</sup> Bemby, *Walking*, 47-8.

Assyria. Much of Hosea's writing focused on the turbulent and violent history of Israel. He was commanded by God to name his own son Jezreel to remind the people of the shedding of blood in the Jezreel valley, and to punish the dynasty of Jehu for the overzealous bloodshed that Jehu enacted against the dynasty of Ahab.

Hosea reminds the people of the allegory of Achor, the Israelite who stole plunder from the city of Jericho during its destruction. When it was discovered what he had done, his family was stoned to death and buried in the Achor Valley. Hosea's truthful accounts of Israel's violent and troubled past are his way of illustrating how God can overturn the sins of the past and offer hope. Hosea used the ugliness of Israel's past to remind the people of the promise that was yet to come. Their past might have been ugly, but through God's power that ugly past was replaced with a brighter memory.<sup>80</sup>

Likewise, Jeremiah referred to Israel's past as a way to call Israel to think about the present. Jeremiah, in both chapter 7 and 26, gives a repeating sermon calling on the people to mend their ways and turn back to God. He scolded the people for putting their trust in the security of the temple versus right living. Many of the people in Jerusalem believe the temple was unassailable. They called on the "Temple of Yahweh" as a means to express their belief that no matter what, God would use God's power to defend the temple at all costs. Jeremiah then reminds the people of their similar belief at the temple of Shiloh, which Joshua established as the center of worship when the Israelites entered the land of Canaan. From this site, the Philistines stole the Ark of the Covenant. After this embarrassment, Shiloh is no longer mentioned in any text until Jeremiah reminds the people. While it is not clear why Jeremiah told the people to go to Shiloh, there is a strong indication that Jeremiah is reminding the people that God has already

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<sup>80</sup> Bemby, *Walking*, 49-51.

allowed the center of worship to fall once before. This is a painful reminder to the people that God is not beholden to a place, but calls on the chosen people to live a life set apart in dedication and worship.<sup>81</sup>

As we begin to understand how these prophets used the often-unpleasant stories of Israel to call the people to hope and return to God, it is important to understand that the pastor has a similar role. The traumatized church's natural inclination is to move back to the past and embrace happier times. This is seen within the book of Exodus, as the Israelites hit difficulties in the wilderness and cry out that they should return to Egypt. No matter how difficult Egypt was, the comfort of the past and the known hardships always look more promising than the unknown. Similarly, the church facing the unknowns of change and uncertainty would likewise want to return to the bondage of the plagues over embracing something new.

The role of the pastor in facing that call to return to the old ways is to hold up a mirror to the people, to demonstrate the troublesome nature of the people's history, reflect the truth that perhaps their memories are distorted, reflect on the nature of the culture and the relevance that the church made at that time. Understanding that the above-mentioned often came at a cost. Sometimes, holding up a mirror reminds people that the image they have of their history is distorted, allowing them to see the hidden bumps, bruises, and ugly spots of the time they hold so dear. This is important in allowing the people to let go of this historic image and allowing them space to move forward. While often, this transparent reminder of the past is able to assist with removing the distortion of the rose-colored glasses assigned to these prosperous times, it can also be a reminder of what the people miss the most.

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<sup>81</sup> Bemby, *Walking*, 55-7.



If the pastor does this properly, it will allow the congregation to re-embrace their core values. As mentioned in the first chapter, much of the church's resilience and behaviors are tied to its core values. Often, as the church has undergone the trauma of the plagues, their view on acting out these core values has, like the memories of their good times, been distorted. The true historian, who is open, honest, and transparent, will reflect not only on the costs and challenges associated with the church's history but on the beliefs, values, and actions that served the congregation well before the trauma happened.

Finally, much like the prophets of old, Hosea demonstrates how the past leads to hope. That while things are unknown at this time, God is ever-present. In the midst of the wilderness, as the Israelites grumbled and complained about the lack of food and water, God always provided. For most of the journey, they bore witness to the presence of God with them as their immediate needs were continually met. The pastor embracing this notion of transparent history serves to remind the people that God is with them and that their past gives hope for their future.

Finally, as the congregation prepares to cross the Red Sea, leaving behind the fear of Pharaoh and his army, the fear of a return to bondage, or their untimely death and fully entering into the wilderness. The time to begin the process of reclaiming their spiritual identity, mission, and vocation. The first step is for them to begin the process of reconnecting with their core values. As the overall anxiety has decreased enough to begin to have more difficult conversations, whether through redefining concerns and traumatic events, the isolation or removal of reactive leaders, or regaining an honest sense of the history of the church and how they got to this point, they are able to begin to analyze and determine their future through reclaiming that which they value most. This is a critical element in the church's reforming as a

community, reclaiming its identity, and developing the plan for how it will move forward into the wilderness.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Wilderness**

The wilderness is a challenging place that makes up for most of the book of Exodus. In analyzing the narrative progression of the people, it is apparent that this is an intentional journey that God is leading his people on to solidify their identity, help them develop their relationship with both God and neighbor, and to provide space and time to heal and restore before embarking into the land of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. Across this wilderness journey, there are themes that appear that help to solidify the sense of national identity and uniform narrative of who they are now that they are no longer slaves.

Over the course of this wilderness journey, there are four areas that will parallel the Israelite's own journey and that are part of the church's healing. Development of a collective identity as people of God; renewed sense of mission, purpose, and vocation; developing a leadership team that will embrace this mission; and finally, how this leadership team develops goals and a plan of action that validates and encompasses the core values of the congregation are the four areas that are paralleled. In order for the church to reclaim its sense of value and see beyond its own trauma to embrace life within the promised land, it is necessary that these areas be addressed.

### **Reclaiming Ecclesiology and Discipleship**

From the moment of the final plague and the deliverance of God's people, instruction is provided to the people on what it means to grow closer to God. Through rituals such as the consecration of the firstborn (Exodus 13: 1-2), the establishment of the Seder ritual as a reminder of their deliverance (Exodus 13: 3-16), to the institution of the Law at Mount Sinai (19: 1-20:21),

and finally, the instructions for building the tabernacle (Exodus 25:1-31:17, 35:1-40:38) are the rituals that God continually provides the Israelites with instruction and rituals that will help to bond them together in community, set them apart from the different communities they may come in contact with, and establish them as a covenant community with God. This demonstrates that ritual and structure are critical elements of identity and a willingness to be set apart for a purpose. This is especially important for people that have witnessed the power of God directly and are able to see God's presence move with them as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire.

What does this mean for the traumatized church seeking to regain its identity? In order for a church to regain its sense of ecclesiology and get back to the basics of developing disciples of Jesus Christ to fulfill the identity of the church. The United Methodist Church (UMC), for example, in its greatest charism is its practical approach to discipleship. The UMC ecclesiology seeks to promote personal and social holiness through methodical practices and small group accountability as it witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and, through him, connects the world and God. In their understanding of who they are, they believe themselves to be workers for the Kingdom of God and seek through grace to be perfected in love in their life both individually and corporately.<sup>82</sup>

The founder of what was to become Methodism, John Wesley, was involved in the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), and this is reflected in the history of the denomination. He sought not to form a new denomination but to create a monastic movement from within the Church of England that would be modeled after the lay orders of the Catholic Church. These societies would then promote "real holiness of heart and life." While these

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<sup>82</sup> Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley And The People Called Methodists, Second Edition* (Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1995) 22-3.

societies did not cloister themselves apart from the world, similar to the monastic movements of the Catholic church, they met regularly and stressed Biblical education as a means to develop personal piety. Also, they created a list of practical steps that each member would make a serious effort to follow as part of their discipleship. The society would not only serve to support and nurture the individual's growth but to hold them accountable to their Christian witness.<sup>83</sup>

I would argue that much of the loss of identity within the church that has led to its decline is related to losing sight of what the church is called to be. While at the core of much of what John Wesley sought to do was reformation through personal pietism, he was well aware of and strongly opposed individualism. In most non-Western cultures, religion is a public observance with a common story, value set, and identity among people.

Rather than serve the individual, the purpose of religion is to serve the community as what binds them together. In Western cultures, there is still a sense of that community; however, it is looser, and when a person's self-interests are not being served, the sense of community is lost, and that can lead to schism.<sup>84</sup> One way to imagine this in practice is that the church is a both/and not an either/or. The role of the church is to promote personal growth and pietism while simultaneously bringing people together in a sense of community. Part of losing our understanding of this is that we are filled with schism, to the degree that denominations are splitting as churches choose to disaffiliate. So how do we reclaim this identity as a both-and?

Unfortunately, the church has gotten lazy, and worship has become an event rather than a lifestyle. Much of this comes from the comfort that the church experienced in the days of Christendom, but worse, we are in a time where prosperity, gospel preaching, and consumerism

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<sup>83</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley And The People Called Methodists*, 22-3.

<sup>84</sup> Runyan, Theodore. *The New Creation John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1998), 102-3.

are rampant in the church. The prophetic leader needs to follow the example of the prophets of old in indicting empty worship.

One only has to turn on the television on Sunday morning to see the emptiness of what is promoted as worship. This is nothing new, since the 1980's pastors such as Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker would promote faith on nationwide television, calling on their followers to live a particular way to give in promotion of their ministries and yet in hypocritical fashion both of these pastors were brought down for their hypocritical lifestyles; Bakker for fraud and financial mismanagement and Swaggart for his love of prostitutes.<sup>85</sup> This has not changed even today, the likes of many of the major known television preachers follow a similar pattern, as they seek to collect money from those seeking a deeper relationship with God, while offering vague promises in the form of the prosperity gospel yet they live not in humility but in million dollar homes and have fleets of private jets.

The pastor of the local congregation is called to speak with a prophetic voice against this false notion of religion and follow the example of Moses. Moses, in the wilderness, was called to speak out against the self-serving idolatry of the people. Fearing that Moses would not return from the mountain, they turned to Aaron to fashion for them a golden calf so that they could bow down and worship it (Exodus 32: 1-6). Moses interceded on the people's behalf, saving them from God's wrath by destroying their idol and making them consume it (Exodus 32: 19-21).

Moses was able to serve as the intermediary between God and the people. When these rebellious and often stiff-necked people complained, he would address God to meet the people's needs, all the while reminding the people that God's presence was always with them. This happened at least four times: the need for drinking water (Exodus 15: 22-27), a shortage of food

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<sup>85</sup> Bemby, *Walking*, 63.

(Exodus 16: 1-30), a further lack of water (Exodus 17: 1-7), and finally an unprovoked attack by a wild desert tribe (Exodus 17: 8-16). In each of these cases, Moses did not resort to empty promises or vague instructions but served as God's prophet to communicate their concerns to God and seek to have the people's needs met.<sup>86</sup>

The role of the pastor is to help the people understand the nature of worship and continually point people to the presence of God in their midst. For much of the mainstream church, worship is no longer a way of life it is an event. Thanks to the consumerism and sensationalism that exists in society, worship is often about how good do you feel or how good was the music. Does one show up to worship expecting to be entertained, to encounter the living God, or to be equipped to live out our faith in the world?

Unfortunately, only a small portion of those participating in worship report that they have experienced the presence of God in worship in the last year. This is problematic because humans were created in the likeness of God for the purpose of worship; however, one needs to take a hard look at what they are choosing to worship. Authentic worship is not about us, it is not showy, it is focused on God and equipping the people for living out their faith.<sup>87</sup>

The role of the pastor is to indict the empty worship that one might hold so strongly to and to challenge their people to engage in worship not as something they just participate in but as something that they experience in their relationship with God. The pastor is called to design worship that allows people to not only praise with their lips but to offer the sacrifice of their hearts and lives in service to something greater. Effective worship not only provides the congregation with an opportunity to experience the living God but serves as an invitation to the

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<sup>86</sup> Sarna, *Exodus* =: [*Shemot*], 83.

<sup>87</sup> Phil Maynard, *Shift 2.0*, 69-70.

journey of discipleship and then provides clear next steps for growth. This is a far cry from the television preachers and, sadly, many local churches that offer false hope and empty promises.<sup>88</sup>

For worship to be effective in building disciples, it must be accessible. Unfortunately, worship in many churches is not accessible to anyone not in the church community. I once heard the question asked of older adults at a church training workshop, “When your grandkids come to visit during the week, do you expect them to sit quietly on the couch and watch your stories (soap operas)? Then why expect them to do that at church?”

How is the church expected to live into its mission of creating disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, if the people that the church is seeking to make disciples of cannot engage in worship? It is important to realize that engaging in worship opens people to experience God. Regardless of whether one is leading traditional or contemporary worship, it is important to consider this element while asking how to make the worship service flow so that people can personally involve themselves in the act of worship.

One way to make worship accessible is to increase the energy level, the worship team needs to be enthusiastic about what they are doing. Second, look at the flow of the service and look for ways to make transitions smoother. Although silence in worship is critical for introverts and other more introspectively inclined people, dead time due to poorly executed transitions has a negative effect on people’s ability to focus on what is important. Finally, take a hard look at the direction of worship, is the focus on drawing people to God or celebrating the worship team? If God is not the priority, then a revamp of worship is definitely needed.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>89</sup> Jim Cowart and Jennifer Cowart, *Start This, Stop That: Do the Things That Grow Your Church* (Nashville, Tn: Abingdon Press, 2012).37-8.



Another concern with many churches' worship is that churches are really good at conveying information but not with the application side. Unfortunately, many seminaries do an excellent job of teaching future pastors how to convey information. In Christian Education classes, students are taught the details of pedagogy and how to relay information and help people understand what scripture says. In homiletics classes, they are taught how to exegete scripture and explain the historical and cultural contexts in the midst of telling the story. It is great for the pastor to be able to say here is what happened and why it happened? But too often, they leave out the so what?

Every week, the pastor has a congregation with people looking for the answers to the so what question. People are hungry to not only know what the Bible says but what can they do about it in their lives. The pastor has a responsibility to take the scripture passage they are preaching beyond the how and why to the what to do next. Pastors seeking to build disciples have the responsibility of making a clear ask in every sermon. By the end of the sermon, the congregation should be able to identify a clear question the pastor is asking of them. Second, the pastor should give three or four next steps. What does the congregation need to do this week to begin applying the ask to real life? There are different ways of doing this, one is in the form of homework or a challenge. For example, over the next week, there can be a challenge in which the church members are asked to reach out to someone you have not talked to in a long time and check in on them in Christian love and community. By giving the congregation a specific task, they have the opportunity to grow and respond to where God is leading them because they have a specific task to try.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Cowart and Cowart, *Start This, Stop That*, 40-2.

In addition to redefining the theology and practice of worship, the pastor also has the responsibility to shepherd his congregation towards discipleship. This can take many forms. One of them is to visit the congregation members in their home. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his instructions on Spiritual Care, writes that “In a visit to the home, the pastor goes without the trappings afforded by chancel, altar, or vestment. In no other place will he be less able to hide beyond objectivity.”<sup>91</sup> It is through this visitation that the pastor is able to listen to the concerns of his congregants, to learn of their desires to grow in faith, and to share the word of God in scripture and prayer. This is a difficult task for many clergy, but it is essential for both the growth of the clergy and the congregation, this is often because being removed from the physical church building these conversations can be more authentic.<sup>92</sup>

A second way that discipleship programs can happen and have a history of being extremely effective is small groups. While most think of small groups in terms of information groups, such as Bible studies or Sunday School classes, these groups have an important role as they are not necessarily the key element to a discipleship program. Rather, this is getting back to the core of Methodism and is looking at transformation groups which are organized to help members support one another in each member’s faith journey. The goal of these groups is to provide accountability, encouragement, and loving support to the members as they live out their lives and seek to be more like Christ. The beauty of these groups is that they are centered on being made new by the grace of God, and challenging one another to live more boldly in their faith, offering advice, and being more open to receiving new ideas about how God interacts in the world. One of the critical elements of this is that it promotes a new level of empowerment,

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<sup>91</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). 45.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*,45.

accountability, and sense of purpose to those in the congregation to care for one another rather than assigning all of the work to the pastor.<sup>93</sup>

Finally, discipleship is about engaging the world around us. Part of maturing as a Christian and accepting one's place in the family of God is to embrace the notion of serving others. This service takes a variety of forms from one on one engagement with friends, co-workers, or neighbors, to community service, all the way to international mission trips. There are a variety of ways for one to discover and use their individual gifts in service to something beyond themselves. Often times, short term mission trips to a nearby location have as much of a transformational impact on those participating as on those being helped. With the understanding that most traumatized churches have turned inward and have moved to an attitude of survival, it is imperative that congregations begin to reclaim their identity and seek to develop themselves spiritually and that they would begin taking steps to re-engage the communities and the people around them.<sup>94</sup>

### **Reclaiming Calling and Vocation**

In its own way, the receiving of the law at Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus was a sense of calling for the people of Israel. This was a specific set of instructions that were meant to set the people apart from the various religions and cultures that they would be encountering throughout the remainder of their time in the wilderness as well as their journey into Canaan. What is unique about the reception of the law is that the 10 Commandments, as listed in Exodus 20: 2-17, serve as a framework for the people to live in a relationship with God and neighbor. The first four commandments center on the nature of worship and the people's relationship with

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<sup>93</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014). pg 20

<sup>94</sup> Phil Maynard, *Shift 2.0*, 123.

God. The remainder of the six commandments are related to how to live in a relationship with others without doing harm. This is a unique way of solidifying the identity and spiritual vocation as a people dedicated to loving God and each other.

While the church still holds to these commandments, they do not draw their vocation and calling from them the same way that the Israelites did. It still remains a counter-cultural lifestyle compared to the status of worldly pleasure, but it is not necessarily what the church is called to be and does in the world today. What does it mean to reclaim a sense of calling and vocation, and how does that help to solidify the identity of the church and the people within it? In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, the Apostle Paul uses the analogy of the body of Christ, the church, being much like a natural body made up of various different parts. When looking at the nature of calling, this is a critical element to understand, because each individual member's calling and vocation may differ but they all work together for a unique purpose to fulfill a greater mission in the world. The role of the pastor in this is to help the people of God understand the calling placed on their lives and respond to their Christian vocation.

What does it mean to be called and who does the calling? Throughout the Christian Gospels, Jesus presents an urgency in understanding a sense of calling. He spoke, taught, and exhorted the people to listen as if everything depended on his teachings. Given the nature of Christ's teachings and the people's inclinations to listen, we can ask the question whom do we have to listen to today?<sup>95</sup>

Today, there are three separate ways that God still speaks. The first is referred to as 'Spirit Persons' which are described as people who are exceptionally gifted at hearing God speak and have an unusual gift to access the sacred. Marcus Borg states that their most common trait

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<sup>95</sup> John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006) 20.

“is that they become funnels or conduits for the power or wisdom of God to enter the world.” Throughout Scripture, there are many examples of ‘Spirit People’. Included in this is Moses, who received his calling through the burning bush, Jonah whose rebellion caused him to spend three days in the belly of a fish, and Jesus himself to whom God said “This is my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased.”<sup>96</sup>

Additionally, the cry of the poor serves as a voice calling to those in the church. One of the most sacred places to hear the Voice is through the needs and suffering of fellow human beings. Those who learn to listen develop an open heart to the stories and lives of the poor and oppressed. God often uses these individuals to cause us to pay attention to injustice around us. If one is only to open their hearts they will become aware of unjust poverty, the depravity of humanity in the ways means are provided for one another, and the reality of systemic injustice in the world. While there are many kinds of needs and suffering in the world, the primary focus is on poverty, which is reinforced throughout all of scripture.<sup>97</sup> An example is Luke 16: 19-31, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. In the parable, Lazarus is a poor beggar with absolutely nothing, the rich man has excess and continually ignores the needs of his neighbor. In the end, when they both die, Lazarus receives his reward in heaven while the rich man endures torment in sheol. This parable serves as a reminder of the importance of the voice of the poor, and that there is a communal responsibility to care for and offer provision for those with the greatest needs.

Finally, we should listen to the “still, small voice”. Scripture again presents a reminder of this in 1 Kings 19: 11-13. In this passage, Elijah the prophet, is sent out to stand before the

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<sup>96</sup> Neafsey, *Sacred Calling*, 22.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

Lord on the mountain. While standing there a wind passed, then an earthquake, and then fire, but God was not present in any of them. Yet, after all of this God spoke to him in a still, small voice. The rich symbolism is still true for us today, too many people are looking for God to speak through miraculous signs.<sup>98</sup>

The pastor has a role in helping the congregation begin to discern these still small voices while understanding that the people are still looking for the booming voice from God or the burning bush of Moses. Rather, what needs to happen is a quieting of the heart and mind and listening for the still, small voice. In the fast-paced world, it is often difficult to learn to sit still enough to hear God speak. Through the spiritual practices of prayer and meditation, one can begin to improve the skills of listening. Prayer, while often thought of as talking to God, is not a one-sided conversation, it is a dialogue.<sup>99</sup>

The challenge in all of this is that there are inevitably a number of conflicting voices that can be heard. These voices come through both internally and externally. Each pointing in a variety of directions and all of them carrying different implications for our lives if we choose to respond. This is where the pastor can help the congregants begin to discern what they are hearing, whether they align with scripture, and what that means for them moving forward.<sup>100</sup>

Once the congregation begins to learn to listen for God speaking through that small voice, they have to begin to understand what it is that they are being called into doing. For every Christian, we understand that some of these callings are of course general, the call to respond to grace, to be justified before God through Baptism, repentance, and to embrace the freedom we have in a relationship with Jesus. While these are important, and often a starting point for

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<sup>98</sup> Neafsey, *Sacred Calling*, 31.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

understanding our calling to follow Christ while living in the world, we need to look at the more specific calling relating to our vocation and how we are called to live in the world in today's time.<sup>101</sup>

When determining the nature of these callings they must be interpreted through a series of guidelines. First, with the understanding that “all callings are directed in service to the care and redemption of the world” we must understand that the needs of the world have an impact on one's calling. Because these needs are diverse, not everyone will receive the same calling to work and live in the world. Some are called to vocational work in the church caring for the spiritual needs of the community, others into medical professions, others the legal profession, others activism, and yet others into various service industries. Much like what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12, all the various parts of the body have a vital role to play for the well-being of all.<sup>102</sup>

What gifts the person has to offer is the second consideration. God grants each person created with a specific set of gifts to be used for the betterment of the world. These gifts vary dramatically - some are intellectual, others artistic, some administrative, others mechanical, and yet others lie in various scientific fields of biology, social sciences, or emotional. Each of these gifts is given for a purpose to uphold the body of Christ and to make an impact in the world, and God's calling takes into account these gifts. For example, someone who has a black thumb when it comes to caring for plants is probably not going to be called to be a horticulturist who is working to improve the quality of plants and food crops. Likewise, someone who is all thumbs and can barely turn a screwdriver probably is not going to be called to be an auto mechanic or

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<sup>101</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Calling in Today's World: Voices from Eight Faith Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016). 59

<sup>102</sup> Cahalan, *Calling in Today's World*, 63.

plumber. The world is dependent on a variety of gifts and can only function when those living in it respond to their callings to share those gifts.<sup>103</sup>

This is true even more so in the church. Not everyone is gifted with preaching, teaching, or pastoral care. It is important for those who are gifted in those areas to live into those vocations within the church. However, much like calling in the world, there is a notion of calling and vocation within the church beyond that of pastor or teacher. Everyone has unique gifts that they can share within the mission and purpose of the church.

Many churches have incredibly talented choirs or praise bands that help lead worship on Sunday mornings. The members of these groups often have a variety of musical talents and have a willingness and dedication to sharing them. Others are gifted with outreach and community care. They love writing cards, visiting the sick, cooking and making food to take to those in need, and have a general heart for people. Others in the church bring a variety of leadership skills to the table and have gifts for administration and finance. For the church to function and be able to live into its mission, it takes everyone understanding their gifts and being willing to step up in response to using those gifts in service to something greater than themselves.

The inherent pitfall is that when the people are unwilling to respond to a calling and use their gifts in support of the church's mission and vocation someone has to step up. Often, this results in church boards filled to capacity with people who are willing to serve but that may not have the necessary gifts to do the work effectively and with joy. This is a common occurrence within churches enduring the plagues, as reactive leaders step up when no one else will, and then seek to ensure they remain in power.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 64-5.



Lastly, there two things to consider with regard to understanding calling. First, it is important to understand that calling changes over our life cycle. While it is important to recognize that one's gifts play a crucial role in determining calling and vocation, it is also important to understand that life-cycle also plays a role. For simplicity sake, let us look at three stages of the human lifecycle. Youth is a transition time between childhood and adulthood, when the youth is beginning to explore freedom. During these crucial years, the youth begins to understand the nature of some of their gifts and begins to plan, prepare, and hope for their future.<sup>104</sup>

As part of their calling, they should be encouraged to explore and encouraged in experimenting with gifts that begin to manifest. Likewise, those in middle age are called to maturity and obedience. This is the time of adulthood to begin the process of harvesting what was sown at earlier ages and is often the most productive time in life because those in middle age have the wisdom and maturity of obedience but are not yet exhausted. Finally, those in old age bring a wealth of experience and wisdom to the table. However, they are often unable to perform at the level they used to. Instead, they are gifted with seeing the larger picture and have gifts and graces for sharing and preparing the next generations of leaders in the church and world.<sup>105</sup>

The final consideration in reclaiming the church's calling and vocation is that while it is often an individual activity, there is a need for communal discernment. One way that the community must play a role in the discernment of call is for those called to vocational ministry. It is important to understand that these individuals experiencing a personal call to ministry must

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<sup>104</sup> Cahalan, *Calling in Today's World*, 66.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

have that call confirmed and affirmed by the community. However, this is an important step for anyone discerning a calling in their lives. Often, a group within the community that knows one intimately can provide insight into an individual's gifts and can help them see the bigger picture. Other times these individuals, who are close to a person discerning their future, can be a source of God's direction encouraging the person to seek a vocation that they had perhaps not considered.<sup>106</sup>

As the individuals begin to reclaim their understanding of their calling and vocation within the life of the church, then the subsequent effect is that the church begins to reclaim its mission and purpose within the community. A church filled with vibrant and active members engaged in living out their respective calling will cease to be stagnant because the members will insist on living their faith in the community in which they live as bold disciples of Christ, seeking to make a difference in the world.

### **Reclaiming Leadership**

One of the challenges of ministry, especially in comparison with the prophets of old with whom we have drawn a comparison throughout this work, is the desire for the pastor to attempt to go it alone. Although Moses did have his brother Aaron to assist him, it is apparent that when it came to resolving disputes among the people Moses attempted to go it alone.

*“The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. When Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?” Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a*

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<sup>106</sup> Cahalan, *Calling in Today's World*, 68.

*dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God.” (Exodus 18: 13-16)*

This is an unfortunate pitfall of ministry, especially in many larger churches or churches with unhealthy lay leadership.

At times it seems easier to try and carry all the weight alone, rather than delegate anything to others. Unfortunately, much like Moses, it is easy for a leader to get so wrapped up in doing the job that they are inefficient and lead themselves towards burnout. However, Moses was never quite alone in his leadership over the people of Israel. He served as the leader, who set the vision and served as the intermediary between the people and God. Moses went to God every time there was a problem with the people. His brother Aaron, however, served as the manager or administrator for the people.

Aaron is the one who saw to the immediate needs of the people and was responsible for the organization of the journey. When put into that perspective, one can see that management and leadership are essential elements for any organization, but just providing them is not enough. For the organization to be successful, these two must be aligned for a common purpose and direction. When they are not connected and sharing that single purpose challenges happen. For example, when separated by too great a distance, Moses was on the mountain receiving the new commandments for the people while Aaron was breaking the commandments in making an idol for the people. When the vision and the administration are not in sync, things fall apart horribly, and the congregation stalls and returns to facing the plagues.<sup>107</sup>

In order for the church to move forward and reclaim its purpose, it must embrace a new way of leadership. Often this means reorganization of staff, both paid and unpaid, which can be

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<sup>107</sup> Gilbert R. Rendle and Susan Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron: Staffing and Supervision in Large Congregations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). 10.

a difficult task for people in ministry. One reason for this is that ministry is about people. It can be difficult to make the mental transition to see people as resources for ministry because the focus of the ministry is too often on the recipients and goals. This disconnect is problematic with regard to addressing new staff being further complicated because the church pastor, who is supposed to be the chief leader and administrator, typically does not have the background needed for human resource management.

This means that often the new staff member is seen as the goal rather than as a resource for conducting a new ministry. This can be a tough transition for many clergy, understanding how to see the members of their congregation, especially staff whether paid, unpaid, full or part-time, as resources rather than as goals.<sup>108</sup> One mindset change that pastors need to make in response to this is to embrace the work of determining the calling and vocation mentioned in the previous section, this would allow the pastor to remain focused on achieving the goal of transforming lives while allowing for a better understanding of people as resources. The effective pastor understands that one goal of a transformed life is the ability to respond to one's calling and vocation in the church and in the world.

This also requires that the leadership have an additional shift in mindset. Much like Moses who felt that he had to be the only one to judge the people of Israel, to teach them the statutes and instructions of God, the pastor has to be willing to move past the singular leader mentality. It is impossible for one person to have every answer and solution to every problem. Whether the leader wants to admit it, they will have natural biases and blind spots. When a leader embraces this mentality, it cuts the creative ability of the resources on the team in developing creative solutions.

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<sup>108</sup> Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, 10-12

Further, this mentality limits communication between staff members, who will often fear the over-controlling style of the singular-minded leader.<sup>109</sup> While this is aimed at the pastor as the leader, this too can be witnessed in the form of church boards. In the polity of the United Methodist Church, there are four required committees: trustees, staff parish relations committee, finance, and nominations. These committees are made up of 9 to 12 people serving a rotating 3-year term of office. Then additionally the church is required to have a church council that's responsible for planning and implementing programs as well as seeing to the due administration of the church.<sup>110</sup>

In a healthy church, these committees serve to assist the pastor with the overall administration of and planning for ministry in the life of the church. However, in traumatized churches, whose boards are filled with reactive leaders, these boards take on the singular-minded leader mentality. In this case, these boards often take the responsibility of micro-management of staff members and every form of ministry meaning that all staff, especially the pastor, are subject to the board's wishes and they make the determination of what ministry can be done, when, where, and with whom they choose. Which results in stifled ministry, undue stress on the staff, and pushing the church towards decline.

In order to break the cycle of reactivity in church boards the pastor in conjunction with the committee on nominations must take into consideration the calling of members in the congregation and do a thorough analysis of potential leaders using strength-based leadership principles. Unfortunately, more often than not leaders on a team are there by coincidence and typically when they are not it is because of competency in a particular area. Even when leaders

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<sup>109</sup> Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, 14.

<sup>110</sup> The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016 (Nashville, Tn: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016). 182-4.

look at the strengths of individuals they are looking to recruit to a team, they tend to pick people who are similar to themselves in terms of strengths and personality. However, a leader who understands the concept of strength-based leadership understands that the team needs to be designed to recruit people who have strengths that will compliment what one another brings to the table. Over several years Gallup did a poll analyzing a variety of executive leadership teams, what they learned was that the most cohesive and successful teams were composed of a broader spectrum of strengths. In analyzing the strengths of these teams, the researchers began to see a pattern of 34 different leadership themes falling into 4 major domains of leadership: executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking. What is striking is that the most effective teams consisted of members who represented all four domains.<sup>111</sup>

The reason for these teams being more effective and cohesive is that the skills in these domains are complementary to each other. For example, a leader who demonstrates strengths in the executing domain, knows how to get things accomplished. They are masters at implementing ideas and will work tirelessly to get the mission accomplished. This is in contrast to another leader who excels in the domain of influencing. These individuals are skilled in selling the teams ideas outside of the organization and helping the group be heard. Next, leaders who are skilled in building relationships are the tie that binds the team together. Without these leaders the leadership team is typically just a collection of individuals, these leaders have the innate ability to bring the group together for a purpose and help them to work effectively as a team. Finally, the strategic thinkers have the ability to see the whole picture and are gifted to keep the group focused on what could be. These are the analysts of the leadership team who are able to

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<sup>111</sup>Tom Rath, *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow* (New York: Gallup Press, 2017). 22-4.

process copious amounts of data and present multiple options for moving forward.<sup>112</sup> When the leadership team of an organization is able to blend this variety of leadership styles together they have a robust set of skills to draw from that complement each other, and the possibilities are limitless.

A well-designed administrative board has freedom from the need to micromanage the pastor and staff, and is then able to fulfill the management role. The pastor as the leader of the church then takes the role of Moses, as the visionary and intermediary. The board supports the pastor's vision for the direction of the church and allows him to oversee the church staff both paid and unpaid, to give them direction and guidance for the execution of ministry. Likewise, the church administrative board takes on the role of Aaron in planning for and allocating resources to the staff overseeing the necessary ministry programs to carry out the vision. Through this partnership the leadership and management elements necessary to carry out the mission of the church are able to form a deeper connection and remain in alignment.

If this relationship operates as it should, it grants the pastor as the leader of the church the ability and authority to delegate the execution of ministry to their staff, and allows for a more decentralized style of leadership. Which is a change from what most churches have probably experienced during the plagues. Overall, the goal should be as staff ability allows, to transfer the decision-making authority from one centralized leader, or board, to the immediate staff members executing their assigned position. Difficult, or complicated decisions should still be brought before the pastor or the staff to be discussed and analyzed as a group before final decisions are made. The benefit to this style of leadership is that it makes the organization more responsive

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<sup>112</sup> Rath, *Strengths Based Leadership*, 24-6.

and flexible. Decisions can be made quickly by those who are often subject matter experts in their respective areas.<sup>113</sup>

However, this means that the pastoral leader or the respective board, whoever has been stuck in the singular leader mentality, has to be able to trust the staff to let go of control. When the pastor is able to delegate authority to accomplish a task or oversee a program it strengthens the congregation as a whole. One way is that it allows for the continued development of future leaders. Second, the task is often being entrusted to the best qualified or most experienced person in the congregation for a particular area. Third, it empowers people to take ownership of the ministry areas in which they work and allows them to grow.<sup>114</sup> In appointing the judges over the tribes of Israel, is one Biblical example of delegation. In Exodus 18: 17-27, Moses heeds the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, to appoint chieftains over the people of Israel, that they could handle the minor disputes and only bring major disputes to him. In doing this Moses empowered those who were chosen to take on the mantle of leadership and to reduce his own workload so that he could focus on other concerns.<sup>115</sup>

Another example of delegation in scripture is Jesus sending out the twelve disciples in pairs of two to the surrounding towns. Jesus delegates this task to them because the need for people to hear the message of repentance and God's Kingdom was great and he was only one person. They were chosen because they were ready for the task at hand, having sat at his feet and hearing his teachings. In this example we see four critical elements of healthy delegation. First, Jesus gave the disciples power and authority, he did not send them forth without the tools to do the job they were being asked to do. Second, he gave them a specific responsibility, they

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<sup>113</sup> Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, 170-1.

<sup>114</sup> Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, 105.

<sup>115</sup> Sarna, *Exodus =: [Shemot]*, 101-2.



were provided with directions on where to go, what to say and do, and even where to stay. They were given a framework to work within. Third, they were provided with support. He sent them out in teams of two so they had someone with them to encourage, to hold them accountable, and so that they did not feel isolated or alone. Finally, Jesus anticipated and accepted that there would be failure and gave instructions on what to do when things didn't work out, to include how to recover and continue moving forward.<sup>116</sup>

When the church has effective leadership that has the combined ability to set a vision and manage its resources to see that mission through, it allows it to heal from its trauma and helps to bind the people together for a common purpose. Through decentralizing decision making, diversifying leadership styles, and reducing the anxiety of reactionary leaders the churches community has the opportunity to develop into a more cohesive body that is focused on living into the calling and vocation of its members and its collective mission to the world around it. As the church begins to embrace this new style of leadership they are better able to create a positive plan of action that will move them forward into prosperity, community, and provide hope. Through this the church leadership culture can begin to change and adapt, allowing for people to be viewed as resources to be equipped, empowered, and sent forth in service to others which is a mark of their growing discipleship.

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<sup>116</sup> Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, 111

## Chapter 5

### Crossing the Jordan into Canaan

By the end of the book of Exodus the Israelites have spent 40 years in the wilderness, learning and growing into the community that they were called to be. While most churches will not spend that much time before they are able to cross into the land of prosperity and hope, they have to go through this process to solidify their identity. To reclaim this sense of community, and live in a relationship with others takes work. As the church moves from the wilderness of discovery they are called into a new purpose of living out their faith and maintaining a sense of community. In this time the church is called to be bold, to think outside of the proverbial box, and to embrace their neighbor in new ways.

### The Church in the World

Through this journey through the wilderness the church is moving past its trauma and starting to develop a new identity with a renewed mission for living out its faith. As the pastor and the other church leaders continue to refine the systems that will allow the church to cross the Jordan and move into the promised land it is important to look at what it means to continue to grow in community. A strong community that is continually maturing and growing in their faith will have a new outlook on how to live into their missional vocation to be the church in a hurting world by turning their focus outside of the walls and building and sustaining community with their neighbors.

Here are four practices that contribute to the sustainment of a community. The first practice is gratitude, this is from the Latin root *gratia*, which means *grace*. The Greek word for grace is *charis*, which is the root for the term thankfulness or gratitude, *eucharista*. Grace and gratitude are fundamental elements that are ever connected, however, they are often absent in the

way we live.<sup>117</sup> When the church was undergoing the trials of the plagues it tended to focus on the negative and gravitated towards noticing flaws and imperfections. However, as the church moves forward with a new more positive outlook, the emphasis can shift to gratitude allowing the community to begin looking for the good in all things. When the nature of the community is centered on gratitude, they are more aware of how blessed they are and are willing to share those blessings.<sup>118</sup>

As the church moves forward into its calling, it demonstrates gratitude in action. In doing this the church is able to realize that all humanity is made in God's image and is called good. John Calvin stated, "of all God's earthly creatures, only humans are able to return thanks to God." Humanity was created for the purpose of gratitude.<sup>119</sup> As the congregation begins to embrace this theology, and remembers what they have experienced in the wilderness they learn to embrace every day as a small resurrection. This carries forward into their daily interactions with the world around them as they reframe their focus and create spaces for gratitude to be put forth in action.<sup>120</sup>

In order to maintain a strong relationship focused on their neighbor they must keep their promises. In order for the community to remain strong and focused they have to have trust and confidence that others will keep their promises. One example of an internal community promise that is made is the membership vows that are made in the United Methodist Church. New members of the church are asked: "To faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, and their service, and their witness." At the same time, the community of

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<sup>117</sup> Pohl, Christine D., *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*. (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011.) 18.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 51.

faith is asked to reaffirm that same commitment. This is a promise that is made among the members of the community. Similarly, the church should make a promise to the community in which they engage in ministry. This promise is to listen, love, and partner with their neighbor in love and generosity as the church seeks to live in a relationship with the neighbors.

This promise is not a contract, but a covenant among those gathered to uphold one another in love and support. In the biblical tradition, there is a close connection between promises and covenants. However, in modern times the shift has been made to more closely associate contracts with promises. Contracts are transactional, there is a promise made and consequences for breaking the promise, usually for a period of time. Covenants, however, are focused on shared commitments within the community with no end date or exit clause.<sup>121</sup>

The purpose of promise making is to help the community move towards a covenantal model and to help hold the community accountable to one another. In order for this to happen, the community must be willing to respond in gratitude to one another, find common ground, and be willing to be vulnerable with one another. It is important that as communities of faith begin this process of covenant making with each other they must be explicit about what their expectations are.<sup>122</sup>

The church must be a vibrant community full of people that love truth, live faithfully, and respond gratefully and relish truth telling. The boldest example of what this looks like is from Acts 2-4. The early church in Acts preached boldly and lived out their faith in passionate ways that sought to care for the poor and those who are marginalized.<sup>123</sup>

The early church knew the dangers of living a life full of deception and lies which endanger

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<sup>121</sup> Pohl, *Living into Community.*, 77.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

communities and undermine the best efforts. This is the model for the modern church that seeks to care for those in their community with the greatest need. Any form of gossip or slander hinders this effort and undermines the focus and mission of the church. The congregation must grow into living in truth rather than give into gossip and lies.<sup>124</sup> A major aspect of learning to live in truth is learning to listen to those around you. Listening is at the heart of wisdom and discernment. There is wisdom in silence. When the congregation is able to practice silence it allows them to hear both the voice of God and the needs of their neighbors.<sup>125</sup>

The final practice for community building is hospitality, which calls on the church to bring all these practices together. Hospitality is the church in action drawing from God's grace and reflecting it back onto a hurting world. Hospitality is a critical element that not only brings together all of the other practices but serves as a point to forge deeper relationships within the community and between the community and the world. For hospitality to come across as genuine it must be rooted in gratitude. It must also allow for truthfulness and vulnerability to be accepting of others. As these elements are combined the congregation creates a welcoming space that allows them to safely welcome strangers and remains vulnerable and open to them.<sup>126</sup>

As the church begins to apply these practices both within its walls and within its community they begin to look differently, taking on new characteristics that further set them apart from the world. These churches begin to nurture elements such as empathy, service, and begin to put people over their self-interests. Mildly put, they become more Christlike in every aspect of their lives.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 148-9.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 159-160.

A community of faith is called to be empathetic and compassionate to the world around it. They are called to embrace the poor, the oppressed, and those in need, and seek to alleviate their pain through service and love. When the church embraces the elements of empathy and compassion they are open to combating the evils that have caused oppression. They are not limited to a single cause, but seek to listen, engage, and walk alongside all those who have been marginalized. As the church begins to develop these relationships and is open to learning, and aligning with rather than rescuing, they will begin to see a shift in their own culture that will allow everyone to experience grace and growth.<sup>127</sup>

As the church begins to truly live into the promise of its vocation one of the major shifts that is noticeable is that the congregation begins to put the needs of others over their personal preferences. This is dramatically different from the way the church functioned during the plagues where the reactive leadership functioning in survival mode put the personal preferences of select members as the priority. When the church turns its focus outward and places others first it seeks to enfold others into the community. The focus is no longer on getting people to join the church, but rather establishing relationships to make those in their immediate vicinity feel like they belong. They begin the process of getting to not only know visitors, but make a conscious effort to learn the names and stories of those who live in their neighborhood. Eventually, inviting them to be part of the church community whether by attending worship or just participating in the ministries of the church as whole.<sup>128</sup>

This relationship building takes time and energy. Its an intentional process that requires the members to learn the people's names, stories, and to become like family.<sup>129</sup> As the church

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<sup>127</sup> Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, in *Church Called Tov* (Carol Streak, II: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2020), 104-6.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-8.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 130

begins to focus on those who are not in the congregational family already, their focus changes. Through grace they begin to see not with earthly eyes, but with the eyes of Christ. The members of the church will see through the facade that people put up and see the truth of their needs, hurts, and desires, and being filled with mercy will look for ways to partner with and walk alongside people to help them heal and be restored.<sup>130</sup>

When the congregation begins to truly see and become aware of the pain and needs of their community they will not be able to resist acting. The congregation will naturally look for ways to help with the needs of those around them. Doing the extraordinary until it becomes the ordinary. Much like the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: 31-46; the serving congregation will not even be aware of their service to others. It becomes a natural extension of their identity in Christ and faith.<sup>131</sup> At the same time as this becomes the new norm within the church the congregation must be aware of the pitfall of serving for the wrong reasons. Service in the example of Christ is meant to be self-less, the challenge for the church is to avoid serving for the sake of attention or reward. Additionally, service is about relationships, not about greatness. The final temptation that the church faces in serving is the notion of the “heroic extreme” in which the congregation is willing to give up everything they have to serve others, pursuing this level of greatness is not what the church is called to do.<sup>132</sup>

### **Doing it Differently, The Innovative Church**

Moving across the Jordan River into the hope and promise of greater things means that the ways things have been done must change. In many regards the church must adapt and be innovative in seeking ways to better live in community with others and to promote growth both

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<sup>130</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *Church Called Tov*, 131-2.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-2.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

within the congregation and their community. This process is called social innovation; which is “the discovery and development of strategies to build, renew, and transform institutions to foster human flourishing.”<sup>133</sup> An organization that leverages the concepts of social innovation seeks to create a new norm that seeks to create new values, unlocks potential, and alleviates suffering. In other words, social innovation is a means by which an organization is able effectively to institute change.

As the church reclaims its values and recognizes its calling in the world they are able to adopt a clear mission, recognizing and pursuing opportunities to serve that mission. In this creating a process of innovation, adaptation, and learning, acting boldly without being limited by resources and exhibiting greater accountability to those they serve. When looking at this list, one can see elements of it based in almost every Christian renewal movement throughout the history of the church, and all of them are prevalent in the early Methodist movement in England in the eighteenth-century.<sup>134</sup> The concept of social innovation is in the church’s DNA. As the church seeks to renew its mission to make disciples, based on the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 16-20), they must embrace the concepts of social innovation that rebuild the relationship between God and the Christian life that build community and seek to tackle the problems in society. There are six key markers inherent in the Christian life that make this possible: blessing, hope, forgiveness, friendship, imagination, and improvisation.<sup>135</sup> Jones further expands on each of the six markers.

The first concept is blessing. God’s blessing is best expressed in creation; in Genesis, the concept of blessing appears with the creation of living creatures. During each day of creation,

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<sup>133</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2016), 4

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-3.



God calls creation good and then calls forth good in response to what is created. Human beings were expressly created for blessing God; this is evident throughout scripture. Blessing is a way of life that responds to God who first blessed the created order, and continues to bless all of creation.<sup>136</sup>

The second concept is hope. Hope is the bridge between a positive vision of the future held in tension with an assessment of the current reality. One way to understand hope is from the understanding of “learned optimism.” Those who can grasp optimism as a gift and skill tend to perform better academically and live longer healthier lives. Unlike pessimists who see the world more accurately, the optimist will reframe aspects of reality to give it a more preferential view. Christian hope focuses on the positive and is rooted in God’s blessing of the created goodness and promise of his coming reign while being aware of the reality of the human condition and inherent brokenness.<sup>137</sup>

Forgiveness is what God offers to humanity in response to sin and evil, and it allows one to move past the brokenness of the past and have an opportunity for a future. There is liberation in the notion of forgiveness; through it, one is no longer held captive by the cycles of vengeance, cynicism, and despair. Rather, through forgiveness, one can experience new life and innovation. Forgiveness is another form of blessing that allows for hope to continue, no longer is one shackled to the past, but has the hope of a better future. Further, forgiveness and innovation are connected in a way that allows for the future and past to work together in a way that blesses and transforms the present.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Jones, *Christian Innovation*, 13.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Next is friendship. Human beings were created in the image of God with the capability to be in a relationship with God and others. Humans need relationships to flourish, and a major aspect of those relationships is forgiveness. One needs to surround themselves with “holy friends” who will hold them accountable, challenge them to overcome those sins that are comfortable and familiar, and will affirm gifts that one might normally deny, and to dream boldly. This kind of friendship is a gift that allows one to discover forgiveness and to imagine in community a greater future shaped by God’s unending blessings.<sup>139</sup>

Humanity has the innate gift to see the world as God does; this is imagination. Human beings are able to view the created order through the lens of all of the above concepts, which allows them to see the possibilities of all of the creation flourishing. To embrace imagination, one must learn to let go of basic assumptions that are rooted in sin, brokenness. In doing that, one can learn to imagine new purpose, vocation, and vision for one’s communities, organizations, and mission.<sup>140</sup>

Finally, improvisation; one should be willing to experiment and seek new innovative solutions with the understanding that the end state of the world is in God’s hands, not in humanities. One who understands this knows that their actions are rooted in hope and bear witness to God’s goodness and blessings, and by such seeks to improve the world around them. Improvisation isn’t as much about making something up from scratch, but rather is about embracing the best of the past, utilizing the gifts of those around them, and building community and common resolve.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Jones, *Christian Innovation*, 14.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

These six themes are present in the Gospel in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Jesus understands the problem of too large of a crowd and too little food. Rather than turn the crowds away, he offers an innovative solution. Jesus turns scarcity into abundance, and by doing so, creates a new pattern for Christian hospitality: ‘take, bless, break, and give.’<sup>142</sup> This pattern is visible throughout not only scripture but the historic liturgy of the church and is an integral pattern in the Eucharist. While this forms the core pattern for Christian hospitality, it is not enough without a clear sense of purpose.

Further, Christian social innovation depends on a clear sense of purpose. Most churches and organizations can clearly articulate what they do, how they do it, and perhaps with less clarity who (and whose they are.) But for an organization to be able to be truly innovative, they must understand the why. Most organizations are very good at stating what and how, but have a harder time explaining why they do what they do. Simon Sinek, who delivered a TED talk in 2009, on this subject, claims that the best leaders begin with their purpose. Their purpose for doing (the why) leads them to explain how they accomplish their purpose (the what) and how further to expand those accomplishments. Sinek states that the most innovative organizations always begin with why.<sup>143</sup>

As the church embraces its new freedoms in the land of Canaan, it is critical that they return to their why. For a church to embrace what it is called to do in ministering and serving the community around it, it must recognize their vocation and calling at the forefront of everything they do. They must seek in every aspect to follow the example of Christ in showing care, compassion, and empathy to everyone they encounter, and be willing to think beyond the historic

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>143</sup> Jones, *Christian Innovation*, 20.

ways that the church has attempted to do mission and outreach. When the church begins to understand their why, they become more imaginative in their how because they see the importance of the mission laid before them. This is where the new leadership structure implemented in the wilderness is able to shine. The pastor as the leader and visionary casts the vision of what the church is to be. The administrative board then finds and allocates the necessary resources and sets goals for the staff to achieve in the implementation of new programs. This allows the staff of the church in conjunction with the laity of the church to be imaginative in using those resources to accomplish the goals they have been provided.

### **Putting it all together, Adaptive Leadership**

Through this journey, the church has been through a process of extreme change and now that it embraces the new environment within its culture as it seeks to look beyond self and into the community. While the challenge is there to be innovative and to help others thrive, there still needs to be a sense of direction to oversee this process. This is where adaptive leadership serves as the final step of the church's transformation, and when applied within the context of this resurrected community it mobilizes the people to engage with challenging problems, come up with creative solutions, and thrive in ways they did not think possible.<sup>144</sup>

Adaptive leadership is different from other models of leadership in several ways. First, it seeks to help realign the actions of the organization with its core values. Second, in adaptive leadership the problem is not always clear, and often neither is the solution. Which means the nature of the problem and the solution require learning. It is allowing organizations to mobilize people to seek

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<sup>144</sup> Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009). 14.

solutions to tough problems and to thrive. This style of leadership is an ongoing cycle of observation, interpretation, and intervention. It is through observation that the organization is able to get a bird's eye view of the situation.<sup>145</sup>

They then can begin to interpret and seek to define a problem based on what they see. The interpretation is the best possible guess related to the facts from the observation, and are the results of internal biases and values. When performing this process in a group the likelihood that each member will have a different interpretation is high. This is a natural part of the process that allows for the ability to view different sides and questions related to the observations.<sup>146</sup>

Then when the issue is addressed, an intervention, or suggested solution, is developed. During the implementation of this intervention, the process cycles, calling for observing how the intervention is working and beginning the process of interpretation so that the intervention can be modified, as necessary. This creates a perpetual loop that seeks to identify new problems and solutions.<sup>147</sup> Another distinction is that unlike other forms of leadership that are often focused on the individual to decide, adaptive leadership requires a team. It is not done in a vacuum and requires the input of various voices to make it successful.

This overview is intentionally vague. It is meant only to articulate the basis for the process of adaptive leadership. Rather, it is in the application of the process that the church goes through that the theory begins to make sense. In this case let us look at an example of a church that has been through the wilderness, has reclaimed its cultural and is starting to align its actions

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<sup>145</sup>Ibid., 32-3.

<sup>146</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, 34-5.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 35-6.

to those values, and as such is seeking to be innovative as they turn their focus outwardly to engage their neighborhood.

The church knows that part of its missional calling is to serve their neighbors, but they do not know their neighbors. They know that they need to observe and listen to the people that they would like to build a relationship with, and partner alongside in meeting the people's needs. The first step the church needs to take is to get to know their neighbors. The church needs to get out into the community, prayer walking, talking to people who are outside, being willing to be vulnerable in introducing themselves to the people who live around them. As they do this, they must learn about their neighbors. What is the condition of the people's yards, homes, cars? Does the neighborhood consist of mostly rent houses, apartments, or single-family homes? Beyond the appearance, what are the people like, are they primarily older or working age, are they multigenerational families, what is the predominant race? While these observations will help with interpretation, they are not the most critical element of observation. In this case, the congregation needs to invest the time to build relationships and spend the bulk of their time listening and learning from their neighbors.

In the case of the churches from chapter one, the church in decline attempted this as they started their healing process. In engaging their neighborhood, they learned that many of the working-class families that lived in the vicinity of the church campus were immigrants from Mexico. In addition, most of them only spoke Spanish, however, because they were also younger families they had children in the local schools. They learned that many of these children were behind in school because they did not have books in English at home so that outside of school they were not able to practice reading. Often meaning that over the summer break their reading proficiency would drop significantly.

In listening to the concerns of both the students and parents, they were able to interpret the need for a literacy program for the community. They took into consideration what the church was capable of providing, they had space and volunteers but not much of a budget to be able to develop the necessary program. Rather, they responded to the needs in an innovative way, allowing a different non-profit organization to come in to provide a summer literacy program. The church took it upon themselves to be the sponsor for the organization, provided craft materials, snacks, and volunteers to read and engage with the children that came to the program.

As this agency partnered with the church, the newly formed committee that was responsible for overseeing the partnership received feedback from both the college students representing the program and the parents of the children participating. This allowed for them to do an on-going evaluation of the program's success and make small tweaks throughout the summer to better serve the needs of the community. This allowed them to not only meet the needs that they did not even know were needed at the start, but as the program grew they were able to expand elements of it to do literacy, English as a second language and Generalized Educational Development classes in the evening for several of the parents who had no education.

This was only possible because the church was willing to reclaim their identity, vocation, and mission and begin to engage with their community to build relationships. Through this they did not bring in new members or grow the church, but they were successful in making a major impact in their community, transforming people's lives, and building new relationships that encompassed their neighborhood into the family in a unique way.

## Conclusion

Thanks in part to the ending of Christendom, the Church has become stagnant, losing sight of its mission, calling, and vocation in the world. In many cases it is ripe with schism and has polarized itself in its politics. As a result, the church finds itself in bondage to the world and is enduring the plagues of trauma. This is not the intent that Christ has for his bride, he calls for them to die to themselves and be resurrected into new life. While there are numerous books that appeal to leaders seeking to revitalize and help congregations make lasting and effective changes, most do not even begin to touch on the effects that trauma has had or why the church has remained in bondage for so long.

The Exodus of the people of Israel is a prime example of what it looks like for the church to name its trauma, to be set free from slavery to the plagues they have endured, and to reclaim their identity, calling, vocation, and mission. Similar to the people of Israel, the church needs the time of the wilderness to reset. Redefine a cultural identity and their post trauma-narrative. They need to analyze their history and find hope for their future, that they may grow as disciples and be instruments of the kingdom of God.

As the church goes through this journey of rediscovery and redemption, it is important to understand that this is not a comprehensive list of steps, however, it is a starting point that follows the pattern of the Israelites as they were transformed through the time in the desert. In the case of the people of Israel they resisted following where God was leading, as such their journey took much longer than expected. They truly had to die, so that the rebellious generations never saw the promised land. The hope in this story, and for the church today is that God has a plan and when his people are obedient to following on the journey laid out before them, he delivers, restores his people. Are you ready for the journey?



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