

“Morning Is Wiser Than Night”

**Reflection/White Paper
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What follows is an opera in three acts. First are the realities. Second are the musings of an Honorably Retired Pastor prone to preach, wander, and muse, hoping to frame who we are. My colleagues out here are aware of my thoughts, but they are mine alone. They, however, do understand. Third and last, starting on page 15, I outline possibilities. I am grateful for the institutional efforts to frame the issues we face. We could use more solutions, more hope. Or tell me where I’m wrong. Come on, folks, we all know how the institutional church can busy itself trying to remodel the kitchen in the middle of an earthquake. And the earth moves under my feet. How the church can busy itself hanging wallpaper in the staterooms whilst forgetting about the iceberg ahead. How the church can readily fuss over salamanders when there are real dragons at the drawbridge.

Let me begin the overture by telling you about my Presbytery.

In the Presbytery of Northumberland 6 retired pastors moderate 11 sessions, resulting in a failure to provide the continuity of support and oversight these congregations need. Their longevity is diminishing. We’re running out of resources. These few moderators simply are unable to offer a dependable presence and familiarity that lends toward asking the elders useful and informed questions. And some of us would like to retire from retirement.

8 other sessions are moderated by non-Presbyterians (including a union church), 13 by part-time or neighboring full-time Presbyterian pastors as well as by commissioned pastors.

Of Northumberland’s 32 congregations (there were 44 when I was called into this Presbytery and we just approved 2 new Administrative Commissions), only 6 are served by full time pastors. The leadership base is running thin. Even the part-time Presbytery Executive moderates 3 sessions, and he just announced to Presbytery his resignation. Our situation is untenable. We got a lot of grief and shame and exasperation out here. We’re getting tired.

How do these figures compare with other Presbyteries? When one of these full-time congregations begins the call process for an installed pastor, it has proven difficult to attract competent candidates. We feel we have been ignored by our seminaries. We feel abandoned. I’d like to be able to contribute again my alumni contribution to my seminary, but I need to talk about how our seminaries can contribute to us. Prolonged gaps in sustained pastoral continuity along with turn-stile leadership weakens congregations (hobbles, hamstrings, harms).

On a personal note, I’m grateful my pastor of the Fanwood Presbyterian Church in Elizabeth Presbytery, Dr. George Hunt (also a former editor of “The Presbyterian Outlook”), did not live to see the current state of the denomination he loved and served so diligently.

What are our realities?

1. The trend will continue.
2. All things created end.
3. Static and stasis are the illusion; dynamism, change, disequilibrium, motion, flux, and flow is the reality.¹ Our globe in our solar system is a top spinning, spinning, spinning... Do you feel it? We are rotating at a speed of 1,000 miles per hour. No cosmic state troopers to pull us over. A bullet from an AK47 travels 1,600 miles per hour. Right now we are traveling $\frac{3}{4}$ the speed of a bullet. Add to our rotation our revolutions around the sun. 67,000 miles per hour. Is anyone here dizzy? Tectonics too – we feel the earth move under our feet...
4. Tides and currents of history are not our fault. Try not to blame yourself for the modern decline of the church. We are affected by these currents and tides, sometimes riptides, sometimes tsunamis, sometimes doldrums. How we sail and navigate these seas, however, is our responsibility and can become our fault if we sail unwisely, unfaithfully.
5. We must confess the truth of our history for “the world is too dangerous for anything but the truth.”² However:

Truth is very nice to handle
Without charity it is an idol
6. Another anticipated trend is an angry reaction to the thinning trend along with the modern rise of globalism and pluralism: the nativist backlash, this retrograde and regressive trend of evangelical nostalgia manifesting itself in white nationalism and its allies (this is their last stand).³ We spew toxins because we suck them up. What’s the difference between the Taliban, ISIS, and the KKK, white nationalists? Complexion, otherwise not much.
7. The post-World War II US American church in which my generation of Boomers grew up was the statistical aberration, the height of the bell curve of church attendance being from 1955-1957. Although, we might wish to see more data on this. This may reflect more of the post war full throated adoption of the programmatic/corporate model of church. Civil War buff me knows that Lincoln never was baptized nor joined any church, but he attended church regularly. That was typical of the day. It also is quite evident folks of that period were well acquainted with scripture.
8. Our congregations are gray and graying. 65% of church participates are from the World War II generation. Only 4% are Millennials.
9. Local experience suggests that the perpetuation of a congregation is determined by how much it has in the bank rather than by how many persons sit in the pews.
10. We cannot count on solutions coming from denominational structures.
11. No one is coming to rescue us.⁴

¹ Brian McLaren, Sessions 1 & 2 of Thriving Church Event, 10/25/19

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

12. Recent pastoral searches by our congregations indicate that Presbyteries such as Northumberland fail to be attractive to seminarians, so it is safer to avoid having high expectations of our seminaries helping us secure pastoral leadership.
13. Potential candidates for professional ministry tend to be far more multi-cultural than our congregations. The hopes of a congregation seeking to call a young white male with a wife and three children is rarely based in reality.
14. What does a congregation need?
 - A. To be spiritually fed by prayer, sacrament, scripture, worship.
 - B. To receive and extend pastoral and parish care.
 - C. To be equipped and encouraged for ministry in the community – a disciple is a spiritual activist.⁵
15. Elton Trueblood spoke of church as a seminary training ministers.⁶ D.T. Niles playfully asked: “Do you first learn to play ball and then join a ball team?”⁷ How do babies learn to walk, talk, love? A baby’s learning begins with trusting he or she is loved, fed, protected. Jesus’ approach in “fashioning a people”⁸ was pragmatic, improvisational, and experiential.⁹ The purpose of church is to equip Christians to live their faith in the world, practicing “life in the Risen Lord.”¹⁰ Nor did Jesus “teach a course on the ‘Pharisees – origins, beliefs, and practices.’ Jesus took the disciples into confrontation with the Pharisees.”¹¹ Too often we advertise how we want people to come and serve the church when it’s supposed to be the other way around. How does the church serve the people to be God’s people?
16. The Sabbath is our God ordained occasion, as the cliché goes, for gathering to scatter. The Sabbath marks us as freed rather than enslaved. We gather (whenever we choose to be our essential Sabbath) to reflect, review, repent, reconnect, recommit.
17. Christianity isn’t outcome based. More and more I am becoming convinced – at church, in my career, as a father, as a husband -- to focus on shining, doing best, not getting obsessed or worried about the outcome, leaving the result up to God. Besides, “the end is preexistent in the means.”¹² Our task is to honor God and that is more than enough. Which is wonderfully refreshing and a great relief. Why? Because what we don’t have to worry about is what happens. Our job isn’t to try to anticipate or figure out or plot the outcome. Let go of those expectations and that crucifying algorithmic thinking. Christianity is not outcome based. That’s God’s issue. Ours is simply being salt, being light. Do your job and leave the rest up to God, thank you very much. It’s the same as I coach my 7th grade soccer club team: focus on the play, the result will be the result.
18. The spirit of Christ operates in the particular (and in the majestic mystery of the paradoxical). We are called to work with people as we meet them rather than be driven by a rule book of one size fits all or forcing our expectations on them or rejecting them on the basis of their past. We,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Elton Trueblood, The Incendiary Fellowship

⁷ D.T. Niles, lecture “The Compulsions of Faith” Princeton Theological Seminary 26 April 1962

⁸ Charles Foster, “Education in Quest for Church”

⁹ R. Paul Stevens, Liberating the Laity

¹⁰ Miller and Seymour, Theological Approaches to Christian Education

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story

imitating imperfectly Jesus, deal with and respond to particular needs, particular situations, particular prayers, a particular hope.

*Don't get so full of yourself or puffed up neither
You probably weren't God's first choice either
But don't fret, worry, or turn all grumpily
Given Peter and Paul you're in good company*

19. Congregational mergers, though ostensibly practical, detach congregants from their neighborhood, from their community, which is a source of identity and purpose for both the church members and local residents.
20. A pastor's calling is to more than the mere congregation, it is to witness to the community, the neighborhood, and its needs, recovering the church's public responsibility. Liturgy (leitourgia) means "to perform a public service." A 'leitourgeos' was a public servant who often out of his own expense served in an office for the public good. We hear this term echoed in 'Minister of State.'

*Pastors: working for the institution
Instead of God is prostitution*

21. Churches and denominations are collaborators rather than competitors.
22. Church architecture can hinder intimacy and a sense of community, family, by failing to offer a multi-purpose environment that fosters conversation, participation, connection.
23. Leadership remains the key factor in effective and faithful congregations.
24. Fact and hope: The extinction event of the dinosaurs gave us the surprise of birds. No more T-Rex's stomping around but lots of fluttering finches.¹³
25. Negatives, negativity, negative energy can only be met, overpowered, and transformed by positives, positivity, positive energy.
26. Who among us can limit the work of the Holy Spirit or knows fully the mind of God? God bless those who think they do and can. Thou art Lord and we are not.

Question 7: What is God?

Answer: God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.¹⁴

¹³ McLaren

¹⁴ The Westminster Larger Catechism

Questions:¹⁵

- 1. What if your budget suddenly increased by 30%. What would you do?**
- 2. What if your budget were suddenly reduced by 30%?**

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The differences became clearer to me the more I talked. I had been asked by the local ministerial association to return and help guide our local religious leaders in a discussion of the ministerium's purpose and mission in my town of Danville. I suppose I had been asked because I'm the local relic. Call me Methuselah. Today is very different from when I arrived to serve my church and this community in 1989. When I described how we benefitted from such a thing as Wednesday Night, eyes widened in the room along with a few wistful smiles,. The school district forbade any activities to take place on Wednesdays. Wednesday was a protected church night. That reality eroded by 1990. "Those were the days my friend," goes the nostalgic song, "we thought they'd never end." I even remember when the town would shut down at noon every Good Friday to accommodate those who wanted to attend the three hour "Seven Last Words of Christ" ecumenical worship service. That service drifted into never never land by 1996.

What became clear to me was how different were the expectations of the local clergy and the ministerial association. It was assumed we'd offer ecumenical witness as well as worship services at our nursing homes. We were expected to fill a seat at many civic tables: Red Cross, Geisinger Medical Center's (our local hospital) bioethics committee, the school district scholarship committee and safety committee, providing comfort and counsel in the schools following a student's death, offering prayers for councils or special occasions such as Memorial Day, the Recreation Commission. We partnered with Geisinger's Pastoral Care Department (appropriately renamed the Spiritual Care Department). We even chastised Glen Steele when he first came to town and callously initiated the first lay-offs at Geisinger. To his credit, he listened. Merck and Geisinger would invite us to their community forums to gather local input. The ministerial association also served as the vehicle through which congregations organized ministries in town: Good Samaritan, Gate House, Jubilee Kitchen, Food Banks. Prophetically, once all these ministries took off and became separate missions, the clergy role became irrelevant.

"Those were the days my friend, we thought they'd never end." But they did. I still have to believe these are Chrysalis Days.

What came clear to me by the end of this afternoon conversation was how I have lived the transition from the old fashioned programmatic church to today's church which is trying to figure out its role in this new climate, a climate where religion no longer plays a central role in our communities. I recalled remarking years ago to one young pastor who explained that he didn't care to participate in the ministerium because it didn't suit his needs. My reply: "I don't care if it doesn't suit your needs, do your job." The problem was that I was talking from my old fashioned frame of reference. Given changing trends, I wonder how much interest there is on the part of the clergy in getting invited to sit at civic tables. Or is the exhaustion level of survival and taking care congregational needs sapping the energy of being community leaders. My congregation expected me to become involved those ways -- it also suited my temperament. Then, again, I'm a relic.

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<sup>15</sup> McLaren

Perhaps it's my turn to sing another song: "Memory all alone in the moonlight, I can smile at the old days, I was beautiful then, I remember the time I knew what happiness was."

Now I'm hearing Warren Zevon: "Poor, poor, pitiful me..."

What the Danville Ministerial Association was trying to figure out parallels exactly what every main-line denomination is trying to figure out. Given modern trends, given decline in attendance, where's the place of church today?

With my own history as the paradigm, I begin to sense that the ministerium has moved beyond the program model of church into a more spiritual, healing, and justice seeking voice, the same direction to which our congregations need to travel. Less institution, more association. Less formal seats at the table and more Christian influencers. There was one ministerium issue we never bothered resolving in my time because it wasn't a pressing issue then: Are we an ecumenical Christian association or are we multi-religious?

Towards the end of our hour together I began to sense that the church's future direction is obvious: Go where the people are crying. Who is addressing the hurt? If we are addressing the hurting, the wounded, the stranger, then it won't matter if Christian only, we will ending up walking with whoever is compassionate and bringing hope.

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The Israel remnant in Babylonian exile has suffered the destruction of everything their religion valued, especially their beloved Temple industry in Jerusalem. Them wringing their hands most pitiful. Up stands prophet Haggai to promise them their Temple will be rebuilt and it will be more glorious than ever.

Haggai 2

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ²Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, ³Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?

⁴Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, ⁵according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

⁶For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; ⁷and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. ⁸The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. ⁹The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.

Except, except, what Haggai didn't realize, the splendor of the house to come wasn't going to be made of stone and silver, gold and cedar. Sorry, Joel Osteen. The house to come wasn't even going to be a place.

It's going to take Jesus to put a spin on this:

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"² Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Mark 13: 1-2

Some stood up giving false testimony against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple and in three days I will build up another, not made with hands.'"

Mark 14: 57-58

This also explains why I smile with a wink when folks refer to Israel and Palestine as the Holy Land. The so-called holy land isn't any holier than Honduras or Shamokin or Williamsport. Israel and Palestine may boast Bible history, but then so can we. We all have been set apart for worship and service. It is, after all, the living Word of God. Faith is a transitive verb. I also was taught more than a half century ago that God is a verb. Thank you, Dr. George Hunt. Forgive us whenever God becomes for us a noun.

Jesus is present tense

Now that makes perfect sense

Forgive us also the sin of pride in race and place. We Evangelicals these days are being given a bad name by a noisier branch of evangelicalism, the one that wants us all to wake up again in white America, 1958.¹⁶

How are you today, Mrs. Lot's wife?

Many of these evangelicals don't go to church. They largely are persons not participating in "robust church communities."¹⁷ As Timothy Carney further argues in his book, Alienated America, they inhabit alienated areas of our nation, largely rural and small towns – areas that are economically deprived, emotionally denied, plagued with overdose deaths and addictions, younger mortality rates, firearm suicides, these "deaths of despair." They suffer the local collapse of the "social capital" of strong institutions of society. Family collapsing. Church collapsing. Unions collapsing. Civic organizations collapsing. Satisfying work collapsing. Trust and respect of authority tested, stretched, broken.

Add to this mix other factors of change. Gender roles confusing. Fear at the browning of the United States. Tribalism. Population shifts, the young (who can) migrating from home towns. Increased mobility and transience. Young people turned off by scriptural pabulum and theological certitude. Young men reacting to wives and girl-friends as the bread winners. Older middle-aged men unemployed without prospect of hire. Housing prices out of reach. Healthcare bills unpaid. College too expensive for our kids. Grandmas raising grand-daughters. The debasement of speech. The debasement of truth. The debasement of moral integrity. Dreams on the ash heap.

The rich brag a rising tide floats all boats. That's true if you own a boat or at least wear a life preserver. Otherwise, you drown. Its also tough to float when an anchor hold you down. Glug, glug.

We peer into this cauldron of chaos and instability, this witch's brew of uncertainty and anxiety.

¹⁶ McLaren

¹⁷ Timothy Carney, Alienated America

While driving through Ontario on my way into Michigan on one of my cross-country writing road trips, I listened to a radio talk show decrying the brain drain of the Canadian north, with the vast majority of the young people fleeing to the south for work and the chance to create new lives. Got to go where there's opportunity. We're always saying goodbye in order to say hello.

Another station I listened to one early morning broadcasted interviews with Alabamans laid off from work when their steel mill shut down. One man, a life-long veteran of the blast furnace, described how nobody wanted to hire a fifty year old man who took medication. Another fellow who was interviewed let his voice drift when he spoke of his daughter wanting to go to college but given what he's earning now, he has to tell her he doesn't know how they can pay for it.

*Oh, if you ain't got the do re mi, folks, you ain't got the do re mi,
Why, you better go back to beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee.
California is a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see;
But believe it or not, you won't find it so hot
If you ain't got the do re mi.¹⁸*

I get it. Where's the square deal for fair pay?

The lie of Ayn Rand is exposed.

There are many reasons why I sorrow for those who admire the philosopher Ayn Rand and her consumptive philosophy of rugged individualism. It is a philosophy as mechanical as a machine, as insidious as a cockroach, as disastrous as a cheater. She really would not approve of Jesus being so weak as to be crucified for the sins of the world.

Her way also is a terribly lonely and calculating way to live. The self-made man -- her idol, her ideal -- is a sad and suspicious creature because at the end of his journey he only has himself to thank. That's an estranged way to live. Who here has no one to thank for their success? For their blessings? Anybody here lacking a belly button?

Point three of her philosophy of objectivism states the following serpent advice: *Man—every man—is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life.*

The human question isn't Ronald Reagan's campaign message, voiced by a Trump Cabinet Secretary: "Am I better off now than before?" The humane question is: Is my neighbor better off now than before?

Forgive us also then of our "functional atheism," where we believers remain "convinced that we have ultimate responsibility, believing everything rests with us."¹⁹

Question: Do we have our buildings or do our buildings have us?²⁰

Forgive me if I make myself out to be a total vandal when it comes to an appreciation for 'sacred space.' I understand the remembrance in the woodwork. The Andrews pew at Fanwood Presbyterian Church was

¹⁸ Woody Guthrie, "Do-re-mi"

¹⁹ Parker Palmer, Let Your Life Speak

²⁰ McLaren

second from the narthex on the preacher's left. When I visited the lavish Suyapa Cathedral in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, my initial reaction was Protestant Pragmatic: how much money went into this decadent architecture that could have been used toward relieving the suffering of the poor? Boy, I sounded like complaining Judas, didn't I? Then I looked into the faces of the campesinos kneeling and genuflecting in their cathedral. Architecture, as music, can transport us from our drudgery into the transcendent, rarely accessible to mundane us.

Still, we also are creatures of habit who find comfort in the familiar, reliable, predictable places of our lives. We value our "security blankets."²¹ Do you have a favorite pair of shoes in your closet? How about a worn, torn sweatshirt? Church can feel much the same, and that's okay. It comforts us, it helps secure our identity, our sense of place. It gives a sense of continuity.

Which is your favorite place to sit in your family room, at your table? We ourselves anoint such space as 'sacred space.' An old pastor once taught us that how his parishioners entered and sat in their familiar pews resembled a folk dance.

Question: What is it that we really worship?

The trick? God is God and we ain't. Whenever we put anything else before God's will as revealed in the person of Jesus – tribe, race, rules, institutions, success, crusades, traditions, family, church, church buildings, work, Dow Jones, alcohol, nation – we commit idolatry. Foolish, foolish idolaters. We become what we praise. Forswear thy foolish ways...

*Jesus doesn't offer an idea, a cause, or religion
Jesus offers himself to us, that's what's given*

We reclaim our souls by remembering that Christians were first called people of "The Way" (Acts 9:2). Faith hadn't yet been formally institutionalized, sanitized. Faith isn't a system of beliefs but a way of life, a spiritual path, a way of the reconciled and reconciling heart for which beliefs can be helpful signposts. Torah too – it means the way, the signposts, the teachings. The institutional temptation is to enforce the way of doctrine over the way of the heart.²² Ardor and order, I seem to recall, the eternal tension. Intellectualism and emotionalism. Reason and passion. Thank you, Lord, for our fervent affections. God forgive us when our affections are unbridled, rampant, ungracious. We read and study scripture. Real knowledge begins by us asking: So what?

The greatest commandment isn't: You shall have a set belief system. It is love God and love your neighbor as yourself.²³

*If talking about God begins to weary you
Try talking with God in order to pull through*

Rabbi Sharon Brous offered a Ted Talk, titled "It's Time to Reclaim Religious Leadership." She argued since religion is part of the problem, it can be part of the solution. She talked about how religious extremism betrays religion. Then she argued how religious routine-ism also discredits religion, a routine-ism similar to a marriage running on empty having lost its original passion and love.

²¹ Jean Shepherd, radio show

²² Marcus Borg, The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith

²³ McLaren

Her steps to recover the value of religious life? First, Wakefulness: be alert to social and personal problems and reject apathy. Second, Hope: be defiant against pessimism and despair. Third, Mightiness: we are strong and mighty, we can't do everything but we can do something. Fourth, Interconnectedness: we reject radical individualism, for your problems are my problems and we are in it together.

Fair enough, although, as with most Ted Talks, her ideas are fine yet thin. The real problem is that she forgot to address something central to all religion: human sin. Religion isn't about us becoming nicer and more enlightened. Religion is about us seeing what wretches we can be and how much we need forgiveness and conversion from who we are. It is about giving up ourselves. We require being held accountable. We require judgment.

Question: Is the fear of going to hell after you die a serious motivator today for faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

One preacher, futurist and theologian Brian McLaren, wants churches to become “studios of love,”²⁴ echoing those New Testament communities of faith. This hardly is a radical, let alone novel notion. Some might recall Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thoughts from his book, Life in Community:

1. Loving the other not for his sake but for Christ's sake
2. Being faithful in the things of daily life: making a cup of coffee, prayer
3. Ministry of knowing when to hold one's tongue – your brother and sister hasn't been given to you to dominate or control.
4. Ministry of meekness, where you honor your brother and sister.
5. Ministry of listening, where you stop telling, haranguing, preaching them into submission to what you think is right, tired of churches pointing fingers, we need more churches that embrace, trust your brother and sister enough that they can open up your soul.
6. Ministry of helpfulness, where nobody is too good for the meanest service or kindness
7. Ministry of bearing, where you forebear and sustain and suffer each other's sins because we each are burdens to each other.
8. Ministry of proclaiming, where you are not your brother or sister's savior but Christ is and we have the privilege of proclaiming him speaking words of grace and reproof.
9. Ministry of authority, not from the cult of power or personality but from doing the humble work of Christ creating trust.
10. Coming to receive the word from the ministry of the communion table as equals: equally unworthy, equally forgiven, equally hungry, equally in need of each other and God, equally beloved.

Question: Do our parishioners feel loved and loving?

McLaren isn't particularly mechanical about how to create these 'studios of love,' though he does describe the type of curriculum to move us in this direction. Design intentional time for the people to discuss and learn: How to love neighbor, the stranger, the outcast/outsider, the enemy; How to love self, not selfish, not self-hating; How to love the earth, all creation – for God's sake and the sake of neighbor and self; How to love God?²⁵

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

McLaren suggests that best would be if congregants were less interested in auditing a lecture or listening to a Ted-talk but in practicing a far more personal and interactive liturgy. Let us provide opportunities at Sabbath gatherings for congregants to tell their stories and reflect on their life in Christ so they can take Christ into their homes, their schools, their play, their volunteer work, their work-week.

How different would become our worship at Presbytery or in our congregations if we were to take time to dwell on such questions as these:

- ↔ Who did I ignore?
- ↔ What moral and spiritual challenges did I face this week?
- ↔ What hurt did I suffer this week?
- ↔ Where did I experience a moment of grace and beauty?
- ↔ How did I please God?
- ↔ How did I not?
- ↔ Who is hungry?
- ↔ Who is grieving, lonely, and needs the friendship of Jesus?
- ↔ How am I creating glimpses of heaven now?

The congregation, surprise, is the curriculum of Jesus.

Question: If so, what are we teaching?

The Curse of Eden

*The curse of Eden
This may seem odd to say
But Eden is our real sin
We were never meant to stay
Where happiness is guaranteed
Bucolic fountains of wine
God meeting our every need
Soft, safe, cruelly benign*

*Nothing demanding our trying
Nothing there to sweat for
Nothing there worth striving
No horizons to explore
Nothing we struggle to earn
Nothing we fear to lose
Nothing that pricks our concern
No freedom to choose*

*Fruit always ripe and juicy
Us pets cared for, comfortable
Rousseau's damn monotony
We're better when vulnerable
Thank God we got shoved outside
Lest we ate the other tree's fruit*

*And ended up with death denied
The curse of eternal ease absolute*

*An eternity of knowing we are separate
Kindness in pushed into the wilderness
Freed to strive and fail now our fate
Lonely us tasting sweetness and bitterness
We ate the fruit that made us learn
The difference between good and evil
Just as toddlers must grow to discern
How life is full of suffering and upheaval*

*Sent outside is the price of being human
Men and women meant to be restless
Needing each other's encouraging union
Never being quite happy makes life precious
The trick is suffering and loving together
Richer and tougher for paying the price
Taking care of each other wherever
Yes, beloved ones, there's your paradise*

This same preacher contends that we Protestants pinched out from our purse the coin of our soul and bought into the view that we got it right and therefore any change would be for the worse.²⁶ I similarly contend that 19th century fundamentalism made boring, leaden, and idolatrous the vivacity of Scripture. We sacrificed moral and spiritual imagination for rigid dogma and constipated interpretation. Ossified. Calcified. Fossilized. Religion became selling a product. Religion as business. Whereas early Roman Catholicism modeled itself on the Roman Empire, we modeled our Christianity on the American corporate model. US Steel, IBM, PCUSA. What's good for General Motors...

*Christians be warned: it really is a terrible confusion
Equating church and the institution is a bad delusion*

An apt comparison would be to apply the stages of faith development to the church itself. Have we gotten stuck in John Westerhoff (mirrored by James Fowler's stages) Experiential stage of faith or Affiliative stage of faith? How shall we move and be moved toward a Mature faith? How many of our members are stuck in third grade theology? That's fine if you are seven years old, but does such theology help you if you are 27, 47, 67 years old? Do we give permission for the Seeker Stage to doubt and ask questions so that they can move beyond an either/or rejection of the Bible and Christianity?

Experiential: Birth to Age 7

It is all about the trust and love and security you receive from your environment, from your family. The world is you. Unicorns swim in the ocean and magic is perfectly real and you are unrestrained by logic. You are appropriately ego-centric. Bad = punishment, good = reward. Santa, Jesus, the preacher – all the same. Example: Noah's Ark – play with the animals, sing, 'Arky, arky.'

Affiliative: Age 7 to 12

It is a second hand faith, mediated by people you trust and admire. Desire to conform and please those in authority. You haven't really examined critically what it is you personally believe because you accept what the group says. You insist on the rules and fairness and the rituals. You conform because you want to belong and be part of the group. The stories are literally what they say they are. Symbol and meaning are inseparable. Example: Noah's

²⁶ McLaren

Ark – it happened two-by-two and the animals were cared for.

Searching: Age 13+

Questioning, rejecting, rebellious. You have begun to ask, “What is really going on here?” You want to stake out your own identity by challenging conformity to what the group values. You want to stake out your own beliefs. You discover unfairness. You’ve begun to question those people you admire and you’ve discovered they aren’t perfect, in fact, they can be hypocrites. You wonder whether the stories in the Bible can be trusted. It’s become for you a matter of either/or. Example: Noah’s Ark – you begin to calculate how all the animals would fit, you ask why would God destroy and drown everyone? How come the lions didn’t eat the gazelles? You discover the other passage about 7 pairs of animals. It doesn’t make sense.

Mature

You have begun to enjoy a faith that you own, and a faith that owns you. It is personal and you’ve taken responsibility for it. You know the world is imperfect but you’ve reached a level of compassion and sympathy. Faith is far more than the rituals and rules and doctrine, in many ways, it is a recovery of the innocence of the experiential with the advantage of experience and knowledge. The Bible is a living document. You see meaning in the proclamation. You can accept paradox, affirming it is a matter of both/and, for you push beyond and seek the meaning of the story. You enjoy an ironic imagination, where truth is multi-dimensional. Example: Noah’s Ark – you avoid getting stuck in the improbable, you appreciate it as parable communicating a deeper message, you appreciate how other cultures have similar stories.

Statistics are telling – it’s not working, our fixes to offset the thinning aren’t working. I argue -- without hyperbolic hysteria –that our days are witnessing the death throes of Western Christendom.

All our standard, necessary, and well-intentioned responses (part time pastors, commissioned pastors, yoked arrangements, residency program, training non-Presbyterians as moderators, shared ministry of resources or leadership) by themselves only postpone and delay the trend. We are affected by the arc of our culture. The health of a church, furthermore, is linked, indexed to the health of its community. Demographic, economic, technological, sociological changes affect us, especially those of us who refuse to adapt and evolve, those of us who resist how to best fit our changing landscape and climate. We learn from Darwin about who is best fit to evolve. They are those who become most adaptable, most attractive, most diverse, best organized.²⁷ If the church is called to transform culture, surely our Godhead uses culture to transform church.

Question: When in the West hasn’t the liberal view become the standard?

Order by its very nature cannot bring the new into being. Order at its best gives form sufficient to harness the flowing power of the spirit of Christ. One danger of order comes when the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity inevitably become an intolerable carapace.²⁸ Stresses and destabilizing factors of each era crack the carapace, demanding, indeed, birthing something new (cf: Erik H. Erikson’s dialectical model of identity formation). Disorderly ardor crafts new creations into being. Given the shifts of our present age, we are beginning to realize how belonging is more meaningful than right belief. Believing the right beliefs (as if they are fixed answers) in order to behave the right way (all those right and wrongs, do’s and don’ts) is yielding to a process of belonging then behaving and finally coming to useable beliefs.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Phyllis Tickle, The Great Emergence

²⁹ Diana Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei -- that is, “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit. I lean toward the passive voice: us being reformed.

Question: How often do we choose to change voluntarily?

Churches vanish -- along with local gas stations, grocery stores, video stores, restaurants, small retail shops, family farms, small industries, fraternal organizations. And with the vanishing of churches, so vanishes the social glue, the moral cohesion, that “social capital” needed by every small community, along with increased alienation, displacement, and those “deaths of despair.”³⁰ Trust in external authorities (police, presidents, priests, teachers, doctors, pastors, even facts) also is vanishing (or already has vanished). Which athlete will be charged next with domestic abuse? Which sports team will be exposed as cheaters? Which beloved TV celebrity will be guilty of rape? Which war hero will be revealed as a sick killer?

Heroes these days, given an incessant scrutiny and gossip mongering by social media and 24 hours, 7 days a week news, have the shelf-life of mayflies. Perhaps that explains the popularity of movie Superheroes, such as the Avengers. Fictional heroes can be more reliable.

Question: What would your community miss were your church to vanish?

This trend of decline in church attendance and interest in the West is going to continue.³¹ Areas of our country with richer “social capital” may weather the trend better than other pockets of the United States. Those of us living in rural towns and villages and those living in urban pockets are on the front lines of the trend’s assault. The twister always destroys the trailer park. A summary of trend data is included in the Addendum.

Question: Is your community enjoying an abundance of “social capital.”

Sure, we’d like more young people to attend church. Churches of members 55 years and older want younger members. Guess what? Few young want a church of 55 year olds. One millennial acidly observed: “They want millennials as fuel for their machine.”³²

Question: What is the average age of your congregation at Sunday worship?

On a writing trip to Armenia I learnt from a Young Life leader, who was lamenting the Orthodox Church’s hostility toward the success of Young Life with young people, that “people want bread not religion.” During a meeting with the Young Life leadership held in one of their homes in the outskirts of the Armenian capital, Yerevan, during which platters of grapes, cherries, and apricots were passed around, Arman, the leader, added: “I am church, you are church. The Bible should be shining to you. We have lots of pastors but few who have...well, we are called to love sinner and not sin but churches still insist on it on their terms. You have to spend time with them, just as you have to spend time to be with Jesus. I love my friend Ashot, but I have to want to be with him to be a good

³⁰ Timothy Carney, *Alienated America*

³¹ McLaren

³² Ibid.

friend. Friends walk together shoulder to shoulder.” A young volunteer later quoted to me a Russian expression: “Morning is wiser than night.”

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## **P**ossibilities (let’s be careful to avoid using the word, solutions):

1. Given the denomination’s distinguished missionary history and commitment, imagine if the Presbyterian Mission Agency would recruit and send two pastors as missionaries and evangelists to each underserved Presbytery. Presbyteries similar to Northumberland could benefit from top-down help, having exhausted bottom-up options: training commissioned pastors, training congregational members to preside at communion, offering worship resources when preachers cannot be obtained, encouraging and establishing shared ministries, seeking to retain pastors who are experiencing rough patches by rehabilitating the health of their relationship with their parish, as well as contracting with part-time pastors who represent a potpourri of Christian organizations. Let us consider our Presbyteries as a new mission field. In 2012 the General Assembly set a goal for 1001 new worshipping communities in ten years. Now that it is 2022, how well has it met its goal? What will be next? Is there a way of augmenting the 1001 New Worshipping Communities initiative to help alleviate such stresses and strains felt by our struggling Presbyteries?
2. Seminaries need to help Presbyteries by offering, in the field, resources for training Commissioned Pastors.
3. Let’s review also how to moderate congregations given our shortage of available moderators. We could train and trust Clerks of Session to moderate. One model worth considering would be where Sessions in need of moderators would agree to meet together on a regular basis with the appointed moderator overseeing them together.
4. Why support weak, insular, inwardly-attentive, and often joyless congregations in weak towns (cf. Carney’s Alienated America) rather than strong congregations (regardless of denomination) in weak towns? More and more I am persuaded that the thin, faded, threadbare, and empty congregations should receive kindly but minimal attention and consumption of Presbytery resources – support them with loving hospice care. Benign neglect.
5. Learn from hospice care and ask similar questions:
  - 1) How can we make today the best possible today given the limits of today?
  - 2) What is your understanding of the situation (when sickness or injury strikes) and its potential outcomes?
  - 3) What are your fears, concerns and what are your hopes?
  - 4) What new goals are more important to you now?
  - 5) How important is safety versus satisfaction and happiness?
  - 6) What are the trade-offs you are willing to make and not willing to make?
  - 7) What is the course of action that best serves this understanding?<sup>33</sup>
6. Why limit commissioned preachers and pastors to those institutionally ordained as elders?

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<sup>33</sup> Atul Gwande, Being Mortal

7. Northumberland Presbytery should re-designate its Revolving Loan Fund from helping our congregations fix their buildings to assisting our congregations in ministry outreach and missions. Remember, the building is only where church meets. Whenever someone mentions how beautiful is your church, a mischievous reply would be: “Yes, they are.”
8. Establish a “Good Stewardship” threshold whereby if the cost to maintain the church building exceeds the set threshold, Presbytery will authorize an Administrative Commission to begin negotiating with the congregation their future, which could involve better use of the building as an asset or possibly relocation or dissolution.
9. Presbytery offers ‘Stone Soup’ moments, when congregations share best practices as well as swap resources.
10. Our resources should focus on regional and town revitalization through effective communities of faith, ministry which in turn may revitalize the church.
11. Train a new (or is it old?) breed of pastors fit for the new needs: patience, collaboration, multi-cultural outreach, equipping local leadership, multi-congregational oversight and support, a willingness to serve Jesus in a community that lacks a Starbucks or Trader Joes.
12. Be open to pastoral leaders who are not like you.
13. New groups for new people. How often have you heard that maxim? Rather than develop and implement programs for growth, keep a weather eye out for where and when new ideas, new groups, new interests are percolating and emerging, and then help cultivate them. Programs don’t help people, people help people. God comes to people through relationships. I am fond of suggesting that the wrong question is: “Who is the Holy Spirit.” I prefer asking: “When is the Holy Spirit?” One version of my Trinitarian Godhead is: “What, How, When?” Another is: “From, Through, In.”

### **God**

*Trying to think about God cramps the brain,  
 Comprehending the perfect infinite is a strain.  
 So we are prone to conceive of God as a being,  
 Some deity in the sky omniscient and all seeing,  
 God as some noun, some big daddy ruling all,  
 God the Father in heaven, him great, we small,  
 Demanding we had better obey all his instructions.  
 ‘Ground of Being’ is a more imaginative depiction;  
 By dynamic truth and love created and sustained,  
 The particularity of goodness universally maintained.  
 Far better is us receiving God as action, a verb;  
 That’s a theology that’s more thrillingly superb.*

*Every concept wants a form for it to be communicated;  
 Whether God or love, the idea is useless unless consummated.*

*I really can’t bother about knowing the Almighty,  
 That is a presumption I cannot take lightly.  
 For me I’ll fix on something more intelligible,  
 Where Jesus reveals to me what’s sensible;*

*The word made flesh, the divine in humanity,  
Which after all is the essence of Christianity;  
Where in him I encounter what is truly good,  
In our living Jesus the divine will can be understood*

14. In congregations where newcomers do visit, don't expect newcomers to conform to you or be ready and eager to do your churchly chores ("why aren't you helping out with the annual rummage sale? And, bless your heart, don't offer novel suggestions") – since when did the church become Procrustes' bed cutting them or stretching them to fit us? Our blessing is to proclaim how Jesus liberates them to use their gifts for the glory of God.
15. My Executive Presbyter has shared from conferences he has attended that two models of ministry attentive to the changing climate and the new generations might be 1) Christian influencers making use of social media forums to promote how to apply and practice Christian spirituality; 2) that the model of church based upon Simon Peter and Paul and their focus on groups be replaced by a model based on Philip and him engaging with individuals where and when he meets them.

**Question: What can we learn about church from LCBC, Mormons, and especially Twelve Step Programs?**

16. Support and align with churches that provide what congregations and communities or neighborhoods need -- whether or not they are Presbyterian.
17. Collaborate with all denominations in recruiting congregational planters in regions where we lack thriving congregations to support. Silo denominationalism is neither a spiritual nor practical option.
18. Equip local leadership (Ephesians 4: 11-13) to be the primary shepherds of our congregations, chosen Mennonite fashion by the congregation. Our Presbyterian gifts are strong and dedicated elders and deacons. Clergy and laity is a false dichotomy. Sacred and secular is a false dichotomy. If you are willing to serve the Magister, you are a mini-ster.
19. Where there is a glad and faithful Session, congregations are better postured to be effective in working toward more than the congregation's good, but also sacrificially, selflessly working toward the community's good. God bless a congregation brave and loving enough to minister to tough topics: suicide, racism, suicides, addictions, violence, polarization, stewardship of the earth, human equality and dignity. Christ's calling (our vocation, sealed in baptism) is meant to be expressed through our occupations.

**Question: Do we take the 'Priesthood of All Believers' seriously?**

20. Presbytery's task is to recruit and equip in local settings Bible teachers, worship leaders, presiders of the Lord's Supper, home communion servers, pastoral care givers.
21. Where there is a lack of professional pastoral leadership, teams of pastors or individual pastors can be called to provide the guidance, training, and support for clusters of these local congregations, helping equip the local shepherds with what they need.

22. Bigger congregations (regardless of Presbytery or even denomination) must ally with and serve smaller congregations with resources, relationships, staff, and opportunities for ministry.
23. Similarly, flush Presbyteries must ally with and view those Presbyteries struggling with a dearth of pastoral leadership as a mission field, serving them with resources, staff, and opportunities for ministry.
24. Small can be beautiful when smaller congregations are community-ministry focused – by those church folks who want to know how they can collaborate with the school district, the elected leaders, health clinics, civic and non-profit organizations. Imagine a church and health clinic sharing space.
25. Small also works best for denominational organization: wiser than expanding and combining Presbyteries (increasing diffusion) is to ally with coterminous regions of oversight of other denominations. It is time for a summit meeting.
26. McLaren describes four types of congregations: Nostalgic wing wanting to go back to the illusory high point of American Christianity; Eggshell Walkers fearful of offending the Nostalgic wing and their deep pockets; Holding Tension Churches honest about differences in church whilst treating each other with respect and Christian love; and Just and Generous Churches.

**Question: Applying McLaren’s construct, which type is your congregation?**

**Lot’s Wife**

*She’s never given a name  
 But then she really is any of us  
 Genesis also fails to say  
 Which way she ended up facing  
 when she becomes a pillar of salt  
 My guess her salted eyes  
 were turned toward Sodom  
 There to remain  
 till wind’s erosion  
 There to stare  
 At what she turned to see  
 What she didn’t wish to leave  
 More than mere nostalgia  
 A lament over change  
 More than a fear of the new  
 More a wanting to cling to the old  
 That ache and yearning  
 Of what she had  
 Ever looking back on what is gone  
 Fixed and trapped  
 Unable to move on*

27. McLaren contends that the future of Christianity will emerge from the Just and Generous Churches who exhibit faith that literally saves the world from our four great crises: Planet, Poverty, Peace, Politics and Religion.<sup>34</sup> Maybe. God might surprise us still.

I finish with the benediction James I. McCord, our seminary president, offered at our graduation: “For Christ’s sake, do something!”

**Pinheads:**

*Why do we fuss about angels on pins when cultivating heaven here is at stake?  
My seminary president gave us the best of charges: "For Christ's sake, do something!"*

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<sup>34</sup> McLaren