

INTIMACY WITH GOD:  
A REORIENTING PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION UPON CHURCH  
DECLINE

by

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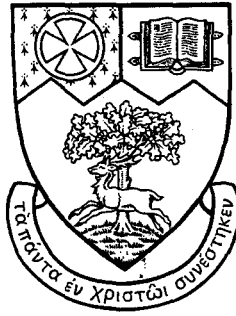
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## ABSTRACT

“Intimacy with God: A Reorienting Pastoral Theological Reflection Upon Church Decline

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This dissertation offers a reoriented perspective of church decline as discerned through a process of pastoral theological reflection. The conversation partners are: (1) statistical indicators of church decline; (2) case studies of church decline as described by congregational studies research; (3) church renewal materials; (4) elements of grief theory; and (5) theological and spiritual resources related to God’s power and presence in weakness. Statistical indicators suggest that decline is still an issue for local churches today. In response to this ongoing situation of decline, myriads of renewal materials have been produced offering ways and means for the church in North America to be renewed. Unfortunately these materials, and the assumptions which undergird their proposals, can be detrimental to declining churches, and fail to address the actual experience of decline as revealed by the case studies. For this reason, this dissertation offers a reoriented perspective of decline. It is a perspective that affirms that even those churches suffering the effects of decline can experience intimacy with God, and participate in God’s fruitfulness. This perspective affirms, in concert with grief theory, that declining churches will need to acknowledge and mourn their losses brought about by decline. It also asserts, however, that theological and spiritual resources are needed to support churches in this regard. To this end, two theological and spiritual polarities



will be offered for the purpose of articulating the reorienting perspective. The first polarity involves the movement between decline and a focus upon God as the One who re-describes our experience of decline. The second polarity involves the movement between an avoidance of decline and a focus upon God as the One who is present with us in it. Ultimately both of these polarities are understood as being grounded in the movement between fear and love. This pastoral theological reflection upon church decline is offered as a means of bringing hope and encouragement to those churches struggling with decline. Decline is serious, but it can also be an occasion of experiencing a profound deepening of the church's relationship and ministry with God.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the congregation of Queen Street Baptist Church, who shared Jesus with me, with one another, and with their community, even in decline.

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## CHAPTER ONE: PROTESTANT CHURCH<sup>1</sup> DECLINE: AN ONGOING ISSUE

### **Section 1: Introduction**

Church decline and an emphasis upon church renewal has occupied a prominent place within the hearts and minds of North American Christians at both the level of the local congregation and at the level of denominations for many decades now. As the number of people attending church dwindles from year to year, as young people and young families, and even some older members leave the church or switch to more vibrant churches, as denominational leaders face diminished resources and church closures and consolidation, it is not surprising that much attention has been paid to the issue of decline and the need for renewal.

Anecdotally, the experience of church decline can be accompanied by a variety of emotions and responses. Sometimes decline leads to a sense of fearful urgency as congregational and denominational leaders search for means to stave off decline before it deepens. Decline can also lead to a kind of paralysis as congregations shrink from the need for change and seek comfort in familiar patterns and practices of doing and being church. The experience of decline can also bring about painful emotions for a congregation, as Sunday after Sunday ministers and congregants alike are reminded of the diminishing numbers, the lack of children and young people, and the increasing age of those who continue to attend. Frustration, too, can emerge as sincere efforts to bring about renewal fail to yield the desired results. In some cases, the experience of church decline can even lead to spiritual pain and questions. Why has God allowed this to happen? Why is it that God does not seem to be answering our prayers for help and

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<sup>1</sup> This work will focus on church decline as experienced by Protestant churches only, as this is the context most familiar to the author.

renewal? Awareness of not only the fact of decline, but also the experience of decline has prompted this study. This work has been undertaken out of a desire to speak to those congregations, and denominational leaders who are experiencing the pain of decline, and who are realizing, at a deep level, that they no longer know what to do.

The work of two authors will help set the stage for this work. The first author is Donald Capps, and the work of interest is his book, *Living Stories: Pastoral Counseling in Congregational Context*. In this book Capps contends for an approach to pastoral counseling that is shaped by and tailored to the particularities of the congregational setting.<sup>2</sup> His aim is to develop an approach to pastoral counseling that can be effectively practiced by pastors—taking into consideration time constraints and the sometimes-limited skills of general practitioners—and that will be understood and experienced as an essential aspect of the life of the congregation.<sup>3</sup> Given these criteria, the approach to pastoral counseling that he argues for is one of the “telling of stories within a constructive framework.”<sup>4</sup> In this he draws a distinction between pastoral care and pastoral counseling. For him, pastoral care provides a constructive and safe environment in which the congregant can share her story, but the story tends only to be empathetically received at face value, and no effort is made to “connect the present story to an implicit story that may lie behind it.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, Capps argues that pastoral counseling should receive the story but also interpret it for the purpose of helping the congregant see things in the story that she has not yet been able to see.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Capps, *Living Stories*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Capps, *Living Stories*, 5, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Capps, *Living Stories*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Capps, *Living Stories*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Capps, *Living Stories*, 11.

Capps' work sets the stage for this project, because like personal lives, the corporate life of the congregation is a "storied" life.<sup>7</sup> Congregations tell stories about the life of their congregation, and so presumably also about the situation of decline. In some cases congregations tell the story that decline is inevitable and will eventually result in the death of the congregation. Other congregations tell the story that decline is not yet significant enough to address seriously. Still other congregations tell the story that the possibility of congregational death due to decline will be less painful than the possibility of change.

In one sense the aim of this work can be thought of as an attempt to offer pastoral counseling to congregations experiencing significant decline. The aim is to listen to congregation's stories of decline and to help them see things in the stories that they have not yet seen themselves. In many respects the multitude of renewal materials already available have provided congregations with varying ways to interpret and also attempt to remedy the situation of decline. In some materials, decline is interpreted as a challenge to be overcome, with planning and programming. In other materials decline is interpreted as a matter of ill health that needs to be addressed. In still other materials decline is interpreted as a spiritual lack calling for greater vibrancy. It is to be argued that what is largely missing from most renewal materials is an interpretive frame that appreciates and takes account of, and is capable of bringing hope into congregation's actual experiences of and stories about decline; including the experience of pain, doubt, fear, sense of powerlessness, and the various ways they have chosen to interpret these experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> Capps, *Living Stories*, 214, follows the work of James Hopewell in asserting that congregations "become known for the way they 'story' themselves."

The second author that helps set the stage for this work is James Gustafson, and his book *Christ and the Moral Life*. Gustafson proposes that the Christian moral life can be delineated into four parts having to do with: perspective and posture; attitudes and dispositions; intentions, purposes and ends; and actual moral judgments.<sup>8</sup> Christ and our loyalty to Christ often does, can, and ought to influence all four aspects of the Christian's moral life.<sup>9</sup> In making this proposal Gustafson asserts that the Christian moral life does not merely consist of making actual moral judgments in line with the norm of Christ. The Christian moral life involves, and in fact cannot exist apart from, also having a Christ-influenced perspective of life and posture in the world, Christ-shaped attitudes and Christ-shaped intentions. More than this, Gustafson would argue that of the four aspects of the Christian moral life, perspective and posture are foundational to the other three aspects.<sup>10</sup> A Christ-shaped perspective and posture will give shape to the other three aspects.

Gustafson's insight is helpful here because it gives us language to speak about the particular concerns of this work. This work is not concerned to offer yet another suggestion as to what churches should do to effect renewal in the face of decline. This work is concerned with offering congregations a particular perspective with respect to decline. Gustafson understands perspective as having to do with the point of view from which we observe and interpret; in this case the situation of church decline. He says about perspective:

...[it] suggests that the point from which things are seen and observed determines what is seen and what is not seen, which aspects of what is seen are outstanding, which are shadowed and which are clear, what attracts attention and

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<sup>8</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 240.

<sup>9</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 240.

<sup>10</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 240.



what is subdued in attention. . . Perspective is [also] used to refer to the state of the observing subject; to his [*sic*] preferences for certain things, to his fundamental vocabulary for describing and evaluating what he observes, his criteria for rational judgment, and his values that determine his affective responses.<sup>11</sup>

Gustafson defines posture in terms of a fundamental state of being, a frame of mind, and the overall orientation “of one’s affections, sensibilities, and value preferences” towards the world.<sup>12</sup> The aim of this work is to offer declining congregations not a method for renewal, but a way of perceiving and orienting themselves in the relation to church decline. With Gustafson, this work contends that any Christ-shaped action in response to decline must be founded in and indeed grow out of Christ-shaped perspectives of and postures toward decline.

To this end, this dissertation will argue that a process of pastoral theological reflection upon the situation of church decline will reveal within these situations a graceful invitation to attend more deeply to God and to participate more fully in God’s fruitfulness even in decline. Contrary to what is ordinarily assumed, the experience of church decline can become an experience of intimacy with God who brings about fruitfulness. This intimacy will be supported as churches live into reorienting perspectives of decline that affirm experiences of weakness and limitation to be occasions for the manifestation of God’s power. This dissertation will explore the experience of decline in the North American church with an intention to creatively resource such decline with a reframing pastoral theological perspective drawn from theology and spirituality. The intention is to enable a more hopeful engagement with the actual reality decline, and to enable greater participation with God in the midst of it.

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<sup>11</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 242.

<sup>12</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 242.

## Section 2: A Pastoral Theological Methodology for Exploring Decline in the Church

This study will employ a methodology of revised mutual critical correlation, as set forth by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat in their book, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*.<sup>13</sup> This approach finds its origin in the method of mutual critical correlation espoused by Seward Hiltner and David Tracy, both seminal thinkers within the field of pastoral theology. The idea that correlation can be “mutually critical” pertains to the belief that both faith and human experience can provide insights into the other.<sup>14</sup> Hiltner argued for a “full two-way street” in the process of correlation, believing that while resources of the faith will indeed be able to provide answers to questions of human experience, insights from research into human experience will also, at times, be able to provide answers to questions raised by faith.<sup>15</sup> Similar to this, Tracy proposed that “*practical theology* is the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theology and praxis of the Christian faith, and the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*.

<sup>14</sup> In this both Hiltner and Tracy choose to augment Paul Tillich’s method of correlation, in which questions arising from human experience are correlated with answers drawn from theological resources; theological resources are accessed to bring answers to questions that arise out of human experience (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1:62–64).

<sup>15</sup> Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, 223 says: “We believe that a full two-way street is necessary in order to describe theological method. If we hold that theology is always assimilation of the faith, not just the abstract idea of the faith apart from its reception, then it becomes necessary to say that culture may find answers to questions raised by faith as well as to assert that faith has answers to questions raised by culture. . . if psychiatry, for example, enables us to help someone to turn a corner and thence move on into the faith, how can we avoid saying that culture has given the answer to a problem posed by faith—provided we believe that our understanding of faith is never known apart from such actual concrete processes?”

<sup>16</sup> Tracy, “Foundations of Practical Theology,” 76, emphasis original. A comment about terminology is pertinent here. The terms pastoral and practical theology can refer to related but differing fields of investigation. The terms can also be used interchangeably to refer to a field of study that employs a theological method that employs a form of mutual correlation. For our purposes here, that form of study will be referred to as pastoral theology. Any references in cited material to “practical theology” will be assumed to refer to the field of pastoral theology as defined here by the theological method of mutual correlation.

Swinton and Mowat, recognizing the difficulty that could arise from ascribing an equal weight to both theological and non-theological resources, propose a revised method of mutual critical correlation<sup>17</sup> in which the relationship between conversation partners is deemed to be asymmetrical. Swinton and Mowat follow the work of Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger in affirming that within the process of pastoral theological reflection, logical priority lies with theological resources. Theological resources are deemed to have priority because they speak of “ultimate issues, of life, death, God and the meaning of life.”<sup>18</sup> For this reason theological resources have the capacity to give significance to non-theological resources in a way that non-theological resources cannot reciprocate.<sup>19</sup> Unlike van Deusen Hunsinger however, they still affirm the importance of a mutually correlative process. They readily acknowledge the interpretive nature of our theological understandings and practices, and therefore affirm the need for ongoing critique of them.<sup>20</sup> Finally, they welcome a process in which non-theological resources are drawn into the process of critique as well.<sup>21</sup> Swinton and Mowat’s revised method

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<sup>17</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 88. Another comment must be made about terminology. In his essay, noted earlier, Tracy refers to his method as mutual critical correlation. Elsewhere, however, he refers to his method of mutual critical correlation as being “revisionist,” referring to the fact that theology must be prepared to undergo revision (as noted by Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, 158). For this reason Tracy’s method is often referred to as revised critical correlation. In contrast to this, Swinton and Mowat refer to Tracy’s approach as a method of mutual correlation, and refer to their own method as a revised method of mutual correlation; revised because in this case it asserts the need for an asymmetrical relationship between conversation partners. As I will be adopting Swinton and Mowat’s method for my project, I will follow their terminology and refer to my method as a revised method of mutual critical correlation.

<sup>18</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 89–90. This critique, however, would be conducted from “the inside” as opposed to from the perspective of “outsiders”; from within a theistic epistemological framework.

<sup>21</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 93. Swinton and Mowat note that van Deusen Hunsinger tends to “leave the ancillary discipline untouched by theology, simply attributing it a subordinate role.”

of mutual correlation complements this author's evangelical theological commitments; particularly, in this case, commitment to the Bible as Word of God.<sup>22</sup>

This methodology serves the goal of this study well—to gain deeper and more theologically nuanced insights into the situation of decline and renewal. The impetus behind this method is for the mutually critical correlation of insight to facilitate new and deepened ways of thinking about and responding to pastoral situations.<sup>23</sup> The method is meant to help us critically and playfully reflect upon our preconceived understandings and consider new and hopefully fruitful lines of thought and practice.<sup>24</sup>

Swinton and Mowat propose a four-stage process of mutual critical correlation, including: 1) situation identification and pre-reflection; 2) situation exploration and investigation; 3) theological reflection; and 4) discernment of revised practices.<sup>25</sup>

Drawing on this approach, this dissertation will bring together five conversation partners: a) statistical indicators of church decline; b) churches' experiences of decline as described by congregational studies research; c) church renewal materials; d) non-theological insights into the experience of decline; and e) theological and spiritual

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<sup>22</sup> One of the hallmarks of evangelical belief as defined by Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Pattison, "Some Straw for Bricks," 138, who says: "The way we perceive situations determines how we will behave in relation to them and the sort of priorities and types of action we might adopt. Theological reflection deepens our experience of the world and of our own assumptions and so stops us from making unwarranted assumptions which may be false. It also has the effect of ensuring that faith and religious ideas do not become encapsulated and cut off from our experience of everyday life."

<sup>24</sup> Whitehead, "Formation and Reflection," 47–50, argues that theological reflection ought to be understood as a form of play. Play is an experience of delight, something that is undertaken utterly for its own sake, and for the sheer delight it brings. When playing, children test their leeway and limits. Theological reflection when conceived of as play reminds us that it is an exercise of testing the leeway between theology and the demands of contemporary life. As such it is a creative experience, in which we make decisions about what can flex and what cannot. Finally, Whitehead notes that play includes the experience of falling. When a child leaps into the air he must also fall back down to the earth. Theological reflection, as a form of play, must include openness to "falling." Whitehead challenges us to accept that falling, or "failing," need not be thought of as disastrous, but a necessary part of the exercise. We are encouraged to incorporate "falling" into our expectations for theological reflection, and to learn to "fall" gracefully.

<sup>25</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 94–97.

resources related to God's power and presence in weakness. The first three conversation partners, statistical indicators of decline, experiences of church decline, and church renewal materials, will aid us in our description and investigation into the situation of decline and renewal (stage 1). Non-theological resources, primarily drawn from the area of grief and bereavement research will deepen our understanding of the experience of decline (stage 2). Theological and spiritual resources<sup>26</sup> related to God's power and presence in weakness will help to illumine our understanding of the Christian faith as it pertains to church decline (stage 3). All of the garnered insights will be drawn together for the purpose of arguing that it is both possible and necessary for even declining churches to live into deeper intimacy with God and participate in God's fruitfulness (stage 4). These theological and spiritual insights will be set forth, but also challenged by the insights gained through the investigation into the situation of renewal and decline. In this mutually critical conversation, this work will be guided by Emmanuel Lartey's suggestion that each of the conversation partners be allowed to ask questions of the other.<sup>27</sup>

Insight into the experience of local church decline will be gleaned from case studies of declining churches drawn from the field of congregational studies.

Congregational studies is a field that honours the particularity and complexity of local

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<sup>26</sup> The aim of theological study is, generally speaking, one of illuminating our understanding of the faith, while the aim of spiritual study is, generally speaking, one of illumination the lived experience of the faith. See, for example, Schneiders, "What Is Christian Spirituality?," 17, who says: "All Christian theology studies Christian faith. . . And the locus in which these realities appear is, ultimately, the experience of the church in its members throughout its history. In other words, all theology is an investigation of experientially rooted *faith*. The distinguishing characteristic, or formal object, of spirituality as a field of study is its specific focus on Christian faith as the *experience* of the concrete believing subject(s). In other words, spirituality studies not simply Christian faith but the lived experience of Christian faith." See also Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, who gives a lengthy account of the relationship between spirituality and theology.

<sup>27</sup> Lartey, "Practical Theology as Theological Form," 132–133. In order to emphasize the point Lartey adds an additional step to his method of reflection entitled, "situational analysis of theology." Lartey's emphasis expands upon Swinton and Mowat's description of the critical conversation.

congregations, understanding them essentially as “texts” worth studying and interpreting. Researchers of congregations appreciate that every local congregation does not just live the faith in a static and sterile way, but particularizes the faith as it lives it concretely in its particular context.<sup>28</sup> The work of congregational researchers who have studied churches that are experiencing decline reveals that the situation of decline is complex and varied. Churches experience decline for a number of reasons. Some of these reasons are external to the congregation, involving factors over which the congregation has no direct control.<sup>29</sup> Other factors are internal to the congregation. Some examples are: decisions made decades previously to forgo reaching out to the changing community;<sup>30</sup> key pastors leaving at a crucial time;<sup>31</sup> well-established and socially necessary relationships among aging long-term members that make it difficult for them to relate to newcomers and draw them into deeper relationships;<sup>32</sup> and a lack of confidence with respect to knowing how to reach out to the local community.<sup>33</sup> These examples reveal that while some factors contributing to decline are internal to the congregation, and are therefore ostensibly factors over which it might have some control, they are by no means simple to address. Related to this, decline impacts

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<sup>28</sup> James Hopewell, the author of one of the seminal works in the field says this: “A congregation, undeniably Christian, nevertheless uses forms and stories common to a larger world treasury to create its own local religion of outlooks, action patterns, and values. I have begun to see how astonishingly thick and meaning-laden is the actual life of a single local church. Ministry in even a small church occurs in a much more abundant world of signals and images than I and, I suspect many others had assumed” (*Congregation*, 3–4).

<sup>29</sup> A common external factor is demographic change in the community around the church (Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 65–93; Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, 194–204; and Stout and Brekus, “American Congregations,” 89.) Demographic change is, however, not the only external reason for decline. In the case of First Baptist Church in Dacula Georgia, for example, one of the main reasons for the onset of decline was the advent of a new “megachurch” in the area (Eiesland, “Contending with a Giant,” 209–212).

<sup>30</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 80; Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, 201.

<sup>31</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 79.

<sup>33</sup> Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, 203.

individual churches differently. Some churches will be impacted more deeply than others, and churches will be impacted in different ways depending on, for example: pastoral leadership; available resources and most particularly financial resources; congregational culture; the structure of authority both within a congregation and between a congregation and its denomination; historical experiences; location; and so on.<sup>34</sup>

Focusing upon the congregation as a source of data for and the context of pastoral theological reflection has been gaining prominence. Acknowledging the importance of the congregation, Capps argues for the development of an approach to pastoral counseling that is shaped and informed by the unique characteristics of the congregational setting.<sup>35</sup> Don Browning proposes a new theological method, one he refers to as a fundamental practical theology. This method moves from practice to theory and back to practice and thus proposes that theological reflection ought to be grounded within congregations.<sup>36</sup> Both Susan Dunlap and Richard Osmer draw upon case studies of congregations as conversation partners in the development of their pastoral/practical theological insights. Osmer allowed the particularities of three congregations in three very different settings to inform and give shape to his thinking about the teaching ministry of the church. The particularities of these three congregations necessitated the development of four different lenses or frames of reference that guided his interpretation of the teaching ministries of these congregations,

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<sup>34</sup> Gleaned from Ammerman's account of those churches that persisted even in the face of change (*Congregation and Community*, 65–93).

<sup>35</sup> Capps, *Living Stories*.

<sup>36</sup> Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*.

and contributed to the development of his practical theological conclusions.<sup>37</sup> Dunlap brought the belief-practices of three diverse congregations, in their ministry to the sick, into conversation with particular theological insights for the purpose of disseminating congregation wisdom, and for the purpose of proposing ways in which congregational caring can support courage as opposed to idolatry in the face of finitude.<sup>38</sup> Support for this approach can also be found within the work of Jürgen Moltmann, and his contributions to practical theological thinking.<sup>39</sup> Moltmann does not adopt a pastoral/practical theological methodology. His hermeneutical method in this work moves from biblical exegesis through to systematic reflections for the purpose of offering suggestions for the renewal of the practical life of the church.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, he identifies the local congregation as the heart of the church and argues that all functions of the church—“service, mission, ecumenical outreach” as well as theological reflection—ought to be located in local congregations and not only be the purview of specialists who are removed from the context of the local congregation and located in academic institutions and denominational and national structures.<sup>41</sup>

Before leaving the discussion of research methodology, it is necessary to give a rationale for the choice to use congregational research conducted by others. While the limits of time and space did not allow for a qualitative research study with churches

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<sup>37</sup> Osmer, *Teaching Ministry*.

<sup>38</sup> Dunlap, *Caring Cultures*.

<sup>39</sup> Runyon, ed. *Hope for the Church*.

<sup>40</sup> Moltmann, "Life Signs," 42. He does, however, acknowledge the necessary interplay between scripture and experience. He says: "There is no interpretation of Scripture which is not at the same time an interpretation of our own situation, and no Christian interpretation of our situation without dialogue with the Scriptures."

<sup>41</sup> Moltmann, "Life Signs," 41, does not argue for the end of academic institutions, but advocates for the need for congregations to engage in theological reflection as well as all functions of the church. His call is for the congregation to become "the conscious agent of its history with God in the Holy Spirit."



struggling with decline in Canada, the use of these materials will suffice if two potential challenges are addressed.

The first challenge comes from the fact that relying upon the research of others means that this dissertation will be limited by the research interests and questions of others. The congregational research reviewed to date was not conducted with the intention of leading to theological reflection upon the situation of decline. While this does not preclude the possibility of reflecting theologically upon the data they have compiled, it does mean that this dissertation will need to be careful to confine its reflections to the data as is, and will need to guard against reading into the data inferences that are not present within.

The second challenge comes from the fact that little of the congregational research employed in this work was conducted with declining churches in Canada. What are the implications of relying upon congregational research of declining churches conducted in the American context? It must be asked whether it is valid to draw conclusions about the Canadian context while relying so heavily on data collected within the American context. This work contends that it will be possible to do so. A close inspection of congregational research into decline reveals reasons for decline, both external and internal to congregations that resonate with the specifically Canadian experience of church decline. The research reveals reasons for decline such as: changing demographics within the local community of the church; change in the religious ecology of a community, namely due to the rise of a newer and much larger church to prominence within a community; decisions made many years ago to not reach out to the changing community; a lack of confidence with respect to how to reach out to

the community, and so on.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the research indicates that the way in which decline impacts churches has more to do with factors such as congregational resources, denominational structure, and the particularities of church culture, than it has to do with wider cultural factors.<sup>43</sup> Given the fact that churches on both sides of the Canadian/American border experience decline for similar reasons, and given the fact that the way in which decline impacts churches has more to do with factors internal to the church rather than factors related to the wider cultural context, suggests that research conducted within the American context can be used to reflect theologically upon decline in Canadian churches.

One final question needs to be addressed regarding the research methodology employed in this work. This question pertains not to the American content of the data, but to the particularity of it. Can research from particular and specific congregations experiencing decline be generalized to draw conclusions about declining churches in general? In one sense, the conclusions derived will apply only to the congregations actually studied. Swinton and Mowat, however, while acknowledging the difficulty with transferability, turn to the idea of “resonance” for help. They argue:

While findings of qualitative research studies may not be immediately transferable to other contexts, there is a sense in which qualitative research should resonate with the experiences of others in similar circumstances. This resonance should invoke a sense of identification with those who share something of the experience.<sup>44</sup>

Following Swinton and Mowat, and the lead of researchers such as Browning, Dunlap and Osmer, as mentioned previously, this work will argue that it is possible to

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<sup>42</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 65–93; Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, 201, 203.

<sup>43</sup> Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, is the exception to this. Their aim was to compile a typology of different kinds of religious presence represented by various congregations.

<sup>44</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 47.

draw more generalized conclusions from data derived from particular congregations. The conclusions must be deemed contingent, as they will be derived from specific and limited data, and as such they must be subject to ongoing revisions as additional data are collected and reflected upon. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that other churches experiencing similar situations of decline may find resonance with the findings of this study. The importance of grounding the research in actual congregations strengthens the approach taken here, while the dissertation will seek specifically to identify in the stories of congregations the specific resonances that set the stage for further reflection on the theme of decline.

### **Section 3: The Ongoing Issue of Protestant Church Decline in Canada: Statistical Indicators of Decline**

This study is founded on the premise that ongoing decline remains a significant issue for many churches in Canada today, and is therefore a situation that warrants continued study. This premise is based on the author's experience working with and attending churches experiencing decline. Given the limited and particular nature of these data, however, it is necessary to confirm whether decline can still be considered a significant issue for churches in Canada today. The work of Reginald Bibby, Canada's foremost researcher into religious trends in Canada, will form the foundation of this exploration. Other sources will be accessed, however, when appropriate. Four indicators of decline will be considered—the decline in church memberships, denominational affiliation, and attendance, as well as congregational aging. The statistical indicators will demonstrate that church decline is still an issue for churches in Canada today. In the course of this exploration, we will also begin to discuss three key issues that will contribute to the argument guiding this work.

## **Declining Memberships and Denominational Affiliation**

Statistical records show that Protestant churches in Canada have, and continue to, experience a numerical decline in church memberships. The number of people holding memberships with six of Canada's major Protestant denominations has been decreasing since the mid-1960s.

### Membership Decline

According to Bibby's research, most of the major Protestant denominations in Canada experienced a numerical decline in memberships beginning around the mid-1960s. See Table 1. The greatest decline in memberships was experienced by the United Church, Anglican, and Presbyterian denominations. The Baptist decline, while much less dramatic, is still evident. Only the Lutheran and Pentecostal denominations defied the overall pattern of decline. The Lutheran denomination did demonstrate an overall increase in memberships between 1966 and 1991. It is important to note, however, that the pattern of increase existed between 1966 and 1981 at which time memberships numbered at 218,000. After 1981 the Lutheran denomination also experienced a decline in memberships, dropping to 208,000 in 1991. Only the Pentecostal denomination avoided the pattern of decline altogether, demonstrating a most significant 105% increase in memberships between 1966 and 1991.

Bibby did not analyze membership numbers in his subsequent book, *Beyond The Gods And Back*, written in 2011. According to the numbers recorded in various editions of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (1990, 2001, 2007, 2011), a continuing trend towards membership decline in a number of denominations can be seen from the late 1980s forward. In the yearbooks, membership numbers are often recorded both in terms of "inclusive membership" and "full communicant or confirmed

members.” Due to certain variations in reporting between denominations, we have chosen here to report only inclusive membership numbers. These membership numbers should not be compared to Bibby’s numbers up to 1991, because it can be assumed that our means for determining membership (our choice to report inclusive memberships) differs from Bibby’s approach.

**Table 1: Church Memberships 1966 & 1991<sup>45</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<b>United Church</b>	<b>Anglican</b>	<b>Baptist<sup>46</sup></b>	<b>Presbyterian</b>	<b>Lutheran</b>	<b>Pentecostal</b>
<b>1966</b>	1,062,000	1,293,000	137,000	200,000	189,000	65,000
<b>1991</b>	786,000	848,000	130,000	157,000	208,000	203,000
<b>Losses/ Gains</b>	-276,000	-445,000	-7,000	-43,000	+19,000	+138,000
<b>Percent Change</b>	-26%	-34.4%	-5%	-21.5%	+10%	+105.4%

According to these data the membership numbers for the United Church, Anglican, and Presbyterian denominations continued to decline (see Table 2). The Lutheran denomination, which had demonstrated an increase in memberships up until 1981 as per Bibby’s numbers, is now showing a trend toward decline according to the yearbook numbers. Once again, we see a different pattern among the Baptists and Pentecostals. As evidenced by the yearbook numbers, Baptist memberships grew by almost 10% between 1988 and 2006-2008. Even more notably, Pentecostal memberships grew by 21% between 1988 and 2007. What is interesting to note,

<sup>45</sup> This table has been constructed from numbers presented by Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> By the term “Baptist,” Bibby referred to numbers given by the Canadian Baptist Federation (Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 22).

however, is that in both cases the most recent membership numbers are down from the previous reporting period. The Baptists reached a membership high of 141,045 in the period 2000-2004, while the Pentecostals reached a membership high of 236,579 in 2003.<sup>47</sup> What this most recent drop in memberships might mean is difficult to discern at this point. It could amount to the beginning of a trend towards decline, or it could amount to a temporary fluctuation in the numbers. It would be important to watch this trend in subsequent years. For the moment, it can be said that these two denominations did see overall membership gains between 1988 and the late 2000s.

**Table 2: Church Memberships 1988 & 2011<sup>48</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<b>United Church</b>	<b>Anglican</b>	<b>Baptist</b>	<b>Presbyterian</b>	<b>Lutheran</b>	<b>Pentecostal</b>
<b>1988</b>	2,052,342	805,521	122,247	213,690	299,093	191,607
<b>2011</b>	1,358,000 (2006)	641,845 (2001)	134,157 (2006- 2008) <sup>49</sup>	170,468 (2009)	243,290 (2009)	232,000 (2007)
<b>Losses/ Gains</b>	-694,342	-163,676	+11,910	-43,222	-55,803	+40,393
<b>Percent Change</b>	-33.83%	-20.32%	+9.74%	-20.22%	-18.66%	+21.08%

<sup>47</sup> Lindner, ed. *Yearbook 2007*, 364–368.

<sup>48</sup> The following numbers are derived from: Jacquet, ed. *Yearbook 1990*, 256–259; Lindner, ed. *Yearbook 2001*, 338–344; Lindner, ed. *Yearbook 2007*, 364–370; Lindner, ed. *Yearbook 2011*, 358–362. The following numbers are derived from denominational answers to the question: “How many members does your organization have?” (see, for example, Lindner, ed. *Yearbook 2011*, 357) While the understanding of membership can vary from denomination to denomination, these numbers are sufficient for indicating general trends. We will follow Bibby’s example and draw attention to membership numbers for the Anglican, Presbyterian (Presbyterian Church in Canada), United Church, Lutheran (Lutheran Church-Canada and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada), Baptist, and Pentecostal (The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada) denominations. As with Bibby (*Fragmented Gods*, 14), Baptist here refers to churches affiliated with the Canadian Baptist Federation, subsequently named Canadian Baptist Ministries. This national Baptist group is comprised of three sub-groups, named, at the time: the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches, the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, and the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada.

<sup>49</sup> In later editions of the yearbooks, the Baptist sub-groups are reported separately. Not all of these sub-groups reported numbers for the same years, therefore necessitating the need to give the reporting period as a range.

Without a doubt, a majority of Canada's major Protestant denominations are demonstrating a trend towards decreasing memberships. The Anglican, Presbyterian, and United Church denominations have all shown a consistent trend towards decline since the mid-1960s. The Lutheran Church, while gaining memberships through to 1981, has more recently showed a trend towards decline as well. The only two denominations that have avoided this pattern of decline so far are the Baptists and Pentecostals. While Bibby's numbers show the Baptists declining to 130,000 memberships in 1986 and remaining steady at that number in 1991,<sup>50</sup> the yearbooks demonstrate a trend towards increasing memberships since 1988 other than the most recent dip. Most resoundingly, the Pentecostals have almost completely defied the pattern of decline. Other than the most recent drop in membership numbers, they have demonstrated a trend towards increased membership since 1966.

### Declining Affiliation

The percentage of Canadians claiming affiliation with many Protestant denominations, particularly mainline denominations, has also demonstrated a trend towards decline. The overall percentage of Canadians who identified as Mainline Protestants has dropped from 48% in 1931, to 41% in 1961, to 32% in 1981, to 23% in 1991 to 20% in 2001.<sup>51</sup> As Table 3 demonstrates, this trend towards a decline in affiliation holds true each of Canada's four Mainline Protestant denominations: the United Church, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran denominations. Overall, the percentage of Canadians claiming affiliation with Mainline Protestant denominations has continued to drop.

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<sup>50</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 74; Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 30.

The same is not true for the cohort of denominations Bibby refers to as Conservative Protestants.<sup>52</sup> Drawing upon Statistics Canada census data, Bibby found that the percentage of Canadians who identified with Conservative Protestant denominations has remained constant at 8% from 1931 through to 2001.<sup>53</sup> Given the increase in the Canadian population over that period of time, the maintenance of 8% affiliation indicates a substantial numerical growth in the number of people claiming affiliation with Conservative Protestant groups. Bibby estimates that the number of Canadians who affiliate with Conservative Protestant denominations would have increased from 1.1 million in 1950 to 2.5 million in the early 2000s.<sup>54</sup>

**Table 3: Percentage of Canadians Claiming Denominational Affiliation<sup>55</sup>**

Year	United Church	Anglican	Presbyterian	Lutheran	Conservative Protestant
1981	16%	10%	3%	3%	8%
1991	11%	8%	2%	2%	8%
2001	10%	7%	1%	2%	8%

<sup>52</sup> Bibby includes Baptist, Pentecostal, Alliance, Nazarene, Evangelical Free, Mennonite and Reformed Churches in this combined term, "Conservative Protestant." (*Unknown Gods*, xx)

<sup>53</sup> Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 72–73. We will continue to see this trend towards greater growth amongst conservative Protestant denominations throughout. This tendency for Conservative Protestant denominations to continue growing while Mainline churches decline has garnered a significant amount of interest in the U.S. context, largely due to Kelley's initially influential thesis that mainline churches tend to decline while Conservative churches grow because Conservative churches make higher demands upon congregants, thus providing greater meaning-making possibilities and securing greater commitment among congregants (Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*). Wang studied church growth patterns between 1990 and 2001, and found that strictness was not a significant factor contributing to Conservative church growth. Instead he found that the presence of a collective effervescence, a greater percentage of young people; and the number of years the church had been in existence (the younger the better) were the three key factors that significantly contributed to church growth (Wang, "Empirical Test," 192–193). Chaves found that Conservative Protestant churches are growing in part because they have been able better able to retain their members than Mainline protestant churches. He has also found, however, that one of the reasons Conservative churches are growing is because members of Conservative Protestant denominations have tended to bear more children than members of Mainline Protestant denominations (Chaves, *American Religion*, 88–91).

<sup>55</sup> These numbers are derived from Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 74; Bibby, *Beyond the Gods* 30.



These numbers suggest that not all of Canadian churches are experiencing statistical decline. Conservative Protestant denominations, including the Baptists and Pentecostals, are showing signs of statistical growth. Despite these signs of growth, however, the statistical decline evident among Mainline Protestant denominations is significant.

### **Distortions in Our Drive for Renewal**

Church decline, represented in part by decline in membership and affiliation numbers, has precipitated countless efforts amongst denominations and local congregations, both in Canada and the United States, to bring renewal to the church in North America. Such effort and dedication to renew the church is admirable, and yet a question must be asked of it. Have our efforts been as admirable as we would like them to be? Have they been fuelled primarily by a love for God and love for our neighbour? Or have they also, or perhaps even more so, been fuelled by fear, pride and ambition? In some respects these questions could be dismissed as unhelpful and unnecessary because our motives and actions as human beings always consist of a mixture of grace and sin. Despite the surety of this, we would argue that it is important to explore this matter for the purpose of acknowledging and accepting more deeply our propensity for distortion, and to attend more intently (faithfully) to the nature of our distortions. Hopefully the former will be accomplished by focusing on the latter.

Our propensity for distortion can be made manifest in at least two aspects of our work for renewal. Renewal work consists of the ends towards which we are working, and it consists of the means by which we seek to achieve those ends. Distortions can develop within both of these aspects.

Eugene Peterson, in his book *The Jesus Way*, underlines the importance of attending to the means or ways of living the Christian life. His concern is that Christians in North America have become primarily focused upon “the what” of the Christian life (what we ought to be saying, doing, seeking to accomplish), and have lost sight of the importance of also appreciating “the how” of living the Christian life (how we say what we say, how we do what we do, how we accomplish what we seek to accomplish). Peterson’s assertion is that faithfully living the Christian life includes not only seeking to do *what* we think Jesus would do, but also includes seeking to do those things in the *way* that Jesus would do them.<sup>56</sup> Peterson emphasizes his point by drawing upon Jesus’ words in John 14:6a: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Peterson understands this statement to mean that Jesus’ way and Jesus’ truth are intricately linked, and together bring about Jesus’ life. One without the other leads to distortion. Therefore we cannot seek to proclaim and walk in Jesus’ truth in any way we wish. Proclaiming Jesus’ truth involves proclaiming it in a way that is consonant with Jesus’ way. Similarly we cannot seek to live in Jesus’ way, without also seeking to proclaim Jesus’ truth.<sup>57</sup> And yet Peterson has noted that North American Christians tend to focus much more upon Jesus as the truth, than also upon Jesus as the way. He observes: “But Jesus as the truth gets far more attention than Jesus as the way. Jesus as the way is the most frequently evaded metaphor among the Christians with whom I have worked for fifty years as a North American pastor.”<sup>58</sup> More than this though, Peterson takes the order of Jesus’ words seriously and asserts that the way of Jesus takes precedence. For Peterson,

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<sup>56</sup> Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 8.

<sup>57</sup> Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 4.

it is in living and practicing the way of Jesus, that we come to understand the truth of Jesus, and so experience the life of Jesus.<sup>59</sup>

Applied to the situation of church decline, Peterson's insights suggest that seeking renewal, for the purpose of ensuring an ongoing proclamation of Jesus' truth, is not enough. Instead it is necessary that we seek renewal, but do so in ways that are consonant with Jesus' ways. More than this though, Peterson's insights would suggest that a consideration of Jesus' ways must precede a consideration of "the what" of renewal, and that it will be through a consideration of Jesus' *ways* that "the what" of proclaiming Jesus' truth in renewal will become more apparent. Such an insight calls into question much of the Protestant church's renewal efforts; efforts that we will see focus much more, and certainly primarily, upon "the what" of renewal. One of the aims of this work will be to explore the ways of Christ in relation to the situation of church decline.

Means aside, it is also possible within the situation of decline for the ends to which we are working, the renewal of the church, to be subject to distortion. The works of Edward Farley and Susan Dunlap and their discussion of idolatry shed light on this possibility.

Farley argues that idolatry is one of the ways human beings respond to the awareness and experience of vulnerability as our ultimate condition, and describes the process by which it emerges. For Farley, humanity lives with a timbre of anxiety and discontent that is not based in a discrete moment of anxiety or "fearful anticipation of a specific future peril."<sup>60</sup> Instead this timbre of discontent and anxiety has to do with the

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<sup>59</sup> Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Farley, *Good and Evil*, 124.

awareness and experience of our “total fragility” and the awareness of our “general and unavoidably imperiled future.”<sup>61</sup> We find this experience of vulnerability intolerable, and so seek to resist it. Negatively, we resist it by denying or refusing the experience of vulnerability as constitutive, and therefore necessary and inescapable, of the human condition. Instead we seek to transform our experience of our vulnerability into something that is accidental and contingent—and therefore also manageable.<sup>62</sup>

Positively, we resist our experience of vulnerability by actively seeking goods that will free ourselves from the discontent and anxiety engendered by it. We respond by seeking goods that will satisfy our passions and hungers for security, significance, and enrichment, and so displace our sense of vulnerability and anxiety.<sup>63</sup> When we relate to goods such as religions, sciences, nations, social movements, and so on<sup>64</sup> as means to remove our experience of vulnerability, we place on these goods expectations that they cannot meet. We come to expect these goods to “displace chaos, set us on the road to our true identity, and fulfill our elemental passions.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, we come to invest these goods with eternal or divine attributes. We come to expect these goods to save us. In a similar way, we also come to equate the eternal or divine with these goods. In other words, we also come to think of the eternal or divine in terms of these limited goods. We come, therefore, to make an idol of these limited earthly goods.<sup>66</sup>

Dunlap draws upon Farley’s description of idolatry and relates it to situations of illness. She acknowledges that the existential anxiety discussed by Farley lies deeper than and extends beyond the fears experienced by those who are ill. She also

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<sup>61</sup> Farley, *Good and Evil*, 124.

<sup>62</sup> Farley, *Good and Evil*, 132.

<sup>63</sup> Farley, *Good and Evil*, 133.

<sup>64</sup> Farley, *Good and Evil*, 133.

<sup>65</sup> Farley, *Good and Evil*, 134.

<sup>66</sup> Farley, *Good and Evil*, 134–135.

acknowledges, however, that “the underlying dread within human finitude can coalesce during illness with the possibility that each might intensify the experience of the other.”<sup>67</sup> For this reason, she considers the role idolatry can play in illness. Those who are ill can turn to many idols for security, such as: medication, diet and exercise, religious practices, belief in the power of prayer over worship of the God who receives prayer, a guru or healer, and so on.<sup>68</sup> She also considers the ways in which idols lead us into bondage. Two aspects of this bondage are important for our deliberations here. Self-deception is one aspect of idolatry. We fail to be honest with ourselves and others about the idol’s limitations, and deceive ourselves into believing that the idol can indeed save us. As a result we will become highly motivated to vigorously protect, serve, and defend the idol.<sup>69</sup> A second aspect of idolatry is its demand for primacy in all matters. All other obligations and loyalties are rendered of secondary importance compared to the offering of service to the idol. Dunlap says it this way: “. . .idols require that obligation to the neighbor be of secondary importance. Our enslavement to the idol means that all other loyalties, obligations, and loves become of less importance than service to the idol.”<sup>70</sup>

Based on Farley’s description of idolatry and Dunlap’s application of it to situations of illness, we would argue that it is also possible for idolatry to become a part of our efforts to effect church renewal. With Dunlap we would agree that the anxiety attendant with church decline is not identical with the deep existential anxiety referred to

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<sup>67</sup> Dunlap, *Caring Cultures*, 197.

<sup>68</sup> Dunlap, *Caring Cultures*, 197–198.

<sup>69</sup> Dunlap, *Caring Cultures*, 199.

<sup>70</sup> Dunlap, *Caring Cultures*, 199.

by Farley.<sup>71</sup> Following Dunlap's lead we would suggest, however, that this anxiety can coalesce with an awareness of our deeper human vulnerability and lead to, in the words of Dunlap, "the possibility that each might intensify the experience of the other."<sup>72</sup>

Within the situation of decline, the church itself, both as a local and denominational manifestation, can become an idol—a finite entity that we seek to serve and protect at all costs against the variety of societal forces currently eroding it. Quite apart from a situation of decline, Farley observes that religion, denominations, and even the local churches can often become idols for us—those goods we look to in order to “displace chaos, set us on the road to our true destiny, and fulfill our elemental passions.”<sup>73</sup>

Presumably the experience of church decline, with its power to threaten our security, significance, sense of efficacy, and way of understanding the world could very easily intensify our tendency to cling to the church as a source of security and meaning in a rapidly changing and insecure world. Beyond this, even our efforts to renew the church can become idols, as we look to finite and limited programs, strategies and organizational wisdom as the means of salvation for the church. So often local congregations find themselves hunting for the “silver bullet”—that one program or approach that will turn everything around for the congregation.

When idolatry takes hold, what is ultimately supplanted is our love for God and love for our neighbour. In the situation of church decline this leads to an ultimate desire to serve the church, and in doing so to serve ourselves and our need for security and significance. This author's experience ministering with a declining congregation

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<sup>71</sup> Jinkins agrees that anxiety has attended the experience of church decline and noted that this anxiety has often led to either a paralysis of action, and/or a hyperactive response “which manifests itself in clutching for any and every programmatic solution and structural reorganization in the desperate hope that survival is just another project or organizational chart away.” Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Dunlap, *Caring Cultures*, 197.

<sup>73</sup> Farley, *Good and Evil*, 134.

revealed just how easily this distortion can emerge. Despite the sincere God-focused language that was used to describe our efforts, our aim to reach out to others had much more to do with a desire to fill pews, than it did with a desire to love as Jesus loved. Our efforts to preserve the church had much more to do with a desire to assuage our fear and grief, than it did with a desire to worship and depend on the One who said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Mt. 5:4)

Certainly not all efforts to renew the church will be distorted by idolatry. Some will, however. We would therefore argue that it is a factor that ought to be considered in any discussion of church renewal.

### **Aging Congregations**

Bibby has looked beyond membership numbers in his analysis of church decline in Canada. Bibby, in his 1993 book *Unknown Gods*, also analyzed the age of those affiliates who hold memberships, attend church weekly, and who think religion is important. Overall he found that it is affiliates older than age 55 who are most likely to take out membership, attend church weekly, and believe that religion is important (see Table 4). While the trend is clear when looking at Protestants as a whole, the trend becomes even more pronounced when one considers the numbers for the Anglican and United Church denominations. By far, in these denominations, it is those in the oldest age range who are most likely to hold membership, attend weekly, and deem religion to be important. As with the data presented above, the Conservative Protestant group does demonstrate a moderated pattern compared to other Protestant groups. While the numbers still show a trend towards the oldest segment of the population, a much greater percentage of younger Conservative Protestant affiliates hold memberships, deem

religion to be important, and claim to attend church weekly, than their Mainline Protestant counterparts.

Based on these figures, Bibby concluded in 1993 that the church in Canada, particularly the Mainline Protestant church, is facing some serious difficulties. As those most devoted to church continue to age, and as younger people are found to be less devoted to church, the number of people available to carry on the work of the church will decrease.<sup>74</sup> When this fact is coupled with the fact that it is those aged 55 and older who are most likely to give financially to churches, and give the most money on a yearly basis compared to those younger than age 55,<sup>75</sup> Bibby concludes that the church in Canada is facing a “coming resource crash.”<sup>76</sup>

**Table 4: Percentage of Affiliates with Memberships, Weekly Attendance and Who Deem Religion Important, by Age<sup>77</sup>**

	Age Range	Protestant	Anglican	United Church	Conserv. Protestant
<b>Members</b>	<b>18-34</b>	27	20	18	49
	<b>35-54</b>	32	31	21	50
	<b>55+</b>	49	39	58	70
<b>Attend Weekly</b>	<b>18-34</b>	22	7	8	54
	<b>35-54</b>	23	13	12	56
	<b>55+</b>	31	21	25	62
<b>Religion Important</b>	<b>18-34</b>	18	12	8	44
	<b>35-54</b>	28	13	9	55
	<b>55+</b>	57	32	40	61

<sup>74</sup> Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 105.

<sup>75</sup> Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 107.

<sup>76</sup> Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 105.

<sup>77</sup> Derived from Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 97.



Mark Chaves has found a similar trend towards aging churchgoers in the United States, and one that has continued into the late 2000s. He analyzed the average difference in age between the overall adult population in the United States, and those who claim to attend church at least weekly. He found that an age difference exists and that the age difference has been increasing since the early 1970s.<sup>78</sup> In the early 1970s churchgoers were on average 3 years older than the general population. Now, in 2008, churchgoers are on average 5 years older than the general population. He has also found that the average churchgoer in the United States is now 50 years old.

### **The Need for Theological and Spiritual Reflection**

The dramatic decline of children and young people in Protestant Mainline churches, and to a lesser degree Conservative Protestant churches, has contributed to the strong impetus to analyze the situation of decline. As a result the North American Protestant church has begun to wrestle with the cultural, organizational, programmatic, strategic, and demographic questions, amongst others, thought to pertain to church decline and renewal. This work is important and needed, and has brought valuable insights to the church. Most notable by its absence, however, is any discussion of the theological and spiritual questions raised by the situation of decline.

The phrase “theological and spiritual questions” is used here in a particular way, and requires clarification. The theological questions referred to here are not questions about our theological understanding of the church. The situation of decline has prompted important questions of this kind, but that is not what is meant here. Likewise, the spiritual questions referred to are not questions about how we should best live the Christian faith. Questions about whether a more liberal or conservative approach to the

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<sup>78</sup> Chaves, *American Religion*, 63.

faith is more conducive to church growth and health have been much discussed, but this is not what is meant here. The phrase “theological and spiritual questions” is used here to refer to our questions about God and God’s activity (or sometimes seeming lack of activity) and our subsequent response to God, in the midst of North American church decline. Most importantly this phrase refers to questions of the heart, heartfelt questions, as opposed to questions of intellectual curiosity. They are, in fact, questions akin to the cries often uttered by the psalmists. Where is God in this? What is God doing in this? Why has God allowed such a dramatic decline in the church? Why is it so difficult to effect renewal? What should we hope for? What should we work for? What should we do?

The situation of church decline is a matter of the heart and not merely a matter for the rational, problem-solving mind. This is certainly true at the level of the local church. Clergy feel the pain as congregants, especially younger congregants, leave for more vibrant congregations. For some it raises doubts and misgivings about God. Congregants feel sadness about the loss of friends who used to attend, and some express sadness that their children and grandchildren no longer attend church.<sup>79</sup> The experience of church decline has the potential to be marked by grief. It has the potential to be an experience of dismay as sincere efforts to renew the church end in failure. It has the potential to be an experience of incremental dread as, month by month and year by year, the numbers continue to slowly diminish and the age of those remaining slowly increases. Church decline has the potential to be an experience of God’s seeming absence in the midst of deep heartfelt prayers for renewal and help.

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<sup>79</sup> McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," ix, has confirmed what this author experienced ministering with a declining congregation.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his book *Lament For a Son*, offers a penetrating reflection of his experience of grief over the loss of his son in a mountain-climbing accident. In it he asks a heart-wrenching question of God: “Will I find you in the dark—not in the streaks of light which remain, but in the darkness? Has anyone ever found you there?”<sup>80</sup> In asking this question Wolterstorff gives expression to his deep pain, his yearning for hope, and his a question that lurks in many hearts. Does God really inhabit the dark places of life? Can God indeed be found in the depths of doubt and pain and hopelessness, or can God only be found as we do our part to grope towards the light of faith and hope? Will God come and meet with us when we are blinded by the dismay, pain, and meaninglessness, and lost in our fears and doubts, and too exhausted to try again to find a way out?

Our tendency in darkness can be to strive towards the light—to strive to find a way out of the darkness and back into the light of meaningfulness and hope. Our tendency can be to work to overcome the darkness, to work to subdue the doubts and fears and put aside the pain, clinging instead to the promises of God’s goodness. Wolterstorff finds himself considering another way. Experiencing a darkness too deep to escape in his own strength, he wonders whether God might be found not apart from the darkness but within it. In this he seeks to embrace both the raw reality of his pain, and his tentative hope in a God whose life and light have not been overcome by our darkness (Jn 1:5). He does not try to overcome or push past his doubts and pain and anger with God. Instead he accepts and in a sense creates a safe place of acceptance for his pain, and from that place of deep and painful honesty seeks and hopes for God, even if hesitantly.

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<sup>80</sup> Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 69.

The pain engendered by the situation of church decline certainly cannot be equated with the pain of losing a child. This does not diminish, however, that church decline can be an experience of darkness, of pain, fear, doubt, and anger for those impacted by it. We would argue that in the face of the pain and fearful questions raised by church decline, it would be important for the church to respond as Wolterstorff did. It will be important for the church not to seek God by working to overcome, push past, and dismiss the reality of our pain. It will instead be important for the church to create a place of safety and acceptance for our pain, and to seek God from that place of honesty.

Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore, and their book *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope*, add support to this contention. They argue that the church in North America has focused too intently upon the prayer of praise and thanksgiving, and has too easily dismissed the prayer of lament. They define the prayer of lament as: "that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God."<sup>81</sup> Primarily they argue that "without lament, hope is stillborn."<sup>82</sup> By this they mean that when "losses are experienced and hope is eclipsed," the way to true hope comes not by denying the pain, but by entering into it and honestly acknowledging it to oneself and to God.<sup>83</sup>

### **Self-Reported Church Attendance**

Acknowledging that a lack of church membership does not always indicate a lack of commitment to church, Bibby has also analyzed data pertaining to self-claimed church attendance. The percentage of those affiliates who also claim to attend church weekly shows a clear pattern of decline between the late 1950s and 1990 (see Table 5).

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<sup>81</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 6.

<sup>82</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 16.

This pattern of decline in weekly attendance holds true for each of the denominations sampled except for the Presbyterians and the Conservative Protestant cohort. The Presbyterians, while showing an overall decline in weekly attendance, showed a slight increase between 1975 and 1990. The same is true of the Conservative Protestants, only to a greater extent. While the percentage claiming weekly attendance dropped between 1957 and 1975, it rose again in 1990 to a level just three percentage points below its 1957 high. While these numbers are discouraging enough, particularly in the case of Mainline Protestants, Bibby notes that it is quite likely that these self-claimed attendance figures are somewhat inflated.<sup>84</sup> In most cases, the percentage of Protestant affiliates who attend church weekly has shown a trend towards decline between 1957 and 1990.

**Table 5: Percentage of Affiliates Claiming Weekly Attendance<sup>85</sup>**

Year	Protestant	Anglican	United Church	Lutheran	Presbyterian	Conservative Protestant
1957	38	24	40	38	38	51
1975	26	24	28	19	11	40
1990	22	15	15	10	13	48

The numbers following 1990 are more difficult to interpret. Bibby's research indicated that while signs of decline are still evident, the trend towards continued decline might be lessening. A close account of the numbers as reported by Bibby is warranted.

<sup>84</sup> Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 6–7, cites the work of another researcher, who compared self-claimed attendance, with actual attendance figures from Vancouver churches. This researcher found that while 18% of Vancouverites had claimed attendance on a particular Sunday, church attendance figures demonstrated that only 7% of Vancouverites attended church that day. Gill, a researcher from the United Kingdom, would argue that when available, the best form of data would be actual church attendance numbers recorded over time (Gill, *The 'Empty' Church*, 16).

<sup>85</sup> Derived from Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 6.

In the case of the Mainline Protestants, while the number of Canadians affiliating with these denominations is still declining, the number of affiliates claiming to attend church weekly has leveled off and in some cases has begun to increase.<sup>86</sup> The following numbers are based on data from Statistics Canada surveys, and so the numbers will differ from those given above. Bibby turned to the Statistics Canada surveys and their much larger sample sizes, in an effort to more carefully discern the extent of the change in trend with respect to attendance numbers. While the percentage of those United Church affiliates who claimed to attend weekly declined slightly from 15% in 1990 to 14% in 2000, each of the other three denominations saw at least a slight increase in the percentage of those attending weekly. The Presbyterian Church saw the most modest increase, with the percentage of affiliates claiming weekly attendance increasing from 24% in 1990 to 25% in 2000. The Lutherans and Anglicans saw greater gains. The percentage of Lutheran affiliates claiming weekly attendance increased from 18% in 1990, to 21% in 2000, while the percentage of Anglican affiliates claiming weekly attendance increased from 14% in 1990 to 18% in 2000. For Bibby this new pattern suggests that “there is a measure of vitality and numerical growth in many settings.”<sup>87</sup> He suggests that the fact that the percentage of affiliates claiming attendance has leveled off, or has begun to grow, means that more younger adults are now claiming attendance to take the place of older adults who have died.<sup>88</sup> In support of this supposition, Bibby

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<sup>86</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 75. Chaves and Presser have found a similar trend in religious attendance in the United States. Drawing upon four different measures of overall religious attendance (not delineated based on denomination or faith tradition) in an effort to control for over-reporting of attendance, they found that all four measures demonstrated that weekly attendance has been stable between 1990 and the early to mid 2000s (Presser and Chaves, "Religious Service Attendance").

<sup>87</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 76.

<sup>88</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 76.

found that the number of Mainline Protestant adults between the ages of 18 and 34 claiming weekly attendance rose from 9% in 1990 to 13% in 2000.<sup>89</sup>

Bibby has also found that those who identify with Conservative Protestant denominations are more likely to attend weekly. After reaching a low of 41% in 1975, the percentage of Conservative Protestants claiming weekly attendance rose to 49% in 1990 and continued to rise to 58% in 2000.<sup>90</sup> These figures are derived from Bibby's Project Canada survey. Figures from two Statistics Canada surveys, the 1990: General Social Survey, and the 2000: Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating, revealed a somewhat different picture. These surveys, which both included sample sizes 10 times larger than Bibby's Project Canada Survey, showed that 50% of those who identified as Conservative claimed attendance in 1990, and 48% of those who identified as Conservative claimed attendance in 2000.<sup>91</sup>

How might these various statistics be interpreted? In the case of Conservative Protestants, the picture is fairly clear. As a cohort, while Conservative Protestants only represent 8% of the population of Canada, they are growing numerically and sustaining a fairly high percentage of self-claimed weekly attendance. Admittedly, there appears to be some discrepancy between the percentage of those who attend weekly as calculated from Bibby's Project Canada Survey, and the percentage calculated from two Statistics Canada surveys. Despite this discrepancy, and compared to mainline Protestant groups, both sets of data show that the Conservative Protestant groups are maintaining a significantly high percentage of those claiming weekly attendance.

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<sup>89</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 76.

<sup>90</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 73.

<sup>91</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 75-76.

With respect to the Mainline Protestants, indicators point to both continued decline and possible signs of new life. Without a doubt, Mainline Protestants have continued to lose ground in terms of the number of affiliates compared to the population of Canada—and those most active and involved in Mainline Protestant churches are aging. At the same time, however, the percentage of affiliates who attend weekly has, at the very least, stopped declining, and in some cases has begun to increase. Bibby is quick to note that it can be misleading to base a percentage on a pool of respondents (in this case those who affiliate with Mainline Protestant denominations) that is continuing to shrink in size.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, Bibby is still willing to consider the possibility that these numbers indicate possible signs of life within Canada's Mainline Protestant denominations.<sup>93</sup> In 2002, Bibby first interpreted these and other statistics as indicating a possible renaissance within organized religion in Canada.<sup>94</sup> In his subsequent work, reported in 2011, he is now offering the possibility that these numbers indicate a growing polarization in Canadian society with respect to organized religion. His most recent data has demonstrated that within Canadian society there has been a "momentum shift away from religion" in recent decades.<sup>95</sup> At the same time the data also show that

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<sup>92</sup> Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 30.

<sup>93</sup> Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 37.

<sup>94</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 90. This view was greeted with questions at the time (see, for example, Thiessen and Dawson, "Is There a "Renaissance," 389–415). It was a view that Bibby also readily admitted was tentative in nature (Bibby, "Perils of Pioneering," 422).

<sup>95</sup> Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 45. Bibby, in beginning to recognize the need to pay attention not only to the percentage of people who attended church, but also to the percentage of people who never attend church, found that amongst both teenagers and adults, the percentage of those who never attend church is increasing. Bibby first discovered this pattern when analyzing his Project Teen Canada data on church attendance between 1984 and 2008 (45–46). Clark, studying Canadian census data, found a similar trend towards greater polarization in an older age group. While the regular attendance of those aged 55–64 in 1988 dropped by only 1% by the time that group turned 65–74 in 1998, the non-attendance rates for this same age cohort rose from 20% to 26% in that same time period. Clark concluded that increasingly, infrequent attenders were becoming non-attenders (Clark, "Religious Attendance," 23).



“a significant segment of Canadians has continued to value religion.”<sup>96</sup> The fact that the data demonstrate that the middle continuum of attendance is shrinking, with more Canadians either never attending, or attending more faithfully, has led Bibby to suggest we are seeing evidence of a growing polarization with respect to organized religion in Canada.<sup>97</sup>

### **The Paradoxical Gift of Church Decline**

It is not hard to imagine that Bibby’s most recent statistics could send waves of relief through the church. One can almost hear the relief: “Some signs of life do still exist!” Bibby’s most recent statistics bring encouragement because in general, our hope has been to work for a lessening of decline and an increase of growth. This is an understandable and admirable goal, and it should not be discounted. This goal, however, does not acknowledge a paradoxical truth recognized by a small but important group of academics—the truth that new life in the Kingdom of God is found in (through) death and not apart from it.

At least two authors have considered this paradox in relation to the church and church decline. The first is church historian Martin Marty. Marty and his co-authors, writing in 1964, concluded that in the midst of church decline and already rapid societal change, death and birth will need to become the way of the church.<sup>98</sup> Based on the belief that this movement from death to birth is vital for the ongoing life of the church, Marty and his co-authors devote the majority of their book to making suggestions about

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<sup>96</sup> Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 46.

<sup>97</sup> Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 46. Chaves has found a similar trend in the United States. His review of attendance data, both from surveys and time-use diaries, has led him to conclude that religious attendance in the United States most likely declined in the several decades preceding 1990, and has remained relatively stable since then. This stability in attendance since 1990 has been accompanied, however, by a significant increase in the percentage of people reporting never to attend religious services. This percentage increased from 13% in 1990 to 22% in 2008 (Chaves, *American Religion*, 48–49).

<sup>98</sup> Marty, ed. *Death and Birth*.

what needs to die and what needs to be born within the churches of their time. Marty observes: “that it is often during those times when the church seems to be ‘written off’ that newness and birth have come.”<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that Paul’s assertion that our baptism is a baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, applies to the church and not just to individuals.<sup>100</sup> Marty understands that death in relation to the church need not be viewed, and indeed must not be viewed, as something that is only negative in nature. For Marty, death in the church—death of certain programs and ways of doing and being church—is the necessary precursor to the church receiving the gift of new life. More than this, the ongoing movement from death to birth in the church becomes the means by which the church actively participates in its vocation to be like Christ in both his death and resurrection.

Pastoral theologian Michael Jenkins is another academic who has considered the paradoxical relationship of death and life with respect to the church and church decline. He begins with a consideration of the individual Christian and then moves on to a consideration of the church. Drawing upon the writings of Paul and the work of philosophers such as Derrida and Levinas, Jenkins concludes that the supreme responsibility of the Christian is to “rely on the other to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.”<sup>101</sup> For Jenkins this involves living a life that consists in “death-toward-life.”<sup>102</sup> He draws upon the language of “death-towards-life” for two reasons. First, this is the language we find in the Bible, as followers of Christ are called to share in Christ’s death so as also to share in his resurrection (see, for example, Mark 8:34–35; Rom 6:3–

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<sup>99</sup> Marty, “Death and Birth,” 30.

<sup>100</sup> Marty, “Death and Birth,” 7.

<sup>101</sup> Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 27.

<sup>102</sup> Jenkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 27.

4; Phil 3:10–11). Secondly, Jinkins draws upon this language because the state of death brings us to a place where we can no longer seek to be the master of life. Death is a state that renders us unable to master and grasp for what is possible. In fact, death is a state that renders us unable to even respond to the other. In death, we are brought to a state of utter dependency upon the other. Jinkins argues that absolute dependence upon the other, in this case God, is the supreme responsibility of the Christian.<sup>103</sup>

Jinkins goes on to argue, however, that the church as a corporate entity, just as the individual Christian, is called to live in absolute dependence upon God. Jinkins refers to Jesus' call to his disciples in Mark 8:34b–36 to make his point. The church's vocation, like the individual Christian, is to deny itself, take up its cross and follow Christ. For it will be in losing its life that the church will find it, and it will be in seeking to save its life that the church will lose it. Of this, Jinkins says:

The call of Jesus that issues forth from the baptismal font at the heart of the worshiping community is the call to follow; and it is for the entire church, as it is for each of the church's members, the call to come and die on a cross. The church that lives in and through this perception, holding with the lightness of a sobbing infant its grasp upon survival, gains its soul, even though it will lay down its life.<sup>104</sup>

The call for the church to live a life that consists in “death-toward-life” is also manifested in the Lord's Supper. Here, Jinkins says, the church is both prepared for and called to “offer itself up in the Spirit of Christ and thereby to embrace its unique and irreplaceable identity in the world of which it is reminded in the sacraments.”<sup>105</sup> Jinkins does not develop how this way of living “death-toward-life” might be manifested concretely within the church. He does, however, try to capture a sense of it when he

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<sup>103</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 27.

<sup>104</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 31.

<sup>105</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 29.

says: “For the church to live toward death is for the church to render to God its life with nothing in its hands, nothing to recommend it, nothing to guarantee its future, because at death all guarantees of future are exempted, all bets are off.”<sup>106</sup> It is to acknowledge, as has been acknowledged throughout the history of the church, that the church’s life

does not depend ultimately upon its skill, its wiles, and its wisdom (or as one might put it these days, its executive competence, its technical expertise, its strategies, and its long-term planning); neither does its life depend upon its faithfulness, theological or moral. The church’s life depends upon the power and faithfulness of God to raise the Body of Christ from every death, because its life is a continuing participation in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>107</sup>

Given the church’s call to follow Christ in a life that consists of “death-toward-life,” Jinkins sees in the situation of church decline and potential death an opportunity for the church to more fully live into its vocation. In this way church decline can be a good gift to the church. This will depend, however, on how the church responds to decline. It is possible, in the face of decline, for the church to lose itself, forsake its fear of death, and so be freed from “captivity to the powers and threats of death,” finding instead eternal life “through the portals of death.”<sup>108</sup> It is also possible, however, for the church to respond to decline by fearing the need to trust in God alone, and seeking instead to save its own life. In Jinkin’s words, it is possible for the church to “dread God, grasp trembling at survival, and cling remorsefully to whatever bloodless thing promises another day like yesterday.”<sup>109</sup> The church can become “preoccupied with its decline, with strategies and desperate remedies for survival, with the self-serving reallocation of resources and the preservation of party interests. . . .”<sup>110</sup> or it can “face up

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<sup>106</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 31.

<sup>107</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 28.

<sup>108</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 29.

<sup>109</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 29.

<sup>110</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 31.

to its identity, its vocation, and its responsibility, . . . [and] own its baptism and offer up its existence in the Spirit of Christ.”<sup>111</sup>

The threat of church decline often strikes fear into the hearts of local churches and denominations. In one sense, this fear is certainly understandable. Marty and Jinkins help us to see, however, that within the very real fear and pain that accompanies church decline and the possibility of church death, lies a paradoxical hope. The church may face death, but the God we worship and to whom we witness is the one who brings life out of death. While pointing us toward this paradoxical reality, Marty and Jinkins do not help us to consider how this pattern of death-toward-life might be concretely manifested within the church. Nevertheless, we would argue that this paradoxical pattern of living death-toward-life, must become a foundational aspect of our response to church decline. One of the aims of this work will be to consider how the church, in this case the declining church, might live in this way.

### **Decline and Local Congregations**

We began this section by asking whether decline is still an issue for churches in Canada today. To what degree has Bibby’s research helped us to answer this question? Bibby’s data have helped us to gain an appreciation of the statistical trends across Protestant denominations and cohorts of denominations. His data, however, cannot give us a sense of the degree to which decline is a factor for particular local congregations. This means, for example, that the fact that Conservative Protestants as a cohort are showing signs of numerical growth does not necessarily mean that all local congregations represented by this cohort are experiencing growth and vitality. Both Mark Chaves and Nancy Eisland demonstrated the way in which even conservative

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<sup>111</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 29.

churches can be affected by the religious ecology of their local community. Eiesland documents the impact the growth of a megachurch had on the other churches in its community of Dacula, Georgia. First Baptist Church—an independent Baptist congregation often considered more theologically conservative than the new megachurch (Hebron Baptist, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention)—has suffered due to the rise of the megachurch. With much more limited resources, financially and denominationally, they have not been able to compete with Hebron Baptist’s ability to provide “all things to all people.”<sup>112</sup> Similarly, Chaves conducted a study of size distribution data for 12 Protestant denominations going back to 1970, and in some cases going back prior to 1970. He found that in every one of these denominations, congregants were found to be increasingly concentrated in the largest churches. This pattern held regardless of whether the denominations were small or large, theologically liberal or conservative, or growing or declining.<sup>113</sup> His data reveal that smaller churches, even theologically conservative churches, will increasingly have a more difficult time competing with their larger counterparts in the current religious landscape. Though as a whole, Conservative Protestants are showing signs of numerical growth, this does not mean that every local congregation will experience this growth.

Similarly, the fact that Mainline Protestants are continuing to lose ground in terms of the percentage of Canadians claiming affiliation, does not mean that all churches represented by these data are experiencing declining numbers. Diana Butler Bass’ study with mainline Protestant churches illustrates this point from the American context. Bass would not dispute the conclusion that Mainline Protestantism in the

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<sup>112</sup> Eiesland, *A Particular Place*, 71–75.

<sup>113</sup> Chaves, "Megachurches in Context," 336–337.

United States is in trouble, but her work with several Mainline denominations has demonstrated that certain Mainline congregations are experiencing health, vibrancy, and spiritual renewal.<sup>114</sup> It is to be concluded, therefore, that while many Conservative congregations and some Mainline congregations might be experiencing vitality and possibly growth, there will still be many local congregations, both Conservative and Mainline, for whom decline is still a significant factor.

Secondly, it must be noted that Bibby's data present us with a limited definition of decline. On the basis of the indicators Bibby has chosen to measure, decline is understood in terms of membership numbers, percentage of affiliation, percentage of those who attend weekly, the age range of those most actively involved, and so on. While these factors are well suited to help us understand decline in terms of statistical trends, they are not necessarily well suited to help us understand decline at the level of a local congregation. Within a local congregation, gauging vitality, or its lack, requires more nuances than these measures provide. It is altogether possible for a numerically small and aging congregation to demonstrate signs of programmatic and spiritual life. For this reason it is necessary to more closely and clearly define our understanding of the term "decline" as it is manifested within local congregations.

#### **Section 4: A Definition of Decline for Local Congregations**

##### **Church Life Cycle Theory: Saarinen and Bullard**

For the purpose of this work, we will define decline by adopting concepts and terminology from congregational life cycle theory. Life cycle theory for congregations

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<sup>114</sup> Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*.

has grown out of life cycle theories developed for business organizations.<sup>115</sup> While many authors have drawn upon congregational life cycle theory in their work,<sup>116</sup> two authors have developed the theory in some depth. They are Martin Saarinen and George Bullard.<sup>117</sup> The theory postulates that congregations will move through several stages of growth, potentially followed by several stages of decline. After a period of growth, a congregation will begin slipping into decline, and will continue to decline further unless specific interventions are employed to renew the congregation. A congregation's location within the life cycle is determined not by its chronological age (although the stages will sometimes follow chronological patterns), but by assessing the congregation in terms of four key factors or organizing principles. Saarinen identifies the four key factors as: the Energizing Factor (E); the Programmatic Factor (P); the Administrative Factor (A); and the Inclusion Factor (I).<sup>118</sup> Bullard assesses congregations in terms of four organizing principles: Vision (V); Relationships (R); Programs (P); and Management (M).<sup>119</sup> Each of these factors or organizing principles is deemed to be present within a congregation at each stage of the life cycle, but only certain factors or combinations of factors will be dominant at each stage.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, the theory holds that at each stage of development common congregational characteristics will emerge.

Therefore, a larger downtown congregation and a smaller rural congregation

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<sup>115</sup> The work of Ichak Adizes and his article, "Organizational Passages—Diagnosing and treating Lifecycle Problems of Organizations," has been a key source for those developing life cycle theories for congregations, including Saarinen and Bullard (Adizes, "Organizational Passages").

<sup>116</sup> See for example: Mann, *Can Our Church Live?*; and Dale, *To Dream Again*.

<sup>117</sup> Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*; Bullard, *Full Kingdom Potential*; Bullard, "Congregational Passages." Bullard's work, "Congregational Passages," is a compilation of unpublished writings, as compared to his book, *Full Kingdom Potential*. In this section we will draw most heavily from his unpublished writing, as his description of the four factors and the characteristics of the stages of decline are more detailed in this work.

<sup>118</sup> Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 2–4.

<sup>119</sup> Bullard, *Full Kingdom Potential*, 76–77. More will be said below regarding these factors and organizing principles, and about the relationship between Saarinen's and Bullard's work.

<sup>120</sup> Bullard, *Full Kingdom Potential*, 87.



experiencing the same developmental stage will exhibit similar stage-related characteristics despite the differences in their history, demographics, context, and so on. These characteristics may be manifested in different ways, but a core commonality will exist.<sup>121</sup> For our purposes here, the combination of factors/organizing principles, and the common characteristics given for certain of the stages of decline will serve as the definition of decline that will be adopted throughout this work. These means of defining decline will be applied to a series of case studies for the purpose of identifying actual congregations that are experiencing decline.

### The Relationship Between Saarinen's and Bullard's Conceptions of the Congregational Life Cycle

A comment must be made regarding the relationship between Saarinen's and Bullard's work. While for our purposes it can be said that a high degree of congruence exists between their respective understandings of the congregational life cycle, some differences do exist. Their conception of the four factors/organizing principles is a case in point. At a fundamental level, their understanding of the four factors/organizing principles is highly congruent. Bullard's description of the organizing principles of Vision and Relationship (comparable to Saarinen's Energizing and Inclusion factors) is, however, explicitly shaped by his evangelical worldview. Bullard describes his understanding of Vision as "God's spiritual strategic direction for a local congregation."<sup>122</sup> And he describes the organizing principle of Relationship, as

. . .the spiritual and relational processes by which persons are brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, become connected to a local New Testament congregation, are assimilated into the fellowship life and care ministry of a congregation, have opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership

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<sup>121</sup> Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 2.

<sup>122</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 2.

development, and are mentored to use their gifts and skills through Kingdom involvement.<sup>123</sup>

In contrast to this, Saarinen describes his Energizing and Inclusion factors in more general terms. The energizing factor is described as that which exudes “vision and hope, excitement and enthusiasm, and a sense of potency and potentiality.”<sup>124</sup> Finally, the Inclusion factor is described as the ways and means by which people are drawn to and assimilated into the life and ministry of the congregation.<sup>125</sup> Given the fact that it is our intention to explore decline in a variety of Protestant churches and not only those churches shaped by an evangelical worldview, it will be important to work with a sufficiently general understanding of the four factors/organizing principles.

A significant, but not complete correspondence is also found when comparing Saarinen’s and Bullard’s description of the various stages of decline. The most notable difference is that Bullard conceives of there being five stages of decline in comparison to Saarinen’s four.<sup>126</sup> In addition to this, Bullard’s descriptions of each stage are more extensive than Saarinen’s, and the two theorists do emphasize different congregational characteristics at points.<sup>127</sup> Despite these differences, however, their descriptions of the four stages that they share in common are complementary, and their understanding of the combination of factors/organizing principles that are dominant and diminished in each of the four stages they share in common, finds agreement in every case.

Based on this comparison, the level of congruence and the notable differences between the two theorists, we will draw from both Saarinen and Bullard to develop our

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<sup>123</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 15.

<sup>124</sup> Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 2.

<sup>125</sup> Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 4.

<sup>126</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 5; Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 5.

<sup>127</sup> Saarinen, for example, focuses more on the degradation of congregational relationships that can occur as a congregation moves further into decline, than does Bullard. See particularly Saarinen’s description of the stage entitled Bureaucracy (*Church Life Cycle*, 13).

understanding of both the four factors/organizing principles, and the common characteristics exhibited during each stage of significant decline. With respect to the four factors/organizing principles, we will make use of Bullard's terminology, and draw from the work of both theorists to develop a comprehensive, yet generalized understanding of what will now be referred to as the four organizing principles. With respect to the number of stages, and the description of the common characteristics exhibited by congregations in each stage, we will follow Bullard, augmenting his understandings with Saarinen's insights, when applicable.

### The Four Organizing Principles

Before moving to a description of the stages of decline, it will be important to briefly describe the meaning of the four organizing principles, as they will be understood here. Vision, as an organizing principle, refers to a sense of direction for the future that engenders energy, hope, "excitement and enthusiasm, and a sense of potency and potentiality."<sup>128</sup> Relationship will refer to all of the processes, relational and spiritual, by which people are drawn to and assimilated into the life and ministry of the church.<sup>129</sup> Program, as an organizing principle, stands for all of the programs, ministries, services, projects, and activities offered by a church in response to the needs of its congregants and the larger community it is seeking to serve.<sup>130</sup> Finally, Management will refer to a congregation's formal and informal decision-making structures, and the ways in which resources are allocated and administered.<sup>131</sup> With these terms in mind, we will now turn to consider a description of the two stages of significant congregational decline.

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<sup>128</sup> Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 2. See also Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 6.

<sup>129</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 15; Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 4.

<sup>130</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 24; Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 3.

<sup>131</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 30; Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 3.

### Stages of Significant Decline

The focus of this work comprises those churches experiencing significant decline. Three factors contribute to our understanding of decline that is deemed to be significant. First, the congregation must have some awareness that the church is struggling with decline, and might be in danger of closing for this reason. Secondly, for decline to be significant, the congregation must have begun to experience a decrease in resources in terms of finances, membership, and/or programs. Thirdly, the congregation must still be in existence and meeting for worship on a regular basis. Based on these criteria, only two of Bullard's five stages of decline qualify for what is meant here by significant decline. The final stage of decline, "Death," does not meet the criteria, because at this point in the process the congregation has disbanded and has ceased to meet regularly for worship.<sup>132</sup> Likewise, the first stage of decline, "Maturity," does not qualify either. At this stage, while the congregation has slipped to the decline side of the life cycle, these churches are often still successful in many ways, and still produce high quality programming and enjoy a high level of resources in terms of finances and membership.<sup>133</sup> Finally, the second stage of decline, "Empty Nest," will be disqualified as well.<sup>134</sup> At this stage the congregation will begin to sense that something has changed, and that the church is no longer doing as well as it once did. They will be aware of a decrease in both the quantity and quality of their programs, but will tend to attribute this diminishment to a lack of commitment among the membership, and not to the possibility of decline. Significant decline then, will be defined by the two remaining

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<sup>132</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 88.

<sup>133</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 73–74.

<sup>134</sup> The following description is summarized from Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 76–77.

stages. A description of these two stages, “Retirement,” and “Old Age,” will now be offered.

### The First Stage of Significant Decline: “Retirement”

The stage entitled “Retirement,” is the third stage of decline in Bullard’s model.<sup>135</sup> During this stage, Programs and Management will be dominant, with Vision and Relationships present only in a diminished form. As with all the stages of decline, Management is the driving and controlling force within the congregation at this stage. The congregation no longer has, or lives out of, a sense of Vision—an energizing sense of future direction. The Relationship principle has now become diminished. At this stage, congregants are much more hesitant to reach out to others as: “Long-term members begin to feel that their congregation is no longer a good place to invite new people to come for worship, spiritual growth, and fellowship.”<sup>136</sup> While the Retirement stage is marked by a sense of quiet and private despair amongst the members, it is also a time when new programmatic efforts are initiated. Recognizing that something needs to be done, and motivated by a desire to see the church returned to its former glory in terms of numbers and participation, the stakeholders of the congregation will give permission for “the newer, younger members and attenders to try new programmatic directions.”<sup>137</sup> At times this impetus will lead to the hiring of a younger pastor who will be given the mandate to bring change and transformation. While appearing to want change, in reality the stakeholders do not want to have to accept “too many personal transitions.”<sup>138</sup> Oftentimes there comes a point when it becomes obvious to the stakeholders that the

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<sup>135</sup> Saarinen does not include this stage in his account of the congregational life cycle. The following description is summarized from Bullard, “Congregational Passages,” 82–84.

<sup>136</sup> Bullard, “Congregational Passages,” 82.

<sup>137</sup> Bullard, “Congregational Passages,” 83.

<sup>138</sup> Bullard, “Congregational Passages,” 84.

changes are not unfolding in the ways they had hoped. If this happens, the stakeholders will “seek to stop the change efforts, and—if necessary—get rid of or discourage the leaders of the changes.”<sup>139</sup> Sometimes the congregation will split as a result.

Congregations can “repeat this stage several times before redeveloping, or moving onto the next stage, Old Age.”<sup>140</sup>

### The Second Stage of Significant Decline: Old Age

The second stage of significant decline as outlined in Bullard’s conception of the congregational life cycle is the stage entitled “Old Age.” At this stage, the only organizing principle still dominant is Management. Congregations slip into the stage of “Old Age” when the efforts to renew the programs of the congregation fail, and the congregation essentially gives up. At this point any sense of shared ministry is lost and “little attention is given to the work of the congregation.”<sup>141</sup> The Relationship factor continues, but relationships within the congregation tend to extend only to long-term members and attendees. Any effort to reach out to new people has stagnated. Management continues, but it tends to focus on the conservation and careful use of resources. Congregations at this stage will tend to be afraid to take risks out of fear of using up the few resources that are left. The habit of meeting for worship and fellowship is “the primary factor keeping the congregation going.”<sup>142</sup> The congregation essentially becomes “a preaching station, or a chaplaincy ministry.”<sup>143</sup> Worship and church life will now tend to focus upon the precious memories of what once was. If a serious conflict or split preceded the congregation’s move into “Old Age,” then the congregation will often

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<sup>139</sup> Bullard, “Congregational Passages,” 84.

<sup>140</sup> Bullard, “Congregational Passages,” 84.

<sup>141</sup> Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*, 15.

<sup>142</sup> Bullard, “Congregational Passages,” 86.

<sup>143</sup> Bullard, “Congregational Passages,” 86.

be marked by a lingering bitterness. The only chance for positive ministry at this stage will come from the congregation's management of its resources. If the congregation's "facilities are in relatively good shape, for example, then they may become an incubation center for new congregations [particularly non-English language/culture], a community center for neighborhood organizations, or a source of income for a merger or relocation."<sup>144</sup> Movement from "Old Age" to "Death" is not inevitable. Churches with sufficient resources can remain in this stage for many years. When a church's resources become too depleted, however, it may indeed experience death.

### **Limitations of the Congregational Life Cycle Model**

It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations inherent in the congregational life cycle as espoused by both Saarinen and Bullard. First, this model conceives of decline solely in organizational terms. Decline is understood only in terms of factors inherent within the congregation itself. This model does not take into consideration the fact that congregational decline is a complex phenomenon usually arising from a combination of factors not only internal, but also external to the congregation. Some of these external factors are: changes in the demographics of the community in which a congregation is located,<sup>145</sup> a lack of congruence between the congregation and the surrounding community;<sup>146</sup> changes in the religious ecology of a particular community;<sup>147</sup> and decline in the population and resources of the community surrounding a congregation.<sup>148</sup> Secondly, the congregational life cycle model operates

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<sup>144</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 87.

<sup>145</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*.

<sup>146</sup> Kemper and Adkins, "Who Are My Neighbors?"

<sup>147</sup> Eiesland, *A Particular Place*.

<sup>148</sup> Hadaway, "Church Growth (and Decline)"; Milofsky, "Organization from Community."

on the assumption that growth is good and decline is not good.<sup>149</sup> It assumes that the only appropriate response to decline is to seek renewal as early in the process as possible. For businesses that operate on the fundamental premise that ongoing growth is always to be sought, Ichak Adizes' assumption suits. Such is not the case with congregations. The assumption that growth is good and decline is not good is applicable to congregations, but only to a certain degree. It does not take into consideration those nuances found in scriptural, theological, and spiritual resources that speak of God's work to bring abundant and redemptive good out of situations that we would be inclined to deem as "not good." With respect to situations of decline, it does not consider the possibility that the experience of decline could serve a redemptive purpose beyond that of moving congregations to take the action needed to redevelop the congregation and initiate another growth cycle. It is the purpose of this work to explore in some detail the redemptive purposes that can be found within situations of decline.

Despite these limitations, this model does serve a useful descriptive purpose. Its descriptions of the characteristics exhibited by congregations experiencing decline are apt, whatever the reasons for the decline. And for this reason, these descriptions will be useful for identifying, from a variety of case studies, those congregations experiencing significant decline.

### **Section 5: Case Studies of Congregational Experiences of Decline**

Due to our intention to reflect upon congregational experiences of decline, it is not sufficient to stop with a theoretical description of decline. It is important to include

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<sup>149</sup> While Adizes, "Organizational Passages," acknowledges that for a business to succeed, interventions may be needed at all stages of the organizational life cycle, during the growth phases as well as during the decline phases (15–23), he also assumes that growth is preferable to decline in that his intervention plan is designed to help organizations return to and stay at the Prime stage of the lifecycle (21). The Prime stage in Adizes' model represents the apex and most effective phase of the growth cycle (7).



descriptions of congregations' actual experiences with significant decline. The description of the stages of decline offered above will guide our choice of suitable case studies, and shed light upon the experiences recounted in the case studies.

## **Two “Retirement” Congregations**

### **1. Gray Friends Meeting, Carmel Indiana<sup>150</sup>**

Gray Friends Meeting originated in the 1830s, and was very active through to the 1940s. During the 1950s however, the membership began to decrease. The 1970s brought a dramatic population increase to the town of Carmel, and some limited growth to the congregation due at least in part to the leadership of a pastor with an evangelistic style. The Sunday school and youth programs experienced resurgence. Longtime members in the congregation grew uncomfortable with the Pastor's evangelistic style however, and eventually forced the minister and his followers to go. Since that time, and up until the mid-1990s, the congregational membership has been declining. As of the early 1990s, the congregation has about 50 active members, with over half of these members over 50 years in age.

The members of this congregation find their identity in the church's rural setting, their family history, and in their identity as Quakers. Gray Friends Meeting tends to think of itself as a rural congregation. The church building still stands on the original property, and many of the congregation's families have a history of working the land, and in some cases still do. The town of Carmel has expanded, however, and the congregation might soon find itself surrounded by housing developments. Family

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<sup>150</sup> The following description summarized from Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 81–86. Although most of the following accounts describe the various congregations as they were in years past, the descriptions here will be written largely in the present tense. We will work with each of the congregations as if they are experiencing decline today.

history is important to the congregation as well. Many of the current members can trace their history back to the founding families. The congregation's Quaker identity is also very important. When visitors come to the church, members will be friendly, but never "pushy." Their identity as Quakers leads them to shy away from aggressive evangelism. Newcomers would have to attend for several months before a member might approach them about joining the church. If someone were interested in joining the church, they would need to take lessons on what it means to be a Quaker, and they would need to be willing to commit to being a part of the committees that work to keep the church running. As of the early 1990s only one or two new families a year choose to join the church.

The congregation is not yet resource-poor. The members are fairly well off, quite well educated, and are still willing to take on the tasks necessary to keep the church running. The church has no debt and the building does not require any major repairs. They have a competent female pastor, whose husband is a former pastor who also provides leadership within the congregation. There are a few young families in the church, and they recently started a Sunday School class for younger adults. The church does have some resource liabilities, however. The building would not be suitable for providing a variety of modern programming, and the congregation tends to operate on an informal network of communication that can easily leave newcomers uninformed about community activities. The congregation knows that they need to recruit new members but, as said, they are not given to aggressive evangelism. The story they tell about decline seems to be: "Decline: A concern, but not as important as maintaining our identity." This and the subsequent stories about decline reveal something of the posture inhabited by the churches with respect to decline; with posture defined by Gustafson, as

has already been noted, as having to do with a fundamental state of being, frame of mind, and overall orientation. Gray Friend's Meeting story about decline suggests that they are inhabiting a posture of ambivalence towards decline.

Gray Friends Meeting is clearly on the decline side of the life cycle. They are no longer operating out of a sense of energizing and hopeful vision, and are instead seeking to maintain what they do have. They are seeking to maintain the culture and structures of their congregation, as they have grown accustomed to them. While it is difficult to ascertain from the available data whether the congregation exhibits all of the characteristics of a Retirement congregation, this stage offers the best description of this congregation. The process of drawing and assimilating new members into the congregation is significantly diminished, and almost non-existent. This is due not so much to a sense that they no longer have much to offer. It is due more to their reticence to actively evangelize, and probably also due to their implicit but strong desire to maintain the status quo with respect to the culture and structure of their congregation. This is a congregation that asks newcomers to accommodate to their ways. It is not a congregation that is highly motivated to accommodate their ways to meet the needs of newcomers. While their financial stability and still active membership is preventing them from sliding into Old Age, their acknowledgement that they need to recruit newcomers belies that they are aware that their congregation is struggling with decline. The new Sunday School class for young adults, although a modest effort, would seem to be their attempt to establish a new program. From the available information, it is impossible to ascertain whether the membership is feeling a sense of quiet and private despair common to churches in this stage. They are a congregation that is clearly

grateful to be able to practice their faith in a way that is comfortable and meaningful to them. Whether a sense of grief and pain underlies this gratefulness is difficult to tell.

The issue of finances is critical in situations of decline. Financial resources often determine the extent of and pace at which churches slide deeper into decline. Good finances often enable declining congregations to live on in a weakened state for some time. Shawna Anderson et al. calculated the mortality rate of congregations in the United States between 1998 and 2005. Surprisingly they found an average annual mortality rate of only 1%; a mortality rate lower than that of all the other types of organizations that have been similarly studied.<sup>151</sup> They conclude that this low mortality rate does not mean that congregations are surprisingly strong compared to other types of organizations. Instead they conclude, based on ethnographic research such as Ammerman's *Congregation and Community*, that this low mortality rate means that, as compared to other types of organizations, congregations tend to live on in a weakened state rather than die.<sup>152</sup> They draw upon research into minimalist organizations to explain the phenomena. Minimalist organizations, of which congregations are an example, are those organizations that cost little to start and maintain, and are also those that often have access to reserve infrastructure, and can be adaptive when in need. When faced with decline, many congregations have access to reserve infrastructure in the form of endowments, additional financial givings from congregants, denominational support, and so on. Congregations also demonstrate relative adaptability in that they will tend to reduce activities, expenses, and goals in order to reduce their maintenance

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<sup>151</sup> Anderson et al., "Dearly Departed," 325.

<sup>152</sup> Anderson et al., "Dearly Departed," 326.

costs. Given these tendencies, congregations can live on in a weakened state for many years.<sup>153</sup>

Based on this research, it can be concluded that Gray Friends Meeting is a church that is living on in a persistently weakened state. The fact that it is financially independent, with a building that is in good repair means that it could live on in this state for many years. Its relatively good financial situation means that Gray Friends Meeting will have the luxury to persist in their particular approach to being a Quaker congregation should they choose to.

## 2. Carmel Wesleyan Church, Carmel Indiana<sup>154</sup>

Carmel Wesleyan Church dates back to 1897. From its inception through to the 1950s the congregation experienced slow membership growth, made gradual improvements to the building and parsonage, and participated in yearly revivals. The church has always been relatively small, reaching an all-time membership high of 64 in 1944, and an all-time Sunday school registration high of 100 in 1952. The congregation began to decline in the mid 1950s, and by the early 1990s the membership had dropped to below 50. It is thought that a large turnover of ministers has contributed to the lack of membership growth. The maximum tenure of any minister has been 4 years, with most lasting only 2 years. With each new minister came a new plan for growth, although most of the plans simply called for a variation on the traditional formula of personal witnessing, reaching out to friends and family, and revivals. In 1981 the congregation built a new sanctuary partly out of need to replace a failing structure, and partly in the hopes of attracting new members. The plan did not work. In 1985, due to a heavy debt

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<sup>153</sup> Anderson et al., "Dearly Departed," 326.

<sup>154</sup> The following description is summarized from Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 86–93.

load, the congregation had to hand over control of their church to the denomination in exchange for financial assistance. In 1992 a new minister of African American descent came to the church, bringing with him congregants from a dying Indianapolis congregation. Initially the merger seemed to go well, but within a year most of the African American congregants from the Indianapolis congregation had left. The merger did, however, lead to a stabilization of the congregation's finances, meaning that the congregation could once again regain independent status.

With respect to resources the congregation is once again financially independent, but its finances still remain a concern. The congregation is diverse, made up of those who are "black and white, young and old, couples and families, farmers and professionals."<sup>155</sup> The newer building has provided them with room to grow, but the ongoing debt has meant that they have scarce finances for anything else.

As a culture, the congregation is warm, welcoming, and open to newcomers. One couple new to Carmel, expecting a child and struggling with few resources of their own, were immediately invited out to dinner by church members and were given a baby and food shower. Prayer is also important to this congregation. Much of the Sunday morning service is devoted to prayer, and congregants are very open with each other. They will readily make their needs known, and will also confess their difficulties with each other and publically ask for forgiveness. The longstanding members of this congregation are very committed to the church and to each other. The researcher notes: "a few key families and their offspring have dominated the church membership and its decision making. These key families exercised added influence through generous

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<sup>155</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 88.

bequests and offerings.”<sup>156</sup> This church has actively sought growth. Although the growth of Carmel is now beginning to slow, the community experienced a dramatic population growth since the 1970s. The congregation tried to reach those new residents through traditional evangelistic efforts—the church’s programming has remained essentially unchanged for 30 years—but largely failed. According to the researcher: “Today, the members are discouraged at the failure of their efforts, mystified by the transience of their new Carmel neighbors.”<sup>157</sup> The congregation tends to remember fondly those days when the Sunday School was full of children, and when their traditional programming seemed to meet the needs of those in their community. The story this congregation seems to tell about decline is: “We don’t know what to do anymore, but we’ll keep on trying.” This story suggests that at least part of the posture inhabited by Carmel Wesleyan Church is one characterized by powerlessness. With each successive failure to effect renewal they are coming to feel more and more powerless to effect change. They will keep on trying because they do not know what else to do, but their efforts are not infused with a sense of confidence that they will in fact be able to effect renewal.

Carmel Wesleyan exhibits many of the characteristics common to Retirement churches. Although they have made various efforts to seek growth, these efforts do not demonstrate the presence of an energizing vision. Their efforts to grow have simply involved a marginal reworking of their traditional evangelistic programs. Unlike the theory suggests, however, the congregants do seem eager to welcome and invite newcomers into their midst, even though they have continually been frustrated in their

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<sup>156</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 87.

<sup>157</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 91.

attempts to do so. Despite this variance from the theory, it is clear that Carmel Wesleyan is a church in Retirement. They have repeatedly tried to implement slightly adjusted programming in an effort to attract new members. They have also begun to feel the pain and discouragement arising from their inability to foster new growth. Despite this discouragement, and although the congregation has struggled financially, the congregation has not yet slipped into Old Age. Many of the members are highly committed and active within the congregation, and still wish to see it grow.

Donald Capps and Nathan Carlin's description of "limbo," as a state of being, helps to illuminate Carmel Wesleyan's situation. Capps and Carlin refer to *Webster's New World College Dictionary* for a definition of the term. In particular they draw upon two of the four possible meanings of the word in their work: "Any intermediate, indeterminate state"; and "a place or condition of confinement, neglect, or oblivion."<sup>158</sup> As an intermediate and indeterminate state, the term limbo refers to being in a state of "in between." Being in limbo is different from being in transition. When in transition, one is in the process of moving from one state/place to another state/place. When in limbo, one is caught in that space in between one state and another.<sup>159</sup> It is a place of indeterminacy because one no longer fits in the state they once occupied, and it has not yet been determined what the new state is that they are moving towards. For some, this state of indeterminacy is compounded by a sense of being confined, neglected, or of being in a place of oblivion; a place of forgetting and being forgotten. Whether this

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<sup>158</sup> As cited in Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 3.

<sup>159</sup> Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 8.



sense develops will depend on factors such as the type of limbo situation experienced, the duration of it, and the characteristics of the person or persons experiencing it.<sup>160</sup>

Feelings of distress often accompany the state of being in limbo. Anxiousness, uncertainty and a sense of feeling “stuck” often accompany the state.<sup>161</sup> The situation often feels untenable; there is no real way of moving back, and the way forward is not clear either. Capps and Carlin capture the poignancy of being in limbo when they liken it to being in a dark tunnel with no light at the end of it.<sup>162</sup> The experience of being in limbo is an experience of being in the dark, with no light yet breaking through. It is often a wilderness or desert experience, and consequently has to do with: a stripping away of all that we have come to place confidence in; waiting and silence; and a sense of helplessness and surrender. It is an experience of dying to an old way of being.<sup>163</sup>

Carmel Wesleyan is stuck in an intermediate and indeterminate place. Their efforts to “go back,” and reach out to their community in traditional ways has failed again and again. Their way forward is also most unclear. They simply do not know how best to proceed. In the process they are a congregation that could be feeling forgotten: certainly forgotten by its community as the growing population has failed to fill Carmel Wesleyan’s pews, and possibly even by its denomination as greater resources are funneled to more promising congregations.<sup>164</sup> They are a congregation in a dark tunnel, with no light yet apparent at the end of it. They are a congregation that is in the midst of dying to an old way of being, without having a sense yet of what it is they might be able to become.

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<sup>160</sup> Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 3–6.

<sup>161</sup> Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 68, 74.

<sup>162</sup> Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 95.

<sup>163</sup> Jones, *Soul Making*, 5–6, 65–66, 175.

<sup>164</sup> Ammerman, “Culture and Identity,” 89.

Having said this, though, it must also be emphasized that the state of limbo need not be a purely distressing experience. It can also be beneficial one. Capps and Carlin strive to emphasize this point throughout their book. The very disorienting nature of being in a state of limbo offers us the possibility of coming to look at our world and ourselves in different ways. Capps and Carlin are convinced that benefits can be found in the midst of a state of limbo, but only when we are willing to search for them.<sup>165</sup> One of the main reasons an experience of being in limbo can become beneficial is because these situations offer us the opportunity to “think in new and different ways about ourselves and what is becoming of us.”<sup>166</sup> They tell the story of a man who rekindled an interest in poetry and discovered a new interest in art when frustrated with the struggle of recovering from eye surgery.<sup>167</sup> The very pain of their inability to reach new members has the potential to lead them on a search for something beyond their traditional ways. They will, however, have to look for them.

## **Two “Old Age” Congregations**

### 1. Brighton Avenue Baptist Church, Allston-Brighton Massachusetts<sup>168</sup>

Brighton Avenue Baptist Church was founded in 1853. It reached a membership high of 500 post-World War II. The decline began in the 1950s when newly married couples moved to the suburbs and left the church. The community of Allston-Brighton is now a part of the city of Boston. In the 1960s and 1970s the community experienced “white flight,” and many of the homes were turned into rental properties and occupied

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<sup>165</sup> Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 90.

<sup>166</sup> Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 90.

<sup>167</sup> Capps and Carlin, *Living in Limbo*, 71–74.

<sup>168</sup> The following description is summarized from Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 74–80.

Although Ammerman’s account represents the church as it existed in the early 1990s, this description will be largely written in the present tense, as we will be working with this congregation as if it were experiencing decline today.

by a transient population.<sup>169</sup> New residents to the area are largely immigrants of various backgrounds, with the largest group being Spanish-speaking.<sup>170</sup> Despite this transition, Brighton Ave. Baptist has remained essentially white and middle-class. In the early 1960s the church called a young pastor who was committed to the civil rights movement. The church quickly grew uncomfortable with his views on racial issues and asked him to leave. A short time later the church then called a pastor they thought would help the church grow in numbers. They gave him a mandate to fill the church and Sunday School again. In the end the congregation did not support his initiatives (which included participation in the local Billy Graham crusade), and he chose to leave.

By the early 1990s the church found itself to be significantly resource-poor. The average attendance on a Sunday morning is between 12 and 15, and the members are almost entirely elderly. Most of the attendees are women. As an asset the church remains debt-free, but their financial resources are very limited. They struggle to maintain and repair the building, and the pastor's salary is lower than it ought to be. The church, a member of the American Baptist denomination, would not likely qualify for financial help, as they would have to submit a 10-year development plan in order to receive help. Their programming has been reduced to the Sunday morning service, the subsequent fellowship time and an occasional picnic. Up until 1994 the congregation's most important asset was its pastor who first came to the church in 1984. She was energetic, diligent, and skilled at helping the congregation face the seriousness of its situation, finding resources, and making connections with the community that helped to keep the church going. Under her leadership the church received grant money to fund

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<sup>169</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 14–15.

<sup>170</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 15.

an English-as-a-Second-Language program for Brazilian immigrants, and rented space to “a Brazilian congregation, a Haitian minister, and an alternative high school program.”<sup>171</sup> The rental fees garnered have been crucial in keeping the congregation solvent. Unfortunately their pastor resigned in 1994. The congregation is now under the leadership of an interim pastor, and its ability to call another full-time pastor is in serious doubt.

As a culture, the congregation is welcoming to visitors, but also struggles to find ways to meaningfully connect with them. Although visitors are rare, they are warmly welcomed, and yet the researcher notes:

It is difficult. . .for the long-term members to get much beyond initial words of greeting. The gulf between them and newcomers is substantial, a gulf defined sometimes by age or ethnicity, often by family form, and always increased by the very lifetime of experience the current members already share with each other. There are no routines for bringing visitors into the fellowship or for teaching new members the beliefs and practices of the church. There simply have been no new members to teach.<sup>172</sup>

The central practice of the congregation is the fellowship time following the Sunday morning service. The coffee hour will often last over an hour. It serves as an important, and sometimes the only, avenue for socialization for the congregants. Although any visitors present are invited to the coffee time, the members will tend to talk with themselves rather than with the newcomers. As the researcher observes: “This small congregation provides for them an important source of friendship, memory, and inspiration.”<sup>173</sup> The members seem resigned to their congregation’s continuing decline. They cannot imagine the possibility that this process might be reversed. They do not believe that members of the surrounding community would want to come to the church,

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<sup>171</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 76.

<sup>172</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 79.

<sup>173</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 76.

and they do not believe that it is possible for them to bridge the cultural differences between themselves and the surrounding community. They are glad to be able to rent their building to various groups, and see this as their community mission. It is, however, a mission that allows them to reach out without having to change their worship or fellowship. They dream of being able to convert part of the building for use as a housing/daycare facility for the elderly, but they currently do not have the resources to accomplish such a goal. The story they tell about decline seems to be: "Decline and eventual closure: an inevitability." The posture Brighton Avenue Baptist Church is inhabiting with respect to decline is characterized by resignation. The term "resignation" is used to connote that their appraisal of their situation, in many respects realistic, is infused with a sense of hopelessness. The ongoing decline and impending closure has loomed large on their horizon. They can see nothing else, and so have nothing else to hang on to that might inspire hope even in the midst of decline.

Brighton Avenue Baptist Church exhibits all the characteristics common to Old Age churches. Management is the only organizing principle that is still dominant. An ongoing concern for the church has been finding the resources to continue. Programs and Relationships have been diminished. As is common to Old Age churches, the only regular event is the Sunday morning service followed by the fellowship time. And while the congregants deeply value the relationships they share with each other, they have lost any hope that they would be able to meaningfully connect with newcomers. The former pastor did introduce some new initiatives, but these did not serve to bring any change or new life to the congregation. Instead, they primarily served to help the congregation survive financially. As often happens, though, this congregation has been able to use their facility to provide a home for a Brazilian congregation and a Haitian ministry. This

is a congregation that has essentially given up. They would love to be able to implement their dream of creating a housing and daycare facility for the elderly, but they do not have the resources necessary to bring this dream into existence.

Brighton Avenue Baptist Church illustrates what Robert Kemper and Julie Adkins describe as a lack of congruence between congregation and community. Congruence, as they describe it, does not mean homogeneity, but has much more to do with vocation. Paraphrasing Frederick Buechner and his definition of vocation, they would say that congruence has to do with a congregation's "deep gladness meeting the community's deep hunger."<sup>174</sup> Brighton Avenue Baptist Church is a church that has lost congruence with its community. Its deep gladness no longer meets the community's deep hunger. Based on the details of this study it can actually be said that for many years now, Brighton Avenue's deep gladness has had nothing to do with the surrounding community, and in fact has been to preserve their experience of church. The congregation's "gladness," indeed their love, has been to consistently make decisions to preserve what was known and comfortable for them. Their gladness/love now is to find in church what social and spiritual comfort they can for as long as possible.

These comments are not meant to carry judgment, only to offer clarity. Brighton Avenue Baptist Church is an example of a church that has largely lost the gift of loving something other than itself. A key issue in their decline would seem to be this lost gift for love. Such a realization raises the question of how the gift of loving something "other" might be rekindled in declining churches that are lacking it.

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<sup>174</sup> Kemper and Adkins, "Who Are My Neighbors?," 335. Writing about vocation, Buechner actually says that: "The Place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (*Wishful Thinking*, 95)."

## 2. City Centre Church<sup>175</sup>

City Centre church is located in an urban setting in a city in either Canada or the United States. The researcher chose to keep the identity and location of the church confidential. The year the research was conducted, 2010, was the year of the church's 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. This once thriving congregation had a membership high of 488 in 1961 that declined to 79 by 2006. The researcher observed the weekly attendance as ranging between 39–52. Most attendees are in their 80s or 90s. On the Sunday the researcher conducted his survey, the mean age of the 34 people who responded was 68.1 years. No youth or young adults attend, but sometimes 1 or 2 children, the grandchildren of members, are present. Most of the congregants have moved out of the urban area surrounding the church and now commute from other areas in the city. The urban centre in which the church is located has also seen a significant decline. The population of the surrounding area decreased 54.6% from 1961–2006, from 10,534 to 4,780. The street upon which the church is located is well kept, but surrounding streets are more run down with some dilapidated buildings and vacant lots.

With respect to culture, the church is described as not being a Mainline church, but no further details about its denominational affiliations are given. The worship service is liturgical and traditional in style. The first Sunday the researcher was in attendance, the Psalm was read from the King James Version of the Bible, and the rest of the readings were from the back of the 40-year-old hymnal. The only technology in evidence was the pastor's microphone. A choir of three members led the congregation in the singing of the hymns. With respect to governance, this congregation operates with a governing structure that is suited to a much larger congregation. The annual

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<sup>175</sup> The following is summarized from McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 143–163.

report lists 33 positions, many of which remain vacant because of the lack of members to fill them. The researcher also noted a culture of secrecy within the leadership of the church. The congregation at large has not been apprised of the church's exact financial situation, and discussions about the future of the church have been limited to the leadership boards.

The church is resource-poor. Despite relatively good attendance and membership numbers, the church does not have enough money to meet its ongoing needs. Its historic building is expensive to heat and maintain, and the building is in some disrepair. The church has now reached a crisis because the endowment funds, which have so far kept the church afloat, are now almost completely depleted. Very few programs remain. A lone Sunday school teacher runs a weekly class for the 1 or 2 children that attend. There are no youth programs, and very few adult programs as well. The researcher notes that there are very few opportunities for adults to gather in order to learn and grow together. Two surprises were found, however. The researcher attended a Shrove Tuesday pancake supper. Twice the number of people who attended the Sunday morning worship attended it, and a fair number of the attendees were middle-aged men who had not been found to attend Sunday worship. The other surprise was the weekly student-lunch program still run by the church. Over 100 students, attending two local high schools, regularly attend the free lunch held in the church basement.

Members are aware that the church is at a crossroads, and might need to close within the year. By the time the researcher left, the church had already voted to lay off the pastor and organist early in 2011. The church acknowledges the seriousness of the situation without also considering plans for renewal. Despite the fact that the pastor had a dream for the future of the church, the formation of an ecumenical worship and service



hub, he never spoke of this during Sunday morning worship. Focus group members readily acknowledged that the church would need to change if it was to survive, but they also felt that any significant change would upset many of the current members. When asked a couple of times about future plans for the church, focus group members ended up talking about the past. When challenged about this, they acknowledged that the church had lost hope in a future, and so had no new vision for the church. A sense of resignation permeated the congregation. When a member of the focus group asked about whether it would be possible for the church to stay together in another setting: “A member of the trustee board quickly ended the discussion by saying that ‘the trustees are considering all possibilities’ and then added emphatically, ‘the thing is, we are too small to be able to continue to function as a congregation.’”<sup>176</sup> This level of resignation surprised the researcher, given the fact that many churches with much smaller numbers than this one continue to function. The story they tell about decline is: “Decline is inevitable, there is no hope.” As with Brighton Avenue Church, City Centre Church is inhabiting a posture of resignation with respect to decline and eventual closure.

City Centre Church is deeply ensconced in old age, and quite possibly on the verge of moving towards actual death. Despite the surprising fact that it still runs an active weekly lunch program for local high school students, its resources programmatically and financially are almost completely depleted. It is also a church that has essentially given up, this despite the fact that its numbers suggest the possibility that it might be able to remain viable if relieved of the costs of maintaining its current building. That said, it must also be acknowledged that the overwhelmingly advanced age of the members would be a significant limitation to future viability. Members were

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<sup>176</sup> McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 162.

much more focused on the church's past than on its future. They acknowledged the need for change, but were not able to conceive of the church being anything other than what it was. The leadership's fear of risk and desire to preserve all remaining resources seems evident in its decision to keep discussions about finances and the future of the church from the wider church body.

McMullin observed that churches in decline can tend to see only obstacles where other congregations can see opportunities. He first observed this while speaking with a minister of another dying urban church. The minister spoke of the difficulties presented by the surrounding community: It was a bad area, no young families lived nearby, and many people had moved out. The church finally closed for financial reasons. Within a few weeks, however, the building was taken over by another congregation that is now thriving in that same location.<sup>177</sup> It would seem that City Centre church has a similar perspective of their situation, at least at the level of leadership. The church leadership seems only to be able to see obstacles and not possibilities. It is almost as if the church (at least at the level of leadership) is more afraid of change than it is of closure. Their situation raises questions of perspective. Had the leadership explored all possibilities, or was their perspective of the situation more limited than it needed to be? Would possibilities other than closure still be available to the congregation, if the leadership had been willing to consider them?

### **Two Congregations Caught Between Retirement and Old Age**

While the congregational life cycle model identifies clear demarcations between the stages, congregations do not always fit neatly into one stage or another. The account of the following congregation will demonstrate this.

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<sup>177</sup> McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 7.

### 1. Faith Episcopal Church, Hartford Connecticut<sup>178</sup>

This congregation began as a Sunday school mission in the 1850s and became a fully functioning church in 1912. The church struggled financially for many years, to the point that from the late 1930s through to the 1960s the thought of selling the land and merging with another congregation was always a consideration. In 1962 the church received a substantial endowment, with more to follow. As a result, the congregation's financial struggles were over. The endowments have continued to grow, and currently the rector can be paid and the building maintained from the endowment alone. In the early 1960s the church had a membership of 200 and a Sunday school of 50-75 children. The congregation engaged in many activities and gave generously to Episcopal charities. The church is located in an area of Hartford that has changed dramatically over the years. The population of the area has declined, and at the time of writing it was largely peopled with Hispanics and Portuguese immigrants. The congregation experienced a period of heated debate at one point. Half of the congregation wanted to call a rector focused on social action, and the other half wanted a rector focused on spiritual nurture. The debate lasted for over a year, and resulted in the appointment of the current rector who is interested in both aspects of the faith. The church seems to have recovered from this, but a number of members who supported the social action emphasis left the congregation.

Faith Episcopal's resources are diminished, but not yet utterly depleted. The church still boasts 150 parishioners, most of whom are white and middle-class, although only about 100 are currently active. The church attracts few new members and few

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<sup>178</sup> The following description is summarized from Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, 192–203.

young people. Most of the congregants are over 50, with the youngest congregants in their mid to late 40s. The majority of the congregants commute from the suburbs, travelling between 15-40 minutes one-way in order to attend. That the membership is so dispersed and living at a fair distance from the church is blamed for the fact that the members have little social contact with each other except on a Sunday morning. In terms of programming, very little is left beside the Sunday morning worship service. The Vestry and Altar Guild still operate. The Vestry has 12 members, and the Altar Guild 2-3 members. In the winter months 5-10 members participate in a Wednesday morning study group. A few potluck suppers are held throughout the year, and 15-20 members take part in semi-annual retreats. The church has provided space to two social programs over the years; first to a senior citizens program until it outgrew the space, and then to an organization called the Community Renewal Team (CRT) that seeks to help the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking residents find jobs, housing, and medical care.

The culture of Faith Episcopal is dominated by its Anglo-Catholic identity. Its efforts to “preserve the richness and beauty of its Anglo-Catholic liturgy” have become a central part of its identity.<sup>179</sup> Community involvement and membership growth seem to be secondary concerns to its determination to maintain an Anglo-Catholic presence in Hartford. Its members tend to be community-minded and active in charity work. Most of the charities they support, however, are located in the suburbs and not in the area surrounding the church. While the church is involved in the community, it is involved only in a marginal way. In addition to providing space for the CRT, they also have a food pantry for those in need. The rector and members of the Vestry try to attend weekly meetings of community members, and parishioners occasionally help out with

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<sup>179</sup> Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, 193.

events put on by the CRT. In general, though, the congregants feel very disconnected from the surrounding community and its residents. The CRT's proposal, that Faith Episcopal provide people to teach English to Portuguese residents, met with no enthusiasm. Faith Episcopal has little confidence in its ability to relate to the surrounding non-Anglo community, and the surrounding community has shown little interest in relating to Faith Episcopal. In response to their sense that they should somehow be involved in the community, they have set aside some finances to fund a part-time Portuguese-speaking social worker. The congregation does not necessarily want to continue declining, but they are also not interested in having the character of their worship changed; something they believe would happen if they really did welcome the Portuguese community into their midst. Many of the elderly simply hope that the church will survive as long as they do. Those members in their 40s and 50s would like to see the church grow again, but they are not confident that this will ever happen. The story they seem to tell about decline is: "We must preserve our Anglo-Catholic identity at all costs." Like Gray Friends Meeting, it appears that Faith Episcopal Church is inhabiting a posture towards decline that is characterized by ambivalence. Decline is acknowledged, but is not considered as important an issue as preserving identity.

It is difficult to identify Faith Episcopal's exact placement in the congregational life cycle. It exhibits the characteristics of both Retirement and Old Age churches. Without a doubt, this congregation lacks both energizing vision and strong relational processes. Not only has the congregation's connection to the surrounding community been diminished severely, but so have the congregant's relationships with each other. In one sense it is like an Old Age church. It offers very little in the way of programming. While congregants will make the effort to participate in the Sunday morning worship,

they make little effort to participate in much else. In addition to this, many in the congregation would seem to have given up any hope that the church will ever grow again. Some would like to see change, but many are content with the congregation's inclination to forgo change in favour of preserving the integrity of their Anglo-Catholic liturgy. Although still boasting relatively large weekly attendance numbers, this church would seem to be moving towards becoming one that gathers for Sunday morning worship only. In some respects, it would seem that the congregation is comfortable with this scenario. The maintenance of their Anglo-Catholic identity is of the utmost concern to them.

This church also exhibits a few characteristics common to Retirement churches. A few programs still exist in addition to Sunday morning worship. The congregation's decision to provide funding for a part-time Portuguese-speaking social worker, although a meager effort, could be viewed as evidence that they have not yet given up completely on trying to connect with the surrounding community. More likely this effort is not so much motivated by a deep desire to reach out, as it is motivated by a sense that they ought to do something. In either case it is an initiative that has been made possible by the congregation's substantial financial resources. It is clear that the congregation's ample financial resources have kept it from sinking more deeply into Old Age. As long as the church is able to maintain its building and fund its staff, and as long as congregants are willing to commute from the suburbs, this congregation could continue for some time.

It is tempting to critique this congregation for its resistance to change. To this, Mark Wilhelm has offered a caution, however. Studying four declining Presbyterian congregations in Yonkers, New York, he found that congregational identity can deeply

affect a church's response to decline. Churches will sometimes persist in certain ways of being, because those ways constitute their deeply ingrained identity, often established at the congregation's founding.<sup>180</sup> Wilhelm fully acknowledges that churches can become resistant to change in unhealthy ways, but advocates for the fact that it is vital to consider the possibility that a church's "resistance to change" may be grounded in positive aspects of a church's identity.<sup>181</sup> Despite Wilhelm's caution, it may be that Faith Episcopal's determination to maintain its Anglo-Catholic worship in the face of decline is in fact unhealthy. This estimation is bolstered by the fact that this determination is directed towards satisfying the congregant's needs much more than the needs of the wider community. Nevertheless, Wilhelm's point is well taken. It is vital in matters such as these to appreciate the depth of a congregation's identity. It may be that this identity may need to change, but it should never be dismissed cavalierly.

## 2. Sanderson United Methodist Church<sup>182</sup>

Sanderson United Methodist Church was established in 1872, and had grown to a membership of 249 by 1907 (40–41). By the 1950s church attendance had declined to an average of 40 attendees (98), and as of 2011, had declined to 9; seven members, the pastor, and the hired piano player (29, 31). All the members are over the age of 65 (111). The town of Sanderson is located in the rural Midwest of the United States, a 30-minute drive off the main highway. The town's population is 286 and shrinking. Young people are leaving, and almost half of the town's population is over the age of 45. The downtown is described as a ghost town, with only one restaurant, a gas station, the post office, bank, and community centre still open and functioning (9–10). In addition to this

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<sup>180</sup> Wilhelm, "Membership Decline and Congregational Identity."

<sup>181</sup> Wilhelm, "Membership Decline and Congregational Identity," 175–176.

<sup>182</sup> The following is summarized from Quist, "We Aren't Dying Yet."

the local factory has closed, and the surrounding farmland is being taken over by corporate farming interests (98).

The researcher found that much of this congregation's identity is tied to the structure of the church. The congregation takes pride in the fact that their church building is a historical landmark, and one of the first buildings erected in the town. The church building has come to be seen as a second home for the congregants. It has become associated with love, security, peace, fellowship, belonging, and a sense of God's presence (54).

While a significant source of identity, the researcher also found that the church building has become a place of confinement for the congregation. The researcher notes that the congregation has become trapped within the walls of the church. The congregation's main mission, a clothing bank, is housed within the walls of the church, and those in need are expected to contact the congregation for help (55). Similarly, while the community is invited to all events hosted by the congregation, the congregation has failed to actively invite non-attendees to attend (116). Part of the reason the congregation has become more inwardly focused is that they have lost confidence in their ability to be an influence in the wider community (116). They believe that they are too old to relate to the younger members of the town, and the older people they know either already attend other churches, or are too infirm to attend (113). The result is that the congregation has become increasingly isolated from the wider community and its needs (113).

While the congregation is becoming increasingly resource-poor, they still have some important resources at their disposal. Much of the congregation's programs have been lost, such as the Vacation Bible School, the Christmas pageant, the Sunday School



and the youth program. They have also had to cut back on Bible studies, the Saturday night fellowship dinners, and the United Methodist Men's group (100–101). The members have had to come to realize that they cannot do as much as they would like due to age and health issues (102–103). Despite these losses, however, the church is still active beyond the Sunday morning worship service. The United Methodist Women's group still runs the church's major mission, a large clothing bank and rummage sale. Another important resource is their pastor. Despite their small numbers, the church has still been able to employ a pastor. While the church expects their pastor to serve their congregation, they have also given her freedom to engage in activities in the wider community, such as chaplaincy work (64). They are proud that their pastor is a female, and consider her part of their witness to the town, since the other two local churches in do not support women in ministry (65). Their church building and grounds have proved to be a resource in their new mission venture to their grounds and building for use during town's annual fall festival (55). Nothing was mentioned regarding the congregation's current financial situation. The lack of attention paid to this, and the fact that the congregation recently received insurance money for the loss of their parsonage, suggests that the congregation's financial situation is not an immediate concern.

Members have come to realize that the church is in danger of closing in their lifetime. Much of this realization emerged when the church parsonage burnt down due to arson in 2009 (88). The church building itself was not damaged, but was at times in danger of catching fire (73). No one died directly because of the fire, but the town's mayor/volunteer fire chief died of heart condition that was exacerbated by the fire (75). This event was significant for the church. It enabled the congregation to see that the town does care for them, and gave them an opportunity to express their gratitude to the

town. The church was able to witness to the town through their decision to publically forgive the one boy who admitted to being involved in the arson (86–87). The decision not to rebuild the parsonage, and move the clothing bank ministry to the church basement ensured that the insurance money could be invested in other ways (79). The congregation would like to see the church renewed, but they also acknowledge that this might not be a realistic possibility (104). The story they seem to tell about decline is: The church may indeed die, but we are not dead yet.

The posture Sanderson United Methodist Church is inhabiting with respect to decline is difficult to discern. It is possible that the church is inhabiting a posture characterized by acceptance. If this is the case, the term “acceptance” is meant to indicate that while the church has come to terms with the seriousness of its situation, their acceptance of this is still infused with a sense of hopefulness. As such, a posture of acceptance would stand in contrast to the postures of resignation seen earlier. It is also possible, however, that this church is inhabiting a posture of denial with respect to decline. If this is the case, the term “denial” is meant to indicate that the church has not really come to terms with the seriousness of its situation—particularly that a declining church in a seriously declining town has very little hope of being renewed. Denial, in this case, suggests that any ongoing sense of hopefulness is located in an assumption that renewal and an ongoing future might still be an actual possibility for the church. In contrast to this, acceptance suggests that the church has come to terms with the fact that the church is likely to close, but trusts God to be good and faithful nevertheless. Of the two possibilities, we will assume that Sanderson United Methodist Church has adopted a posture of denial. This is because the data reveal that much of the church’s hope is still

located in the possibility that the church might continue to remain viable and have a future.<sup>183</sup>

Sanderson United Methodist Church is a church that demonstrates characteristics of both the Retirement and Old Age stages of decline. On the one hand, this church would seem to be an Old Age church. Its numbers have been depleted to less than ten. Many of its former programs have been lost. The congregation has largely turned inward, and lost confidence in their ability to influence the wider community. Their focus is on maintaining the church building and what programs they still have.

Nevertheless, the congregation has not yet given up. This suggests that the church may not yet be entrenched in Old Age, but may in fact still exhibit characteristics of a Retirement church. The congregation has not yet become only a preaching station. It still meets regularly for bible study and dinners out together. It is still actively engaged with their main mission to the community, the clothing bank and rummage sale. In addition to this, the congregation has also decided to engage in a new mission, the provision of their facilities to the town for use during the annual fall festival. Such an act, on the one hand, continues to demonstrate the congregation's deep and perhaps isolating tie to their church building. On the other hand, this decision also represents the congregation's desire to serve and interact with their community.

The church is severely depleted, but a spark of life remains. The parsonage fire would seem to have played a pivotal role in reinvigorating the congregation. The fire provided them with an influx of new finances, and a new awareness of the seriousness of their situation. It also may have served, at least for a moment, to have brought them back into relationship with the wider community in positive ways. Whether the church

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<sup>183</sup> Quist, "We Aren't Dying Yet," 117.

will be able to capitalize on these unexpected gifts remains to be seen. So far, from the lack of mention about finances, it would appear that the church has used the influx of money to preserve what they still have rather than to risk something new. That, and given the state of decline of the town as a whole, suggests that the prognosis for the church may not be good. For the moment, however, the congregation has not yet given up, and is determined to do what it can to revive the church.

Sanderson United Methodist Church illustrates the need to appreciate the inextricable ties that exist between a local church and the surrounding community.<sup>184</sup> The decline experienced by this congregation certainly has to do with, perhaps in large part, the decline of the town of Sanderson in which it is located. The church still has hope, but it seems unlikely that the church will survive, given the decline of the wider community. This situation raises questions about churches' response to decline, and the options that are typically assumed. This church is operating on the basis that only two options are available to it: to continue working for renewal, or to face closure. It is admirable that this church is still determined to seek renewal, especially given its small numbers, but is this response to decline as helpful as it could be? Might there be another option for this church, something else for it to hope for that will be more fruitful given the very real limitations faced by this church and its surrounding community? Is there another option for thinking about decline that can move us beyond the renew/die dichotomy?

### **Insights Revealed by the Case Studies**

These case studies reveal that church decline is much more than a theoretical

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<sup>184</sup> See, for example, Hadaway, "Church Growth (and Decline)"; and Milofsky, "Organization from Community."

proposition, and certainly much more than a statistical reality. Church decline is a very real experience happening to very real churches. As such, the experiences of and responses to decline are unique from church to church and situation to situation. Our aim is to take the unique experiences of and responses to decline seriously and allow them to inform our reflection throughout this work.

One of the differences the case studies have revealed is that different churches tell different stories about their experience of decline, and therefore also inhabit different postures with respect to decline. Two of the churches assumed the decline of their churches to be inevitable, and therefore inhabited postures of resignation towards it. Two other churches, while acknowledging that decline is a problem, seemed to fear losing their identity more than the possibility that their churches might have to close someday. These churches were said to inhabit postures of ambivalence towards decline. Another church truly does not know what to do, but feels that it must keep trying to do something. We have said that this church inhabits a posture of powerlessness with respect to decline. The final church continues to hope for renewal, even though the chances of it are unlikely. We have assumed that this church is inhabiting a posture of denial with respect to decline.

In addition to this, our initial analysis of the case studies has identified a number of issues and questions that will require attention throughout the remainder of this work. The role finances play in decline came to the fore. A lack of finances tends to perpetuate the process of decline, while good finances often enable churches to maintain the status quo for some time and avoid making changes that probably need to be made. Capps and Carlin helped us to see that, at least in some instances, church decline can be understood as an experience of being in limbo. Such an analysis helps us to appreciate

church decline as an experience fraught with distress, but also helps us to appreciate it as an experience ripe with possibility. More importantly Capps and Carlin help us to see that the possibility inherent in limbo experiences cannot emerge apart from the experience of distress. A question about hope was raised. It became evident through these studies that often hope is too narrowly equated only with the possibility of renewal. A question about identity was raised. When is a church's determination to maintain a particular identity healthy, and when does it become distorted? It was also demonstrated that not all forms of "acceptance" might be helpful in situations of decline. It would appear that it is possible for some churches to accept the inevitability of decline in such a way that rules out the search for other eventualities. Finally, the studies revealed that a lack of love for something other than the church can contribute to decline. This revelation moves us beyond organizational considerations alone and alerts us to the need to consider how love for something other than the church can be fostered.

### **Section 7: Summary**

In this chapter we introduced and presented the thesis that will guide this work, and described the methodology that will be employed throughout. A key feature of the methodology will be to draw upon case studies from the field of congregational studies and to present actual descriptions of churches struggling with church decline. This work assumes that church decline is still an issue for many local congregations in Canada. Statistical indicators of church decline in Canada have been offered in support of this assumption. In the course of exploring the statistical indicators of decline, some of the issues that will become pertinent to our discussion of perspective and posture in the face of decline were introduced. Issues of possible distortions in the form of idolatry, the need for theological and spiritual reflection, and the possible paradoxical gift of decline

were all considered in this regard. In acknowledging that statistical indicators of decline are not sufficient for providing a definition of decline, a definition for decline, and particularly significant decline, was drawn from the work of congregational life cycle theory. Finally, six case studies were presented that will form the basis of our pastoral theological reflection. An initial analysis of these studies was also conducted, resulting in the identification of six key issues and questions that will inform the subsequent work. The purpose of this chapter was to begin to explore the situation of decline. Before beginning the process of theological reflection, however, it will also be important to review what will be referred to here as the “situation of renewal.” The expression, “the situation of renewal,” refers to the fact that over many decades now, a vast array of material has been produced to help bring renewal to declining churches. This vast array of material cannot help but contribute, to a greater or lesser extent, to churches’ perspectives and postures with respect to decline and renewal. For this reason it will be important to identify the key characteristics and underlying assumptions of some of the more notable approaches to renewal.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE SITUATION OF RENEWAL: IDENTIFYING ASSUMPTIONS

In the previous chapter we focused on the situation of congregational decline. We asserted that decline is still an issue for many local congregations in Canada today, and therefore a matter for ongoing research. We outlined a definition of significant decline derived from congregational life cycle theory, and we presented case studies of several churches that are experiencing significant decline. In the process we identified some key issues and questions about church decline in general, and about the case studies in particular, that will inform our subsequent discussion throughout this work.

As has been said, before we can leave the discussion of the situation of decline, it is important to consider the “situation of renewal” within which churches experience decline. The phrase, “situation of renewal,” refers to the fact that the church in North America (and therefore also Canada) is and has, for several decades now, been inundated by a plethora of materials proposing ways and means for the church to be renewed.<sup>1</sup> While it could be argued that all theological writing is offered for the purpose of renewing the church, we are concerned here with those materials contained within the category of “the practice of ministry.” We are interested in the materials that a typical minister and church would turn to for help when experiencing decline. Observation reveals that several general patterns or movements of renewal can be discerned. Five of these can be identified as: the church growth movement, the church health movement,

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<sup>1</sup> The anecdotal comments of both William J. Abraham and Michael Jenkins are illustrative of the point. Abraham observes: “The Western Church is currently awash in a sea of renewal movements. So much so that she is in danger of drowning” (*Logic of Renewal*, 1). Similarly Jenkins notes that: “The literature on the church’s decline seems to be the only thing growing in North American Protestantism. And it is a literature riding the crest of a tidal wave of anxiety that threatens everything in its path” (*The Church Faces Death*, 12).



organizational renewal, spiritual renewal, and the missional church movement.<sup>2</sup> It is important to consider these movements in the context of our discussion of decline, because there will be assumptions at work within them that have the potential to inform and influence our perspectives and postures towards decline.

This chapter will proceed through four sections. An analysis of representative texts from each of these five movements led to the identification of three important assumptions. In section one, these assumptions will be described, and the ways in which the assumptions operate within the representative renewal texts will be demonstrated. Within section two, the renewal material and the identified assumptions will be brought into discussion with our case studies. Next, within the third section, certain assertions arising from the preceding discussion will be presented. Finally, the chapter will close with a concluding summary.

Before proceeding, it will be important to give a brief account of the five renewal movements and identify the texts that have been chosen to represent the broad renewal movements. The church growth movement originally grew out of the writings of Donald McGavran. Frustrated with the lack of growth experienced by churches on the mission field where he worked, he set about to research the factors that cause churches to grow.<sup>3</sup> His ideas, which originally pertained to cross-cultural missions, came to be applied to the North American context during the 1970s, when the church growth

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<sup>2</sup> This list of movements is not exhaustive, and not meant to be so. Other patterns besides these can also be discerned. Leadership renewal represents another large movement in this regard. This category of material will not be pursued because our primary interest is the renewal of congregations. We are interested in material that promotes the renewal of congregations directly, as opposed to material that promotes church renewal indirectly through renewed approaches to leadership. Another movement could be identified as the emerging church movement. We have chosen not to pursue this material either out of a need to contain the scope of this discussion. The aim here is not to conduct a thorough analysis of renewal materials, but to simply begin the process.

<sup>3</sup> Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 33–34.

movement exploded. C. Peter Wagner became one of the key contributors to the translation of McGavran's principles to the context of North American Churches.<sup>4</sup> From its classical incarnation in the works of McGavran, Wagner, and others,<sup>5</sup> the church growth movement has become increasingly diverse and diffuse. McIntosh, for example, suggests the movement developed in three phases.<sup>6</sup> The classical phase is linked to McGavran and Wagner, and those working with them, and is described as having a two-pronged emphasis on both international and North American missiology. The second phase, which McIntosh identifies as popular church growth, developed in some cases parallel to the first phase. McIntosh suggests that the popular phase represents various streams of research that, while they have to do with growth in the church, do not necessarily flow out of the classical teachings of church growth thought.<sup>7</sup> According to McIntosh, this trend towards embracing a popular understanding of church growth has only continued. He would suggest that the third phase really began with the retirement of Wagner from the *McGavran Chair of Church Growth* at Fuller Seminary's *School of World Mission*. From that time on, the number of voices promoting growth in the church, but not necessarily the classical tenets of church growth, has exploded. Topics have become increasingly specialized with subjects, including: "church planting, cell groups, prayer, spiritual warfare, generational studies, conflict management, change

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<sup>4</sup> Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 54–57.

<sup>5</sup> Others contributed to the classical development of the church growth movement. Some of them are: Win Arn (see, for example, Arn, ed. *Pastor's Church Growth*; Arn, ed. *Pastor's Church Growth, Vol II*); Alan R. Tippett (see, for example, *Church Growth and the Word of God*); George G. Hunter III (see, for example, *Contagious Congregation*; Hunter, *Spread the Power*); and Elmer L. Towns (see, for example, *Effective Sunday School*; ; Towns, Vaughan, and Seifert, *Complete Book of Church Growth*).

<sup>6</sup> McIntosh, "Why Church Growth Can't Be Ignored," 18–21.

<sup>7</sup> McIntosh suggests that four main streams of research have contributed to what he has called popular church growth. They are: systems research, which he identifies with the work of Lyle Schaller; survey research which he identifies with the work of the Alban Institute and Schools focusing on the Sociology of Religion; polling research, which he identifies with the work of George Gallup and George Barna; and anecdotal research, which represents stories about growing churches ("Why Church Growth Can't Be Ignored," 19).

agency, long-range planning, leadership, and fundraising, and other ministries. . .”<sup>8</sup> Of the vast array of material that comprises this movement in both its classical and popular phases, we have chosen two texts written by founding members of the movement as representative: *Understanding Church Growth*, Donald McGavran; and *Your Church Can Grow*, by Peter Wagner.<sup>9</sup>

In many respects, the church health movement grew out of a reaction to the church growth movement. Critics of church growth, and the perceived over-emphasis upon numbers, wished to emphasize instead quality over quantity. The general belief is that a healthy church will grow, while an unhealthy church will not. As a result, proponents of this pattern of renewal set about to identify the characteristics of healthy churches, and identify ways and means for churches to become healthier. At least two main approaches comprise this overall movement. One approach involves applying family systems theory to the understanding of church dynamics.<sup>10</sup> The other approach emphasizes ways and means for becoming healthy.<sup>11</sup> We have chosen as representative for this movement one of the most well known and often used approaches to church health: *Natural Church Development*, by Christian Schwartz.

Another pattern of renewal is what we will refer to here as organizational renewal. These materials understand that the church is not just a spiritual organism, but is also a human institution/organization that functions in ways that are similar to other human institutions and organizations. As with all human organizations, it is assumed

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<sup>8</sup> McIntosh, "Why Church Growth Can't Be Ignored," 21.

<sup>9</sup> Rainer suggests that *Understanding Church Growth* represents McGavran's mature thought on the subject, and also notes that *Your Church Can Grow* was one of Wagner's most popular books (*Book of Church Growth*, 38, 57.)

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Friedman, *Generation to Generation*; Parsons and Leas, *Congregation as a System*; Richardson, *Healthier Church*; and Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*; Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Church*; and Whitesel, *Common Church*.

that the church too will require renewal in terms of how it functions organizationally. The congregational life cycle theory that we have already encountered falls within this category of renewal materials. As has already been said, it assumes that the church, like all organizations, will go through periods of growth and decline, and hopefully also then periods of renewal and consequently renewed growth. In addition to congregational life cycle material, we would suggest that at least three other bodies of material contribute to this overall pattern of renewal.<sup>12</sup> They are: materials pertaining to facilitating change,<sup>13</sup> materials that promote effective management,<sup>14</sup> and materials that emphasize the importance of strategic planning and the need for vision.<sup>15</sup> Out of this body of material, we have chosen, as representative, three different approaches to the strategic planning process: *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, by Roy M. Oswald, and Robert E. Friedrich; *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice*, by Gil Rendle, and Alice Mann; and *Advanced Strategic Planning*, by Aubrey Malphurs.

A wide variety of materials have been written, seeking to bring spiritual renewal to the church. Some of these materials focus upon bringing renewal to individuals, sometimes with the implicit assumption that spiritually renewed individuals will help contribute to spiritually renewed churches.<sup>16</sup> Others of these materials focus upon

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<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, these three bodies of material represent only a small portion of what could be considered organizational renewal. The point is not to offer an exhaustive list, but to begin to give an idea of some of the kinds of materials that fall into this overall pattern.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Rendle, *Leading Change*; Weems, *Next Step*; Mosser, *Transitions*.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Schaller, *What Have We Learned?*; Dudley and Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition*; Bacher and Cooper-White, *Church Administration*; Bergquist and Kerr, *Church Turned inside Out*.

<sup>15</sup> It is from this body of literature that we will draw our representative texts. In addition to our representative texts, see also: Shelley, Briscoe, and Anderson, *Vision and Planning*; Mancini, *Church Unique*; Callahan, *Twelve Keys*.

<sup>16</sup> The number of books in this category is immense. Certain key authors have become important in the field, such as: Henri Nouwen (*Reaching Out*; *Return of the Prodigal*, for example); Richard Foster (*Celebration of Discipline*; *Streams of Living Water*, for example); Dallas Willard (*Divine Conspiracy*; *Hearing God*, for example); Mark Buchanan, writing from a Canadian context (*Rest of God*; *Spiritual*

bringing renewal to individuals within a congregational context, or bringing renewal to the church as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Our focus upon congregations led us to draw our representative texts from those materials that are explicitly concerned with the spiritual renewal of the church as a whole. We have chosen two different texts, with two different approaches to the spiritual renewal of the church. They are: *Worship-Centered Church Renewal*, by Jane Rogers Vann and *Becoming The Blessed Church*, by Graham Standish.

The missional church movement argues that what is needed is not a better or renewed church, but an entirely new paradigm for being church. The word missional is meant to convey that it is not enough for the church to engage mission to the wider world as one ministry among many. Instead it is meant to convey that the church, at its very core and in all of its activities, is to be in mission to the world.<sup>18</sup> Although, it is a newer movement, a substantial amount of material has already been written about the missional church already.<sup>19</sup> We have chosen three texts that provide an introduction to the missional church movement as representative. They are: *Introducing the Missional Church*, by Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren; *Missional Church*, edited by Darrell Guder; and *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, written by Darrell Guder.

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*Rhythm*, for example); and Eugene Peterson, (*The Jesus Way*; *Christ Plays*, for example). Certainly many other authors and books on spiritual renewal could also be included here.

<sup>17</sup> Books pertaining to the development of small-group ministries could be considered here. See, for example, Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church*; and Gorman, *Community That Is Christian*. See also books such as: Ackerman, *Spiritual Awakening*; Ackerman, *Listening to God*; Vennard, *Praying Congregation*; Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*; Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation*.

<sup>18</sup> Guder, *Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 52, notes that the “missionary character defined the church from its very inception, long before the canonical record documented it. It has often been noted that the New Testament writings do not explicitly command the church to do mission—they assume that mission is what these communities were all about.”

<sup>19</sup> The following represents a sampling of some of the many books written on this topic. See, for example: Barrett, ed. *Treasure in Clay Jars*; Van Gelder, *Ministry of the Missional Church*; Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*; Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*; Frost, *Road to Missional*. The writings of Lesslie Newbigin provided a seminal influence on the development of the missional church movement. See, for example: *Foolishness to the Greeks*; *Pluralist Society*; *Open Secret*. Gary Nelson has written on the missional church from within the Canadian perspective (*Borderland Churches*).

Before continuing, it must be acknowledged that these renewal materials do not just speak to declining churches specifically, but have been written to address the renewal of the church in general. Nevertheless we consider them pertinent for two reasons. First, while decline is not always their main focus, many of the texts acknowledge the situation of decline as one of the reasons for renewal. Second, these texts represent larger bodies of material that churches and church leaders would tend to refer to when faced with decline and a desire to effect renewal.

### **Section 1: Assumptions Undergirding the Renewal Material**

An analysis of the chosen texts has revealed three assumptions critical to our study. These will now be described and discussed in reference to the texts. The aim was not to identify all of the assumptions that might undergird these materials, but to identify those most pertinent to our work here. We also acknowledge that these assumptions pertain only to the representative texts reviewed here, and therefore cannot be assumed to also pertain to the broad renewal movements as a whole. It is conceivable that other assumptions would be identified as a greater variety of materials are analyzed. Despite the fact that more might emerge, the assumptions identified here are sufficient for demonstrating the way in which renewal materials can influence our approach to decline. Finally, we would assert that each of these assumptions offers a particular perspective of renewal and/or decline; a point of view that determines what is seen and what is not seen in the situation of decline and renewal.

#### **Assumption One: A Reductionistic Approach to the Divine-Human Interaction in Renewal**

Four of the texts reviewed assume a reductionistic view of the divine-human interaction in the renewal process. They are the two church growth texts written by

McGavran and Wagner, Malphur's approach to strategic planning, and Standish's approach to spiritual renewal. The term "reductionistic" refers to the fact that each of these representative approaches offers an oversimplified view of God's involvement in renewal, and therefore also an oversimplified view of our involvement with God in renewal. Each of these approaches manifests this reductionistic approach in differing ways, and therefore they will be considered separately.

### McGavran and Wagner's Reductionistic Approach to the Divine-Human Interaction

Three key principles of McGavran and Wagner's approach to church growth are worth noting here. First, they assert that God's will is for the church to grow.<sup>20</sup> This means that faithfulness to God and involvement in God's purposes involves seeking the lost and being involved in the multiplication of churches that are founded on the Bible and that are full of the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted, however, that while Wagner has identified several kinds of numerical growth,<sup>22</sup> he also values internal growth—growth in terms of deepened faith in and more faithful service to God.<sup>23</sup> Second, McGavran and Wagner assert that it is not enough for believers and churches to witness to non-believers, it is also vital to emphasize the making of disciples.<sup>24</sup> Here McGavran distinguishes between what he terms "search theology," and "harvest theology."<sup>25</sup>

According to McGavran, "search theology" operates on the basis that the essential

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<sup>20</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 7, 23; Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 189–200.

<sup>21</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 5; Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Wagner identifies three kinds of numerical growth: 1. Expansion growth is when believers bring people to Christ and into their existing church; 2. Extension growth involves bringing people to Christ and planting new churches; and 3. Bridging growth involves planting new churches, but planting them in a culture different from the base culture of the existing church (*Your Church Can Grow*, 106). Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 13–20, adds two additional forms of numerical growth: catalytic and proliferation growth.

<sup>23</sup> Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 26, 32, 39, 41; Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 40, 161, 174.

<sup>25</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 32. See also Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 40.

activity in missions is to sow seeds and witness to Christ. In contrast to this, “harvest theology” operates on the basis that believers are called not just to witness to non-believers, but also to persuade non-believers and actively work to bring them to faith in Christ. Finally, McGavran and Wagner assert that it is vital to scientifically study the factors that both cause and hinder church growth, so that churches can employ those methods that will be most effective in bringing about growth.<sup>26</sup> While Wagner acknowledges that all growth ultimately originates in God, he also affirms that it is necessary to study the factors that contribute to and hinder growth because this essentially involves learning “more about God and the way He works.”<sup>27</sup> McGavran, while conceding that the phenomenon of growth in churches is complex and varied,<sup>28</sup> still believes it possible to identify key factors that, when applied effectively, will contribute to growth. Most notably, Wagner emphasizes that the spiritual renewal of believers will not be enough to facilitate growth in churches. While spiritual renewal is important, an understanding of the factors that contribute to and hinder growth is crucial.<sup>29</sup>

McGavran and Wagner and their approach to church growth provide a clear example of a reductionistic approach to the divine-human interaction in renewal. Without a doubt, McGavran and Wagner embrace God’s involvement in church growth by firmly asserting that all growth originates in God.<sup>30</sup> They also firmly embrace the

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<sup>26</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, chapters 6–7 in particular; Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 28–32.

<sup>27</sup> Wagner, 29.

<sup>28</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 8–22.

<sup>29</sup> Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 43. One of the most well known and oftentimes contested principles is the principle that church growth will occur best within homogenous units of people; in a context where people will not need to cross language or cultural barriers in order to come to belief (McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 223–244; Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 127–143).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 22.



need for human activity in church growth, as it is understood to be our responsibility to scientifically discover and implement those principles that will most effectively lead to growth. Despite their affirmation of both divine and human activity in church growth, their understanding of the interaction between God and believers is over-simplified. They assert, for example, that God has already communicated what it is that the church ought to do; namely to make disciples of all nations. Having been already given a clear directive from God, it is now the church's responsibility to determine the best methods for accomplishing that directive by, for example: conducting research into the causes and hindrances of growth, and drawing upon the insights of sociology and psychology.<sup>31</sup> Since God's will has already been clearly communicated, there is little need for an ongoing process of listening to God and discerning God's will in each unique context and setting. Such an approach is reductionistic in that the emphasis is shifted away from a focus upon God's ongoing communication with us, and our need to listen to that communication. The focus is placed instead upon our efforts to develop appropriate goals and methodologies to carry out God's already communicated directive.<sup>32</sup>

This reductionistic approach to the divine-human interaction is grounded in a propositional understanding of scripture. It assumes that scripture can be codified into universal principles that, because they are biblically founded and therefore truth-filled, can be used to make decisions regardless of culture or context.<sup>33</sup> Such an approach to

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<sup>31</sup> Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 41–43; McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, chapters 6–19; Hunter, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 37–60.

<sup>32</sup> Van Rheeën, "Reformist View," 175, says it well: "Unintentionally Church Growth practitioners developed a missionary model vulnerable to the spirit of their age. Assuming they could chart their way to success by their ingenuity and creativity, they focused on what humans do in missions rather than on what God is doing. Their beginning point was humanity rather than divinity. They saw the missional task as merely setting goals, developing appropriate methodologies and evaluating what does or does not work rather than as seeking God's will based on biblical and theological reflection."

<sup>33</sup> Van Gelder, "Gospel and Our Culture," 97–98.

scripture assumes that scripture holds static truths that universally define what it means to be obedient to God in all circumstances and times.<sup>34</sup> It is because of this propositional approach to scripture that McGavran and Wagner can assert that God's directive regarding the making of disciples and church growth is clear. It is therefore also the reason they emphasize human agency and the need for the church to do all that it can to fulfill this directive.

A propositional understanding of scripture runs counter to at least three current and well-accepted approaches to scripture. While it is not the purpose of this study to contend for a definitive understanding of scripture, these three approaches to scripture are offered for the purpose of arguing that a propositional understanding of scripture is not a commonly accepted position today. First, a propositional understanding of scripture runs counter to those who have come to understand God's revelation in scripture in personal terms. Regarding a personal understanding of scripture, Erickson notes: "This is the view that revelation is not the communication of information (or propositions), but God's presentation of himself."<sup>35</sup> A propositional understanding of scripture also runs counter to those who understand scripture from within the framework of pneumatology. That the Bible is the "Spirit's book"<sup>36</sup> means that the authority of scripture comes not just from the text of the Bible itself, but comes from the Holy Spirit speaking through the text of scripture.<sup>37</sup> One of the implications of this is that the text of scripture cannot be distilled into universal truths applicable to all contexts and times. The Spirit's speaking through scripture will always be particular to specific contexts,

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<sup>34</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 7, exemplifies such an approach when he states unequivocally that God requires church growth, and points to passages such as John 14:6, and Acts 4:12 "and scores of similar passages" as support for this statement.

<sup>35</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Grenz, *Community of God*, 379.

<sup>37</sup> Grenz, *Community of God*, 380.

and will therefore necessitate an interpretive process that takes one's cultural context seriously.<sup>38</sup> Finally, a propositional understanding of scripture runs counter to those who understand scripture as the unfolding story of God's creative and redemptive work, that calls us beyond mere propositions to live into the ongoing work of God in the world.<sup>39</sup>

### Malphurs' Reductionistic Approach to the Divine-Human Interaction in Strategic

#### Planning

Malphurs is deeply concerned about what he interprets to be the decline of the church in North America. He attributes this to the "mega change"<sup>40</sup> occurring in North American society, and to the fact that churches have largely failed to seek new growth after slipping into the decline side of their life cycles.<sup>41</sup> For him, strategic planning will need to play an integral role in any church's move to begin a new growth cycle.<sup>42</sup> He also acknowledges, however, that not every church would be ready to engage a strategic planning process. Malphurs advises churches to consider the degree of their commitment to such a process in terms of time and money,<sup>43</sup> and reminds them that such

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<sup>38</sup> Grenz, *Community of God*, 391, says: "The illumining work of the Spirit speaking through the Scriptures always occurs within a specific historical-cultural context. . . The acknowledgement that the Spirit's illuminating activity occurs within the changing historical-cultural context of the people of God heightens our appreciation for the theological importance of cultural context in the hermeneutical task. We seek to listen to the voice of the Spirit through Scripture, who speaks to us in the thought-forms, categories and conditions of the world in which we live."

<sup>39</sup> Van Gelder, "Gospel and Our Culture," 98, for example, views the Bible "more as a dynamic story of God's purposes in relation to creation, redemption, and a final consummation. Learning to live into this story, so that God's story continues to shape our story, is seen as an ongoing journey in which new insights into the meaning of the gospel are regularly unfolding within the Christian community, especially in light of the changing character of cultural contexts." See also, Bartholomew and Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," and Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 144–168.

<sup>40</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 7–12.

<sup>42</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 37–39, 47–49.

a process can initially lead to increased conflict and painful soul-searching.<sup>44</sup> As with most advocates of strategic planning, he understands the process in terms of a number of steps that move a congregation from an initial assessment of their current situation through to the development of a new vision and mission and plans for its implementation. For him, the strategic planning process would best be carried out by a strategic planning team consisting of up to 25-30 people depending on the size of the congregation. By keeping the team large, Malphurs hopes to better represent a congregation's various viewpoints, and minimize the impact of those team members who hold extreme or minority views.<sup>45</sup> For Malphurs, the goal of the process is to arrive at an inspiring and compelling vision that will fuel passion in a congregation.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the other two approaches to strategic planning that will be discussed below, Malphurs does not assume discernment to be the ultimate goal of the process. The goal is a stated vision, as opposed to a relational dynamic with listening at its centre.<sup>47</sup>

Malphurs description of the strategic planning process also contributes to a reductionistic view of the divine-human interaction in renewal. In this case, however, the reductionistic approach grows out of a failure to integrate the organizational and spiritual aspects of church in the description of the strategic planning process. Malphurs speaks to the importance of prayer and spiritual formation within the planning process, devoting an entire chapter to the subject.<sup>48</sup> On the surface, such an emphasis would seem to indicate the recognition of the need for a robust understanding of the divine-

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<sup>44</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 14, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 36–37.

<sup>46</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Having said this, it must be stated that the fact that Malphurs emphasizes arriving at an articulated vision as opposed to discernment, does not necessarily mean that listening to God is not important to him. It is of note that Malphurs describes the process in such a way as to emphasize arriving at an articulated vision as opposed to discernment.

<sup>48</sup> See chapter 3 of Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 79–92.

human interaction in strategic planning. Unfortunately, Malphurs almost completely fails to draw any connection between the activities and aims of spiritual formation and the actual process of moving through the stages of planning.<sup>49</sup> He urges the congregation, for example, to spend time in intense and positive prayer for the church.<sup>50</sup> With only one exception, however,<sup>51</sup> he does not describe the ways in which prayer can be incorporated into the planning process as Oswald and Friedrich do.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, while he exhorts congregants to remember that the church is the Lord's and not their own,<sup>53</sup> he does not describe ways in which the congregation can grow in the practice of listening and discernment as both Oswald and Friedrich, and Rendle and Mann do.<sup>54</sup> These are but two examples of a demonstrated pattern. While it is believed that Malphurs values prayer and probably assumes its presence throughout the planning process, his way of describing the process demonstrates a compartmentalization between a congregation's spiritual formation and the planning process. This compartmentalization contributes to an oversimplified understanding of the divine-human interaction in planning. Malphurs asserts the need for prayer and spiritual formation, and he asserts the need for engagement in a proven planning process. He fails however, to help us understand how

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<sup>49</sup> Malphurs' litany of spiritual growth points—such as, “confess your sins,” “forgive others,” “pray for the church,” “be positive,” “agree to church discipline,” “obey the leadership,” “pursue holiness,” amongst others (81–90)—seem perfunctory in nature. He offers a brief description with accompanying scripture passages as support for the importance of each growth point, but fails to describe how we might actually grow in these ways.

<sup>50</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 83.

<sup>51</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 153, does encourage “envisioning prayer” during the discrete process of developing the actual vision. He does not, however, encourage prayer through the other steps of the planning process such as identifying core values, developing a mission, or developing strategies. And while he does encourage prayer at this point, he does not clarify the purpose for praying, and also does not emphasize praying for the purpose of discernment.

<sup>52</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, encourage prayer at every step in the planning process (see, for example, 59, 79, 87, 93–94, 96–98, 111–112), and offer descriptions of centering prayer (145–146) and fasting (122–129) in the appendix.

<sup>53</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 89–90.

<sup>54</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, 6–9; Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 139–152.

prayer and spiritual formation can be incorporated into the practical work of planning. Likewise, he fails to help us appreciate how the practical work of planning can lead us to a deeper appreciation of prayer and the need for spiritual formation.

### Standish's Reductionistic Approach to the Divine-Human Interaction in Congregational Spiritual Renewal

Standish advocates for an approach to church renewal that is fundamentally spiritual in nature. He argues that in order for churches to be healthy, vital, and blessed, they need to turn from a rational functional approach to church and open themselves more deeply to an encounter with and experience of the triune God as Purpose (God the Father), Presence (God the Son), and Power (God the Holy Spirit).<sup>55</sup> Standish addresses his work primarily to mainline churches,<sup>56</sup> and is critical of an overly rational approach to faith that tends to treat God as more of an idea than as a tangible presence that can be encountered and experienced.<sup>57</sup> In his experience, an overly rational approach to faith tends to lead to an overly functional approach to church; an approach that sees churches engage in worship and other ministry activities more for the sake of maintaining the institution than for the sake of drawing near to God.<sup>58</sup> In contrast to this, Standish urges churches to become grounded in God's purpose, presence, and power. Becoming grounded in God as purpose involves seeking for and listening to God's leading. It involves learning and cultivating a culture of discernment that permeates every aspect of the church's functioning.<sup>59</sup> Drawing near to God as presence involves becoming aware

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<sup>55</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 7.

<sup>57</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 15–16.

<sup>58</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 64, 67–69.

of and attuned to the God who is alive and present with us at all times.<sup>60</sup> Standish suggests that we can help congregants draw near to God's presence in Christ by: preaching the reality of Christ's presence, by teaching for transformation and not just information, and by offering opportunities for people to experience the healing ministry of Christ.<sup>61</sup> Becoming open to God as power involves making room for God's Spirit to work in our churches. When we do this we will discover God: bringing a unity that is beyond anything we could generate ourselves, empowering us for ministry in ways that far exceed our functional giftings, and working things together for good in ways that far exceed what we could ask or imagine.<sup>62</sup>

Standish's overarching belief is that those churches that become open to God as purpose, presence, and power will become blessed churches. Becoming a blessed church does not necessarily mean growing numerically or being saved from all struggles and difficulties.<sup>63</sup> It does mean, however, becoming a church that is healthy and vibrant, that deeply trusts and therefore surrenders itself to God, that has a strong sense of hope despite any current struggles, and that embodies a deep love for one another and the world.<sup>64</sup>

In one way, Standish's approach to congregational renewal affirms the importance of a robust interaction between God and the congregation. Congregations are urged to experience and encounter the Living God, and to allow that experience to inform and give shape to their congregational worship and ministry. In another way,

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<sup>60</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 74, 76.

<sup>61</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 80–85.

<sup>62</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 102–103, 109–112.

<sup>63</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 20, 115.

<sup>64</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 23.

however, Standish develops his argument in a way that unnecessarily diminishes our appreciation of the divine-human interaction in spiritual renewal.

Standish's central point is that being and becoming open to God and God's purpose, presence, and power is the key to being a blessed church. He says:

What I have consistently noticed in almost all thriving congregations. . . is that what makes the difference is the extent to which the community is open to God at its core. Many churches simply aren't open to God. They let the will, ego, and purpose of the dominant voices in their congregation, whether the pastor's or that of a few strong members, drive the agenda. Instead of seeking God's call and purpose, they argue over who is right and wrong. Declining churches tend not to be open to God's presence. They worship, meet, and engage in ministry and mission, but their sense is that God is in heaven, we are on earth, and all that matters is doing good deeds so that we can get into heaven.<sup>65</sup>

He then claims that his book is about how to "open our hearts and minds to God in our communities in such a way that we become blessed in everything."<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, Standish actually says very little about how congregations can become open to God. In Chapter 5, the chapter that discusses being open to God as power, for example, he likens the process of becoming churches of power to taking steps like that of turning on a fan. We need to "plug in," click on," and then "bask in the breeze" of the Holy Spirit.<sup>67</sup> Prayer is central to "plugging in," and so he urges the importance of developing a discipline of prayer, and the need to try to centre oneself in God in the midst of prayer.<sup>68</sup> "Clicking on" has to do with faith. It involves developing a surrendering trust in God, praying with the belief that something will actually happen, and taking the risk to act in faith, trusting that God will act.<sup>69</sup> Finally, "basking in the breeze" means becoming a

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<sup>65</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 112.

<sup>68</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 113.

<sup>69</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 114.



congregation that learns to expect that God's power will be at work in all that it does.<sup>70</sup>

Standish's recommendations as to how to become churches of power amount to little more than further exhortations to pray, have faith, and act in trust. He emphasizes that which we must do, and says nothing about about the dynamics and movements involved in actually growing in prayer, faith, and trust. More particularly, he says nothing about how the triune God will work with us, and in us to help us grow in openness to Godself. The fact that he says very little about the spiritual movements involved growing in openness to and with God is curious, given the fact that his doctoral work was in the field of spirituality.<sup>71</sup> It is suspected that Standish understands more of the nuances of the movements of growing in openness to God than is communicated in his book. Nevertheless, as the book stands, it presents an approach to renewal that fails to delve into the movements involved in spiritual growth with God. As such we are left with various exhortations to be more open to God, and are given little help to understand how God works with and in us to foster such growth. More than this, we are left with the sense that God's ability to bless the church and bring renewal is dependent upon our ability to be open to God. Such a description, while seeking to bring encouragement, can actually serve to leave congregations wondering whether they have indeed become open enough to God to truly receive God's blessing.

We find in Standish's presentation echoes of what Torrance refers to as "the existential, present-day experience model" of our relationship with the triune God.<sup>72</sup> Speaking about this model of the God/human relationship, Torrance notes that while it emphasizes God's movement towards humanity through the mediation of Christ, it fails

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<sup>70</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 115.

<sup>71</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 26.

to emphasize the fact that Christ also mediates humanity's movement towards God.

Those operating within this model tend to emphasize humanity's role in the relationship and our need to respond to God. Torrance says:

Although it stresses the God-humanward movement in Christ, the human-Godward movement is still ours! It emphasizes *our* faith, *our* decision, *our* response in an event theology which short-circuits the vicarious humanity of Christ and belittles union with Christ. For all that it may emphasize the vicarious work of Christ on the cross to bring forgiveness and make our faith a real human possibility, it fails to see the place of the high priesthood of Jesus Christ as the *leitourgos* (Heb 8:2). It is he who leads our worship, bears our sorrow on his heart and intercedes for us, presenting us to the Father in himself as God's dear children, and uniting us with himself in his life in the Spirit.<sup>73</sup>

In Standish's work we encounter a definite emphasis upon the believer, and our need to respond to God in openness.

In contrast to this model, Torrance favours what he refers to as the "incarnational trinitarian model."<sup>74</sup> It is a model that emphasizes not only Christ's mediation in the God-humanward movement, but also emphasizes Christ's mediation in the human-Godward movement.<sup>75</sup> In this model, the focus is not upon our need and ability to respond to God. The focus is instead placed upon our union with and participation in Christ, in the Spirit, who alone has responded to God in a perfect way. Torrance says:

At the center of the New Testament stands not our religious experience, not our faith or repentance or decision, however important these are, but a unique relationship. . .between Jesus and the Father. Christ is presented to us as the Son living a life of union and communion with the Father in the Spirit, presenting himself in our humanity through the eternal Spirit to the Father on behalf of humankind. By his Spirit he draws men and women to participate both in his life of worship and communion with the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 29.

<sup>74</sup> Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 30.

<sup>75</sup> Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 30–31.

<sup>76</sup> Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 30–31.

Relating this to Standish and his terminology, this would mean that it is not so much our responsibility to become open to God, as it is our opportunity to be drawn by the Spirit into participating in Christ's already accomplished perfect openness to the Father. Such an approach has the potential to bring a categorically different flavour to Standish's argument. Embracing a participatory conception of our relationship with God immediately brings us into relationship with Christ. We are no longer called to manufacture sufficient openness to God within ourselves, but are instead drawn into union with Christ who invites us to live into his perfect openness with the Father.

Clearly such a proposition, as Torrance has offered, requires greater exploration. It could be argued that we have simply exchanged Standish's exhortation to be more open to God, with Torrance's call to allow ourselves to be drawn into participation with Christ through the Spirit. At the very least though, it can be said that Torrance's conception of the God-human relationship leads us to Christ and Christ's work in us through the Spirit, rather than leaning us back onto ourselves and our need to somehow open *ourselves* to God.

In summary, it is not our contention to dispute Standish's call for the church to be open to God as purposeful, present, and powerful in the life of the congregation. Our concern is that the way he develops his point leaves us focused on ourselves, and *our* need to somehow become more open to God, and diminishes our appreciation of work with us in this regard. Ironically, Standish fails to describe the ways in which God, as purpose, presence, and power, is at work to help us become open to Godself. Torrance offers us one suggestion as to how we might begin to conceive of God's work in and with us in this regard.

### Contrasting Approaches

Not all of the representative renewal materials chosen for review offer a reductionistic approach to the divine-human interaction. A number of the materials describe a process that is centred in an ongoing interaction with God. To begin with, Oswald and Friedrich espouse a planning process in which the ultimate goal is discernment—a listening for God’s leading—facilitated particularly through prayer.<sup>77</sup> Rendle and Mann conceive of discernment as the ultimate goal of the planning process as well.<sup>78</sup> In both of these cases there is an understanding that an interaction will occur between the congregation and God. The congregation may initiate a planning process, but ideally their goal will be to listen for God’s leading. There is an assumption that God will speak and will lead, and enable the congregation to listen and follow. More comprehensively, Vann conceives of renewal in the church as an ongoing back-and-forth interaction between the congregation and God, centred in worship. The congregation comes to worship, a human-designed event, for the purpose of worshipping and focusing upon God. Worship will lead to encounters with God,<sup>79</sup> which then prompt the practice of reflecting, thinking, analyzing, questioning, and learning more about God and living deeper into the life of faith.<sup>80</sup> Such human-initiated reflection will ideally lead to a renewed and deepened worship and experience of God.<sup>81</sup> According to Vann, this interactive process will also lead to discernment with respect to the congregation’s

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<sup>77</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, xii–xv, 12.

<sup>78</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 42, 139. For Rendle and Mann the dynamic from which discernment will emerge is not so much prayer (although they would not discourage prayer), as it is open and honest conversation (xiii–xiv).

<sup>79</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 23–24.

<sup>80</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 38.

<sup>81</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 41.

calling in mission and ministry.<sup>82</sup> Finally, the missional church movement understands that being church means engaging an ongoing process of living faithfully with God and God's gospel, in a way that is also faithful to the church's ever-changing context.<sup>83</sup> It is a process of ever discerning the leading of God in the intersection between the gospel and a church's context.<sup>84</sup> The goal is to be a pilgrim people that are ever "moving in and toward the reign of God."<sup>85</sup> While each of these four sets of material conceive of the interaction between believers and God in differing ways, they each agree that renewal is to be founded in a form of ongoing human-divine interaction. As such, they offer a contrast to those materials that adopt a reductionistic approach to the divine-human interaction in renewal.

It is not uncommon for congregants to raise concerns about attempts to ground decisions and planning, if not all of a church's activities and being, in a practice of listening for God's leading. Johnson, in his book *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*, addresses some of the objections raised against the practice of discernment in the church. He notes that some raise the concern that an emphasis upon discernment has been misused in abusive ways when those in power assume a greater insight than others.<sup>86</sup> Others object because the practice of discernment offers little in the way of objective criteria for judging what is of God and what is not.<sup>87</sup> The concern is that a church could easily be tossed and turned on waves of subjective experience that has little to do with God. A third concern, not mentioned by Johnson, but known by experience, is the concern that if we pause to listen for God, we will become enmeshed

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<sup>82</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 51.

<sup>83</sup> Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 14.

<sup>84</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 88–90.

<sup>85</sup> Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 204.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 110.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 112.

in a process of “navel-gazing” and never accomplish anything. While each of these objections have merit, Johnson exhorts that we should not let them cause us to “abandon this most precious spiritual gift.”<sup>88</sup> The gift can certainly be abused, but this does not mean that it is inherently unbeneficial.<sup>89</sup> It is also true we might mistake our voice for God’s and so follow a path that is not of God. There is no guarantee, however, that practicing another form of decision-making process will safeguard the church any better. As Johnson says, following a process of discernment is not any more risky than any other form of decision-making. What we lose by practicing discernment is not a guarantee of a godly decision, but the illusion that we can be in control of the decision-making process.<sup>90</sup> Finally, it is true that a church may become enmeshed in an unhealthy and unhelpful period of “navel-gazing.” But again, this does not mean that the process is inherently faulty. Such an eventuality is more of an indictment of the congregation than it is an indictment of the process. Presumably any church that would engage a process of discernment in an unhealthy way, would also engage other forms of decision-making process in an equally unhealthy and unhelpful way.

### **Assumption Two: Significant Change is Possible**

Many of the reviewed renewal materials assume a degree of change that would be difficult for many churches to embrace, and that may be out of the realm of possibility for the churches in our study. The work of Oswald and Friedrich, Rendle and Mann, Vann, Standish, and the missional church movement all ask significant change of churches, and assume that at least some churches would be willing to

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<sup>88</sup> Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 110.

<sup>89</sup> Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 110.

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 110.

experience significant change; the kind of change that leads to new perspectives, new attitudes, new and different ways of being church and living the life of faith.<sup>91</sup>

### Significant Change: Oswald and Friedrich, and Rendle and Mann

Oswald and Friedrich, and Rendle and Mann both offer similar but slightly different approaches to strategic planning in the congregation. As with all approaches to strategic planning, they agree that the planning process includes moving through a variety of steps that would lead a church to honestly appraise its past, its current resources, its situation and context, and its calling, all for the purpose of envisioning a preferred future and implementing steps to move the church towards that future.

Oswald and Friedrich envision an eight-step strategic planning process,<sup>92</sup> with robust congregational involvement, that is founded in prayer and the practice of discernment. While the direct result of the process will be the development of four to eight goals that will guide the congregation for the next three to four years,<sup>93</sup> the ultimate aim, according to the authors, is to discern the will of God for the congregation.<sup>94</sup> With this as their goal, the authors emphasize the importance of grounding all aspects of the planning process in prayer.<sup>95</sup> They highlight the need to

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<sup>91</sup> It is possible that employing Malphurs' approach to strategic planning, or Schwarz's approach to natural church development could also lead to change of the order we are considering here. The emphasis upon significant change is made more explicit within the works represented in this list. It is for this reason that we will focus upon these materials.

<sup>92</sup> The eight steps outlined in Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, are: 1. The choice and preparation of a strategic planning team (14); 2. Assessment of the congregations liabilities and strengths (46); 3. Reflection upon the congregation's history (64–65); 4. Identification of the unwritten rules by which the congregation functions (77); 5. Interviewing key people in the community around the church for the purpose of assessing needs (85); 6. Prioritizing the goals that have emerged (93); 7. Affirming and committing to the chosen goals (108); 8. Writing a mission statement to outline the broad purpose of the congregation (117).

<sup>93</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, 95, 99.

<sup>94</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, 12.

<sup>95</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, xii– xv.

teach the congregation about discernment prior to beginning the planning process,<sup>96</sup> include suggestions for prayer and scripture study for each step of the process, and strongly promote the importance of fasting, particularly during the goal-prioritization process.<sup>97</sup> Most importantly, they understand prayer in deeply relational instead of perfunctory terms. They assert:

Prayer is making myself present to God within me and around me. . . We pray in order to become open to God. And when we bring an openness, a freedom, to our prayer time, then we are able to adopt the unconditional attitude, ‘God, when you show me a direction to follow, I will say ‘yes’ no matter what the cost.’”<sup>98</sup>

Rendle and Mann’s approach to strategic planning is similar to Oswald and Friedrich’s, but with some differences. They envision a process that includes up to ten possible steps,<sup>99</sup> but acknowledge that most congregations would not be able to, and might not need to engage a full planning process. The extent to which any congregation engages the process will depend on that congregation’s particular needs.<sup>100</sup> Rendle and Mann emphasize the need for the planning process to be infused with Bible and text study. They encourage openness to the Spirit facilitated by engagement with the traditions and texts of the faith. Rendle and Mann suggest that a good way to accomplish this is for the team to reflect on and explore those biblical stories that the congregation is “currently living.”<sup>101</sup> Similar to Oswald and Friedrich, they assert that the planning process must consist of much more than a technical process of “following

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<sup>96</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, 93–94.

<sup>98</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, xii.

<sup>99</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 36–37, summarize the full planning process. Phase 1, entitled “getting ready,” includes training the congregation for planning, selecting and training the committee, and conducting a needs assessment to determine the questions the planning process needs to address. Phase 2, entitled “collecting data,” includes gathering data about the congregation and the surrounding community, and collating the learnings. Phase 3, entitled “shaping the future,” includes developing a mission statement, vision, objectives goals and recommendations, seeking board approval and developing action and implementation plans.

<sup>100</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, xx.

<sup>101</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 42.



the necessary steps to arrive at the destination. . .”<sup>102</sup> For them too, the ultimate goal of the process is discernment.<sup>103</sup> Somewhat different from Oswald and Friedrich, however, the core dynamic that lies at the heart of the planning process is conversation. For them, a sense of vision and mission will emerge when the team and congregation are led by the planning steps, into an open and honest conversation with themselves and with God.<sup>104</sup>

Both of these approaches to strategic planning look for churches to undergo significant change. As already noted, Oswald and Friedrich assume that listening for God’s leading can often lead to significant change for a congregation. They caution leadership boards to discern whether their congregation is ready for such a process, because it amounts to a “major intervention”<sup>105</sup> into the corporate life of a church, and can lead to “a radical departure” from the way a church is currently functioning.<sup>106</sup>

Rendle and Mann distinguish between three different types of planning: problem planning, in which a problem-solving model is employed to fix a specific issue; developmental planning, in which a congregation that is in a fundamentally good place considers its next steps; and frame-bending planning, which is the kind of planning that would apply to the churches in our study.<sup>107</sup> Frame-bending planning is needed when a congregation’s approach is no longer working or “faithful and appropriate to the present setting of ministry.”<sup>108</sup> As the name suggests, this last form of planning is more radical

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<sup>102</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, xiii.

<sup>103</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 42.

<sup>104</sup> Ideally the conversation would include an exploration of “their differences and their perceptions,” and would allow them to “risk saying what they believe to be important” (Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, xiii). This conversation would also need to be full of “stories, memories, and hopes” (Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, xiii), and would help the congregation come to an “understanding of their identity as a faith community, their sense of purpose, and their relationship with God” (xiv).

<sup>105</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, 5.

<sup>106</sup> Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, 12.

<sup>107</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 6–9.

<sup>108</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 9.

in nature and involves a process that is “designed to highlight and disturb expectations in order to make space for the possibility of an unseen or unconsidered future.”<sup>109</sup>

### The Significant Change of Vann and Standish’s Approaches to Spiritual Renewal

For Vann, churches will be renewed as their worship is deepened and broadened.<sup>110</sup> According to Vann, worship is central to a church’s renewal because worship is the central act through which we encounter the presence of the living God in the Holy Spirit,<sup>111</sup> and because the structure and content of worship and the church year serve to form, inform, and transform our understanding of our lives and the world around us.<sup>112</sup> A focus upon worship is not enough to facilitate renewal, however. Vann asserts that reflection upon worship is also needed. Vann draws upon the work of experiential learning theorists to argue that growth and change will come not through experience of worship alone, but also through reflection upon one’s experience.<sup>113</sup> Vann proposes a four-step process of reflection that corresponds to the major practices of the Christian faith.<sup>114</sup> This degree of correspondence helps us to see how all of the activities of the church can be engaged in such a way that they flow out of and feed back into the church’s worship. Prayer groups, study groups, and ministry groups need not operate

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<sup>109</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 9.

<sup>110</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 3.

<sup>111</sup> In saying this Vann does not mean to suggest that we only encounter God in worship. She fully accepts that God can be encountered in countless ways and settings. She does, however, mean to affirm that our encounter with God in worship is in fact paradigmatic of all our other encounters with God, because it does, and ought to give shape to and inform all of our other encounters (*Gathered before God*, 23, 34).

<sup>112</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 25–27.

<sup>113</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 38.

<sup>114</sup> Step 1 involves engagement in the concrete experience of worship. Step 2 involves remembering and describing the experience in some detail. Vann notes that prayer and other spiritual disciplines provide opportunities to engage this stage of the reflective process. Step 3 involves analyzing and interpreting the experience, with the help of abstract concepts, for the purpose of gaining insight into the experience and our response to it. Teaching and study moments can serve to facilitate the work of step 3. Finally, step 4 involves making use of the new insights by imagining and preparing for how these insights will inform our subsequent acts of worship and ministry. The ongoing ministry and mission of the church provide opportunities to experiment with the new insights gained through the reflective practice (Vann, *Gathered before God*, 38, 40–41, 56–57).

independently of worship. Instead they can become avenues for reflecting upon and responding to worship, and consequently can also then become sources of new insight that lead to the ongoing deepening and broadening of worship. It must be noted that Vann's work is a work of description and not prescription. She does not offer a plan as to how churches can move towards being worship-centred, but instead describes in detail the characteristics of and dynamics at play in worship-centred churches.<sup>115</sup>

Vann found that a number of changes emerge when churches become worship-centred. Churches come to expect to encounter the living and present God in their lives and particularly in worship, and subsequently expect to be changed by those encounters.<sup>116</sup> They come to understand that all activities and plans of the congregation must be shaped, informed, and conformed to the worship of God.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, these churches appreciate that becoming worship-centred means allowing themselves to shed those worldviews imposed by the world, and to adopt instead the worldview that comes of worshipping the living God.<sup>118</sup> Churches seeking to become worship-centred would need to come to be open to these kinds of changes.

With respect to Standish's approach to spiritual renewal, it has already been noted that Standish's goal is for churches to: become grounded in God's purpose for them,<sup>119</sup> connect with Christ more powerfully on a daily basis,<sup>120</sup> and to become churches that are marked by works of power by the Holy Spirit.<sup>121</sup> Such a goal implies

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<sup>115</sup> Her study of worship-centred churches revealed that their movement towards being worship-centred came about for a variety of reasons (Vann, *Gathered before God*, 17–18, 91). She did note, however, that in every case the qualities of the leadership did profoundly affect the spiritual orientation of the congregations. The "spiritual participation of worship leaders was always evident" in worship-centred churches (83).

<sup>116</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 21.

<sup>117</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 22.

<sup>118</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 24–25.

<sup>119</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 54.

significant change, since scripturally, drawing near to and being becoming open to the Living God has always meant transformation.<sup>122</sup>

### The Significant Change of the Missional Church Movement

As has been said, the missional church movement argues for an entirely new paradigm for being church. The old paradigm is referred to as the attractional church paradigm.<sup>123</sup> In this paradigm, church tends to be thought of as a place, and the expectation is that the church will provide spiritual goods and services to believers so that they can be better Christians and lead better lives.<sup>124</sup> The ultimate goal is to *attract* as many people as possible to the church to receive its spiritual goods. This paradigm is supported in part by the belief that the real need is to help individuals come to know Christ.<sup>125</sup> It is also supported by a reductionist understanding of God's salvation. Within this paradigm salvation is understood in individualistic terms, and the benefits of salvation are separated "from the reason for which we receive God's grace in Christ: to empower us as God's people to become Christ's witnesses."<sup>126</sup> The new paradigm, the missional church paradigm, asserts that the church is to be sent into the world as that which represents God's already come and coming Kingdom, as sign, witness, foretaste and instrument.<sup>127</sup> Being missional means much more than supporting missionaries,

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<sup>120</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 71.

<sup>121</sup> Standish, *Blessed Church*, 99.

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, Luke 4:18–19. In the presence of the Living God, the poor receive good news, prisoners are freed, the blind see, and the oppressed are released.

<sup>123</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 18.

<sup>124</sup> Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 84.

<sup>125</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 81.

<sup>126</sup> Guder, *Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 120. See also Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 92, and Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 69–70.

<sup>127</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 54, 71, refer to the church as sign, witness, and foretaste. Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 101, refers to the church as a sign and foretaste of the coming Kingdom, but also as an instrument and agent of the Kingdom that has been given authority to act in accord with the Lord of the Kingdom (Mt. 16:19; Jn. 20:19–23).

engaging in short-term missions, or having an outreach or evangelism program.<sup>128</sup>

Being missional means completely reimagining our view of church to grasp that mission is not something the church does, as one activity amongst many, but that mission is what the church is.<sup>129</sup>

No formula or model exists for being a missional church. Being missional does not involve emulating certain programs or strategies. Instead it involves going on a journey with God into the world, and joining with God in the work God is doing there.<sup>130</sup> It involves coming to accept that we have been saved, not for ourselves alone, but for the sake of the world, and to participate in God's work to bring the entirety of creation to healing and wholeness.<sup>131</sup> It involves allowing God's work in the world in Christ (his life, death, and resurrection and the coming of the Spirit) to become the paradigmatic story that gives shape to our living in the present, and our thinking about the future.<sup>132</sup> It means listening and paying attention to those around us—their concerns, questions, values, and ways of ascribing meaning to life.<sup>133</sup> It therefore also means coming to appreciate that God's leading will be found as we learn to engage in the art of reflection and ask "questions about how our biblical understandings interact with and are being challenged by this involvement in the community."<sup>134</sup>

The fact that the missional church movement calls congregations to undergo

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<sup>128</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 31–32.

<sup>129</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 29, 45; Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 5–6.

<sup>130</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 21–22.

<sup>131</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 42, 69–70; Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 4.

<sup>132</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 43–44.

<sup>133</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 88–89.

<sup>134</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 90. Roxburgh also notes that this does not mean that we should carelessly abandon traditional interpretations, but it does mean that we cannot presume in advance to know what scripture has to say to the community (87–88).

significant change is clear. Nothing less than a complete reimagining of what it is to be church is required of churches wishing to become missional.

### The Challenge of Significant Change

It is possible to say more about the kind of change sought by each of these approaches to renewal. In every case these approaches to renewal aspire to lead churches to what Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky refer to as adaptive change. Heifetz and Linsky, in their book *Leadership On The Line*, have observed that organizations will face two kinds of challenges. These are technical challenges and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges are not necessarily easy to address, but they are challenges for which the organization already has the “know-how and procedures” to find a solution.<sup>135</sup> These kinds of challenges are best be addressed by those in authority in the organization. Adaptive challenges, however, are those kinds of challenges that cannot be addressed by existing procedures or know-how. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed by learning completely new ways, “changing attitudes, values and behaviors,” and by experimenting and engaging new discourses.<sup>136</sup> More so, adaptive challenges do not require the effort of only those in authority. They in fact require change of everyone in the organization who is impacted by the challenge.<sup>137</sup> Everyone impacted by the challenge will called upon to learn new ways, change attitudes, values, and behaviours, and be willing to engage in experimentation and new discourses. Based on this description of adaptive change, it can be seen that the five approaches to renewal discussed above do in fact wish to lead churches to adaptive change. Oswald and Friedrich envision the possibility of discernment leading to a radical departure from how

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<sup>135</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 13.

<sup>136</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 13.

<sup>137</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 13.

churches currently function. Rendle and Mann's frame-bending planning most definitely requires adaptive change. Vann envisions the congregation coming to have their worldview transformed through a focus upon God in worship and reflection. Standish's call for the church to surrender to God's purpose, connect meaningfully with Christ on a daily basis, and be open to the works of power of the Spirit would certainly mean being open to new learning, changed attitudes, and experimentation. Finally the missional church movement, with its call for a complete reimagination of the church and the Christian life, demonstrates the epitome of adaptive change.

The difficulty with adaptive change, according to Heifetz and Linsky, is that it is most often resisted. In fact, the deeper the change required, the greater the resistance will be.<sup>138</sup> Adaptive change is so often resisted because it is disturbing and disruptive.<sup>139</sup> In asking people to change their "habits, values and attitudes"<sup>140</sup> it asks them, amongst other things, to experience loss. This is because adaptive change requires people to modify their identities, give up a sense of stability, and become disloyal to the traditions and experience that has previously guided their way of being and doing.<sup>141</sup> Each of these approaches to renewal expects significant change of churches. Presumably some churches have been willing to undergo these kinds of changes. It is not clear, however, that the churches in our study would be willing or capable of making these kinds of changes. Heifetz and Linsky do offer a clue as to a possible way forward. Significant/adaptive change will always be very difficult, but it is helpful to acknowledge that it involves loss; loss of identity, loss of stability, loss of loyalty to past

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<sup>138</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 14.

<sup>139</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 20.

<sup>140</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 27.

<sup>141</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 27–28.

traditions and ways. The presence of loss suggests the need for grief; a process of accepting one's losses, coming to terms with them, and establishing new understandings of oneself and the world. Heifetz and Linsky's understanding of adaptive change would seem to suggest that allowing for and encouraging a process of grief may be an important part of the process of helping declining churches come to terms with the need for significant change.

### **Assumption Three: Decline is Always "Bad"**

The third assumption that emerges in the reviewed material is the belief that decline is always negative. The materials that operate upon this assumption convey the sense that no good can come of decline. Decline is something that must either be avoided or overcome. More than this, some of these materials see in decline an indication of a lack of God's presence, and an indication of spiritual ill health and a lack of faithfulness amongst church members. In short, there is no sense within these materials that paradoxical gifts of life can be found within the experience of decline.

### **McGavran, Wagner, and Malphurs' Perspectives of Decline**

We see this assumption at work in some of the renewal materials already discussed. This assumption is most clearly seen within McGavran and Wagner's understanding of the church growth movement. It is also seen within Malphurs' development of the strategic planning process. With respect to church growth, Wagner would argue that a lack of growth runs counter to God's purposes and is an indication of sickness and disease within a church.<sup>142</sup> Likewise, McGavran assumes that growth in the church indicates faithfulness on the part of the church members and provides

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<sup>142</sup> Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 45.



evidence of God's work, while a lack of growth is indicative of a lack of faithfulness.<sup>143</sup> For Malphurs, who works with the congregational life cycle, the ideal would be for churches to avoid decline by engaging a proactive strategic planning process that would spur the development of a new growth cycle before decline has an opportunity to take hold.<sup>144</sup> His argument is not without merit. As Malphurs can attest, it is much more difficult to revitalize an already declining church that has depleted its resources and that is experiencing the discouragement of decline, than it is start a new growth curve with a church that is still growing and vibrant.<sup>145</sup> His preferred approach reveals, however, that he sees decline as something only negative that at best ought to be avoided, and at worst must be overcome if at all possible.

#### Natural Church Development's Perspective of Decline

Schwarz, the author of the Natural Church Development approach to church renewal, contends for an approach to renewal that appropriately values the church as both an organization and as a living organism. In this view Schwarz readily acknowledges that it is not possible for us to cause the church to grow, but it is possible for us to work towards developing an organization that will be most conducive to the growth of the church as a living, vibrant, and growing organism.<sup>146</sup> Through his biblical and empirical research, as well as his observation of nature, Schwarz has identified what refers to as "the laws of life."<sup>147</sup> These are biotic, or natural principles created by God, and discerned from nature and scripture that, when allowed to flourish, lead to health

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<sup>143</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 5–6.

<sup>144</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 9, 13.

<sup>145</sup> Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 15–16.

<sup>146</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 89, 94.

<sup>147</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 7.

and vitality in churches.<sup>148</sup> While we cannot cause the growth ourselves, by cooperating with these principles we can minimize the obstacles to growth and maximize the factors that will support God's work of growth.<sup>149</sup> Through his research he has identified eight quality characteristics that must be present, and must be present to a significant degree, in order for a church to be healthy and growing. They are: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship service, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships.<sup>150</sup>

While the eight quality characteristics represent the "what" of natural church development, Schwarz argues that the "how" is important as well.<sup>151</sup> In addition to the eight quality characteristics, Schwarz's research also revealed what he refers to as the six biotic principles. These are principles that "all help to bring about the greatest possible results with the least possible energy expenditure."<sup>152</sup> They are: interdependence, multiplication, energy transformation, multi-usage, symbiosis, and functionality.<sup>153</sup> Appreciating and practicing these six biotic principles is crucial, according to Schwarz, because it can be very easy for us to seek to develop the church in accord with technocratic as opposed to biotic principles.<sup>154</sup> Schwarz notes, for example, that when faced with a particular situation we can tend to think in terms of finding the right program to address the situation, or finding the most useful response, as opposed to reflecting upon what the six biotic principles might mean for that particular situation.

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<sup>148</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 7.

<sup>149</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 10.

<sup>150</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 22–39.

<sup>151</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 7.

<sup>152</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 63.

<sup>153</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 66–77.

<sup>154</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 80–81.

The overall aim of his work is to help churches cultivate the eight quality characteristics in accordance with the six biotic principles. By doing this, churches will minimize the obstacles to growth and thereby cooperate with God's work to bring growth. As with McGavran, Wagner, and Malphurs, Schwarz also assumes that growth is good and decline is not. He would argue that God has put "biotic potential" into every church and that churches will grow if this biotic potential is freed to work.<sup>155</sup> Therefore, he says:

If churches have a low quality index [in terms of the eight quality characteristics] and are struggling to grow, it is because they are doing something wrong. It is clear that they are *not* applying the biotic principles described in this chapter. It is almost always possible to pinpoint the problem in a church with a low quality index.<sup>156</sup>

For Schwarz, growth is good, and a lack of growth or even decline is an indication that something has gone wrong.

### Decline Can Contribute to New Growth

To a certain degree the assumption that growth is good and decline is not, is valid. Growth suggests health, vibrancy, and vitality, all of which are characteristics we value and seek to attain in all aspects of our lives. Conversely, decline suggests stagnation, deterioration, and a slowing or ceasing of functionality, all of which are characteristics we do not value and therefore seek to strive against. Furthermore, the Bible identifies growth as a key characteristic of the Kingdom of God<sup>157</sup> (see, for example, the parable of the mustard seed, Mt 13:31–32; Mk 4:30–32; Lk 13:18–19, and

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<sup>155</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 10.

<sup>156</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 79, (emphasis original).

<sup>157</sup> While our understanding of the relationship between the church and the Kingdom has varied, it is generally accepted that some degree of relationship does exist between the church and the Kingdom. See, for example, Grenz, *Community of God*, 477–478, who understands that the church has come into being as a result of the inauguration of the Kingdom, as people respond come to respond in obedience to the announcement of the coming and come Kingdom.

the parable of the yeast, Mt 13:33 and Lk 13:20–21), and the church in the book of Acts is described as a growing church (see, for example, Acts 2:47b). Given the fact that growth can certainly be good, and decline can certainly be undesirable, our critique of this assumption must be developed carefully.

The real difficulty with this assumption is not the recognition that growth is generally better than decline, but the failure to recognize that decline can play an integral role within a church's movement to new growth. It is interesting in particular that *Natural Church Development*, with its focus on biological processes, fails to acknowledge that in nature there exists a cycle of growth, decline, and death, that then contributes to new growth. In the natural world, processes of decline allow for the breakdown of organic matter that then provides the nutrients needed for further growth. Within Schwarz's approach to *Natural Church Development* however, as well as within church growth materials and Malphur's work on strategic planning, lies the assumption that the process of decline holds within it no redemptive potential. Within these materials decline is viewed as something that ideally ought to be avoided, or ought to be overcome as soon as possible before death becomes inevitable. In contrast to this, however, some have begun to realize that decline and even a kind of death can become integral to a church's ongoing movement towards growth. These authors perceive within the situation of church decline an opportunity to live into the paradox of the cross—the paradox that new life comes not apart from the “cross-like” experience of decline but through it. These authors offer an understanding of church decline as a “kind of death,”<sup>158</sup> and perceive that the way through the situation of decline includes

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<sup>158</sup> Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*, 9.

drawing near to this kind of death with trust in God alone as the one who is able to bring forth new life.

Three voices in particular point to the importance of seeing a death-toward-life paradox within the situation of decline. We have already encountered two of them in the previous chapter: church historian Martin Marty and pastoral theologian Michael Jinkins. The third voice, writing from within the Canadian context, is church practitioner Peter Bush. Bush argues that embracing the experience of decline as a kind of death, and trusting solely in God as the source of resurrection life, must be foundational to our efforts to renew, revitalize, and redevelop congregations struggling with decline.<sup>159</sup> He argues that within any renewal process, a form of death will take place regardless of where the congregation is in the cycle of decline.<sup>160</sup> This is because any process of renewal will involve significant change and therefore also loss. Bush says:

I believe that moving to the upside of the life cycle (dreaming again, renewal, revitalization, redevelopment—whatever words are used to describe this transition) also requires a death. To begin again means dying to what has been. The old dream, no matter how worn out and broken it appears, is still a dream that led to effective ministry at one time. Moving to the other side requires burying that dream, so that a new dream can be born. This movement is a death. Any death, including a death that ends a congregational dream, is painful.

Bush, therefore, seeks to help churches live into an acceptance of death, while also maintaining their hope in the God of the resurrection. In doing this he acknowledges the importance of leading congregations through a process of grieving their losses.<sup>161</sup> He affirms that the kind of change that is needed will not come apart from a grief process

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<sup>159</sup> Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*, 35.

<sup>160</sup> Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*, 26. Bush in fact would argue that a cycle of death and rebirth is, and ought to be, the pattern of all congregational life (126). He would contend that all churches ought to live this pattern, even healthy churches, because an experience of God's resurrection power and life can only come through an ongoing process of death and rebirth (15, 39).

<sup>161</sup> Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*, 68–76.

that will help the congregation loosen their attachments to what was, and become open to the new life God is offering them. Not only has Bush affirmed the fact that decline can hold within it the paradoxical gift of new life, but he has also intuited, along with Heifetz and Linsky, the need to acknowledge and tend to the extent of loss that comes with any kind of significant change.

## **Section 2: Renewal Materials and Case Studies in Conversation**

It is time now to consider what can be learned by bringing the case studies of the declining churches and the renewal materials into conversation with each other. The purpose is to ask two questions. First, do the renewal materials shed light upon our understanding of the situation of decline? Second, do the descriptions of the declining churches shed light upon our understanding of the strengths and/or limitations of the renewal materials and their assumptions? We will begin by considering what light the renewal materials shed upon our understanding of the situation of decline.

### **Case Studies Viewed From the Perspective of the Renewal Materials**

#### **Renewal Materials Reveal an Inward Turn Within Case Studies**

It can be said that the majority of the renewal materials described above bring into stark relief the fact that each of the congregations described in Chapter One are significantly focused upon themselves, their needs, and their survival. The church growth, strategic planning, and missional church material all emphasize, in their particular ways, the need for congregations to reach out to and take into consideration the needs of those outside of the congregation.<sup>162</sup> In contrast to this, all of the churches

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<sup>162</sup> For the church growth movement, reaching out to and discipling non-believers is central to the Christian life. Strategic planning methodologies lead churches to pay attention to the needs of the community surrounding the congregation. The missional church material urges churches to move out into

described in Chapter One demonstrate a concern for their own congregation that far outweighs concern for the surrounding non-churched community. A few themes emerge from the descriptions of the declining churches in this respect. First, the declining churches described here tend to think more in terms of recruiting new members to ensure the viability of the congregation, than they think in terms of reaching out to and ministering to the needs of the surrounding community.<sup>163</sup> Secondly, when these churches do consider reaching out to and ministering to the needs of those in the surrounding community, they seem to do so more out of a sense of duty than out of a sense of compassion.<sup>164</sup> They also tend to reach out in ways that secure them from having to change in significant ways.<sup>165</sup> Thirdly, the declining churches tend to demonstrate a strong desire to maintain the status quo with respect to their worship and way of being church.<sup>166</sup> Finally, some of these churches have essentially given up any real hope of meaningfully connecting with the surrounding community.<sup>167</sup>

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the community and listen for God's leading in the intersection between the community's needs, concerns, questions, and values, and the witness of scripture.

<sup>163</sup> See particularly the description of Gray Friends Meeting. They are described as knowing that they need to recruit new members, but no mention is made of any desire to genuinely care for those in the surrounding community.

<sup>164</sup> Faith Episcopal demonstrates this tendency. Feeling that they ought to be involved in the community, they set aside funds for a Portuguese-speaking social worker. This effort is contrasted with the fact that a proposal for the congregation to help teach English as a second language, made by a community agency that rents space from them, met with no enthusiasm.

<sup>165</sup> Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church both offer examples of this tendency. As a congregation, Brighton Avenue feels good about being able to rent their building out to various groups, but it is a ministry that allows them to pay their bills while not requiring any change to their worship or fellowship. City Centre church is still running their student lunch program. In one respect this demonstrates a continuing desire to minister to the surrounding community. On the other hand, however, it is a ministry that allows them to reach out in a way that does not impact their worship or way of being church.

<sup>166</sup> Gray Friends Meeting and Faith Episcopal Church both demonstrate this tendency. Both of these churches exhibit a strong desire to preserve their current identity despite the potential costs of this. The members of Brighton Avenue Baptist Church value their time of fellowship with one another to such an extent that it makes it difficult for them to connect with any newcomers. See also, Carmel Wesleyan Church and City Centre Church. Although Carmel Wesleyan has sought growth for many years, and although they have demonstrated a capacity to care for the needs of those new to their congregation, they still demonstrate a strong desire to maintain the status quo. Despite their desire to grow, their programming has barely changed in 30 years, and their efforts to reach out have tended to follow

### Assumptions/Perspectives of Renewal and Decline and the Case Studies

When the assumptions/perspectives are brought into conversation with the case studies, it becomes apparent that the churches in our study demonstrate two assumptions/perspectives similar to those found in the renewal materials; a reductionistic approach to the divine human-interaction and a belief that decline holds no redemptive potential. In every case the source of the churches' assumptions cannot be traced to a particular approach to renewal. It can be said, however, that we see in these churches tendencies towards assumptions that correspond to those assumptions found in the reviewed renewal materials. With respect to the third assumption/perspective, an expectation that significant change is possible, we find in each of our case studies examples of churches that do not appear to be willing to accept this kind of change. We will consider each of these assumptions in turn.

#### *A Reductionistic Approach to the Divine-Human Interaction Among the Case Studies*

Based on the data we have received, it can be seen that at least five of the churches in our study have tended to adopt a reductionistic approach to the divine-human interaction in renewal.<sup>168</sup> This reductionistic approach is evident in their tendency to primarily focus upon their efforts and responsibility in renewal, and to speak

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traditional methods. City Centre Church has become more focused upon its past than upon its future. While members acknowledge the need for change, they are more concerned about the fact that any significant change would upset current members.

<sup>167</sup> See particularly Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and Faith Episcopal Church. Sanderson United Methodist Church has also struggled with this. The researcher notes that they have lost confidence in their ability to influence the wider community, and so fail to actively invite non-members out to church events that are open to the entire community. Having said this, though, it must also be acknowledged that in offering their church building and grounds for the town's fall festival, the church has made an attempt to reach out to and interact with the surrounding community.

<sup>168</sup> It is difficult to ascertain from the data whether Sanderson United Methodist church is operating from a reductionistic approach to the divine-human interaction in renewal or not. Nothing in the data suggest that they are not, but nothing in the data convey the sense that they are operating from an reductionistic perspective either. In order to err on the side of caution, we will consider the data inconclusive on this point.



very little about God's involvement in renewal. Gray Friends Meeting, though a Quaker congregation that would appreciate the tradition of discernment, is described as knowing *they* need to recruit new members. Carmel Wesleyan has tried again and again to reach new residents through traditional approaches to evangelism, and is discouraged at the failure of *their* efforts. Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church's focus upon their own efforts in renewal is evident in their seeming resignation to decline. Brighton Avenue is very aware that in and of themselves *they* have nothing to offer the surrounding community, while City Centre Church has lost any hope that *they* have a future.<sup>169</sup> Faith Episcopal Church also demonstrates a focus upon their own efforts and responsibility in renewal in their belief that the gulf between them and the surrounding community cannot be bridged. They too doubt that *they* have anything to offer the surrounding community. Believing, however, that *they* should at least try to do something, they set aside funds for a part-time Portuguese-speaking social worker.

None of the data indicate that any of these five churches has approached renewal with an emphasis upon, or from the perspective of an interaction between divine and human agency. It is possible that this apparent pattern may have more to do with the interests, purposes, and perhaps biases of the researchers providing the information. It is also likely, however, that we are seeing evidence of a tendency, at least for these particular churches, to approach renewal from a perspective that emphasizes human agency and diminishes an emphasis upon divine-human interaction. In contrast to this,

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<sup>169</sup> The researcher specifically noted that of all the churches he studied, City Centre Church was the most secularized. By this he means that: "The future of the church was being driven almost exclusively by financial considerations and the aesthetics of their building. There was no mention of any religious aspects of seeking guidance through prayer or the reading of the Bible or even a collective consideration of what they believe to be the will of God" (McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 163).

this study will operate on the assumption that any efforts towards renewal must be grounded in an approach that emphasizes divine-human interaction.

*Decline Holds No Redemptive Potential*

The churches in our study have responded to decline in three ways, all of which belie a belief that the situation of decline holds no possible redemptive potential. Two of the churches have and are seeking to overcome decline. These are Carmel Wesleyan Church and Sanderson United Methodist Church. Their aim remains to do whatever they can to effect renewal and overcome the trend towards decline in their churches. Two other of the churches are responding to decline with resignation. These are Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church. These churches have essentially come to the conclusion that renewal is not going to be possible, and that the death of their congregations is largely inevitable. The final two churches are ambivalent towards decline. These are Gray Friends Meeting and Faith Episcopal Church. While at some level they believe that they ought to do something about decline, they have essentially decided that they can put off seriously addressing it for the time being. None of the churches in our study have operated from the perspective that the actual process of decline might become an integral aspect of their movement toward new life and growth. None of the churches in our study have perceived, with Capps and Carlin, the possibility that the disorienting nature of decline as a limbo experience could potentially contribute to the search for new insights into ways of being church. None of the churches in our study have considered the possibility that within the experience of decline as a kind of death could lay the seeds of resurrection life. Admittedly this is a dramatically different perspective of decline than is often presented. It is the purpose of this work to develop

in some detail the way in which this different perspective might be manifested among declining churches

*Resistance to Significant Change in the Case Studies*

It may be that some churches would welcome the kind of significant change envisioned by the renewal materials,<sup>170</sup> but it is unlikely that the churches in our study would welcome this kind of change.<sup>171</sup> Gray Friends Meeting is described as being deeply committed to its Quaker identity. They have already asked a pastor to leave because his more overt approach to evangelism ran counter to their unassuming Quaker ways. There is also the sense that the church would still expect newcomers to adapt to their ways of being and doing church, with the church demonstrating little willingness to accommodate their ways to the needs of newcomers. Brighton Avenue Baptist Church has asked and subtly encouraged two pastors to leave because they were uncomfortable with the new directions in which these pastors were leading them.<sup>172</sup> Currently the church is pleased to be able to rent their building and serve the community in a way that allows them to maintain their practices of worship and fellowship as they are. Similarly, Faith Episcopal acknowledges that they are not interested in changing the flavour of their worship. This is at least part of the reason why they are hesitant to reach out to the Portuguese community surrounding the church. Their identity is firmly centred in their

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<sup>170</sup> Many of the renewal materials acknowledge the difficulty involved in the kind of change proposed. They acknowledge that some churches may not be ready for such work, and also emphasize the need for good preparatory work. Presumably, however, such change is possible in that most of these materials include stories of churches that have been able to embrace adaptive change.

<sup>171</sup> It is ultimately impossible to know for sure how these churches would respond to adaptive change. This is in part because the data we are working with are limited. And it is due in part to the fact that churches can always surprise us. Nevertheless, the received data would seem to suggest that most, if not all of the churches in our study would likely find it very difficult to embrace adaptive change.

<sup>172</sup> We do not have sufficient data to judge whether these moves on the part of the congregation were due to a kind of resistance or not. It is possible that other factors contributed to their decision. Nevertheless, these choices allowed the church to maintain a status quo.

Anglo-Catholic worship, and every indication suggests that they are not yet willing for this to change. Likewise, City Centre Church appears to be highly resistant to any kind of change. Though facing the very real possibility of closure, the church is still very much concerned that any significant change would upset the current members. Only two churches in our study might possibly be open to change: Carmel Wesleyan Church and Sanderson United Methodist Church. Carmel Wesleyan has sought growth through the building of a new sanctuary, and through many evangelistic efforts. Moreover, the church has demonstrated openness to and offered substantial generosity to newcomers. Despite this, though, it is difficult to ascertain their actual degree of openness to adaptive change. It is possible that their evangelistic efforts have been shaped by traditional methods because of a lack of good and consistent leadership. It is also possible they have continued to employ these familiar methods out of a deeper tendency to resist change. Similarly it is difficult to ascertain whether Sanderson United Methodist Church would be open to adaptive change. So far the ministry choices they have made have not required significant change. It is quite possible that this is because they are not open to more adaptive forms of change. It is also possible, however, that the spark of hope and determination that has been ignited within the congregation since the fire might lead them to consider more significant forms of change in the future. In summary, we are left with a variety of renewal materials that advocate a degree of change that would seem to be beyond the tolerance of the churches in our study, and quite possibly beyond the tolerance of many other churches experiencing significant decline.

### **Renewal Materials Viewed From the Perspective of the Case Studies**

Having considered what can be learned about the case studies from the perspective of the renewal materials, we now turn to consider what we can be learned

about the renewal materials from the perspective of the case studies. Three points are worth noting. We will consider each of them in turn.

### The Need for Differing Approaches to Renewal

The various case studies demonstrate that no one approach to renewal is going to be helpful for every church. A church like Carmel Wesleyan, for example, may be served well by a strategic planning process. It is a church that has sought growth, although unsuccessfully. It is a church that is welcoming to newcomers, and willing to serve them compassionately. It is a church that would appear to experience a high degree of trust amongst its membership. Each of these characteristics suggests that Carmel Wesleyan may benefit from a well-led strategic planning process that helps the church better come to terms with the needs and characteristics of the surrounding community. It might also benefit from exposure to missional church material, *Natural Church Development*, and possibly even church growth material. Faith Episcopal Church, on the other hand, would not likely benefit from an emphasis on church growth, strategic planning, *Natural Church Development*, or missional church material. The fact that the congregation is so dispersed, and relatively disengaged, apart from the Sunday morning worship service, suggests that it would be difficult to generate genuine enthusiasm for any of these renewal approaches. It is possible, given the fact that the Anglo-Catholic worship service is central to this congregation's identity that they might respond to something like Vann's description of worship-centred renewal.

### Renewal Materials Can Fail to Meet Churches at Their Point of Need

The case studies also reveal the inability of renewal materials to address churches facing significant decline at their point of most need. None of the reviewed renewal materials give recognition to the fact that churches facing significant decline

can experience a deep sense of powerlessness, ambivalence, resignation, and/or denial. The reviewed renewal materials instead assume a desire to change, a sense of confidence in the ability to effect positive change, and a sense of hope in an ongoing future. They begin at a point that is different from the postures inhabited by the churches in our study. In a sense, this is not the fault of these renewal materials. It is not the intention of the authors of these materials to address the issues identified here. It does, however, affirm the need to develop materials that do address the postures currently inhabited by these churches. What does the church that is feeling frustrated and disheartened in their inability to effect positive change need to hear from renewal materials? What does the church that fears change and loss of identity more than closure need to hear? What does the church that is fairly sure it no longer has a future need to hear? What does the church that has not yet come to terms with the seriousness of its situation need to hear? The fact that we believe in a God who has met us in the cross and resurrection of Christ at the point of our deepest poverty and need, suggests that God is one who desires to bring meaning, good, and life even out of the powerlessness, ambivalence, and resignation experienced by churches facing significant decline.

#### The Need for a Reconceived Understanding of Hope

The final point of note that emerges as we consider the renewal materials from the perspective of the case studies is that there is a need to find additional ways to conceive of hope. Many of the renewal materials tend to locate hope in the ongoing life of the church and in particular ways of being church; as growing, visioning, healthy, blessed, missional churches. If hope has to do with the church living on as a growing, visioning, healthy, blessed, and/or missional church, where is hope for churches like those in our study that are not likely to survive decline? Where is hope for those

churches that are so deep in decline that all they can see are the obstacles and impediments to growth? Hope should be their inheritance too. It is necessary to find additional ways to conceive of hope so that hope might belong even to those churches experiencing significant decline.

Beth Ann Gaede offers one alternate conception of hope in her book, *Ending With Hope: A Resource For Closing Congregations*. She and all of the contributors have written from the perspective that the closing of a congregation can be a resurrection experience, as energy is released for use “in places where God is working in new ways.”<sup>173</sup> Lindsay Biddle, for example, tells the story of one congregation that was located in the midst of a growing Latino community. The congregation entered into a discernment process and came to sense God calling them to close so that a new Latino ministry could be started in that area.<sup>174</sup> Lowell Hesterman likewise recounted the story of a congregation that chose to close even when worship attendance was still “about average for a Protestant church in the United States. . .”<sup>175</sup> The congregation acknowledged the increasingly downward trend in their attendance, and decided to close the church and use the proceeds from the sale of their valuable property to seed other ministries and missions. The congregation understood their decision as a decision to deny themselves, in order to give a gift to the larger mission of Christ.<sup>176</sup>

Gaede’s vision is hopeful. Her aim is to relieve the shame that can be attached to church closure and offer the possibility that God might indeed be calling some churches to close. Her book offers a perspective of hope even in closure. In this we applaud her

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<sup>173</sup> Gaede, "Preface," vii.

<sup>174</sup> Biddle, "Tale of Two Closings," 95–100.

<sup>175</sup> Hesterman, "Ending with Strength," 121.

<sup>176</sup> Hesterman, "Ending with Strength," 121–131.

work. Our concern here, however, is to ask about where hope can be found for those churches that find themselves stuck in the in-between places of decline. Most of the churches in our study find themselves caught in a state of limbo, not able to move towards life and not wanting to move towards death. What is the nature or source of hope even for those in-between places? The churches described by Biddle and Hesterman had hopeful closures because they were able to choose closure from a posture of hope. The churches in our study have not yet adopted such a posture. To impose upon them hope in the form of closure, may be just as inappropriate as trying to impose upon them hope in the form of renewal. It is our concern to discern the nature and source of hope even for those in-between places of powerlessness, ambivalence, and resignation.

### **Section 3: Concluding Assertions**

Four concluding assertions can now be drawn out from the preceding analysis. They pertain to: the fruitfulness of bringing actual case studies of churches in significant decline into conversation with renewal materials and their assumptions, the importance of perspective in the situation of decline, and the need to conceive of hope differently.

#### **The Fruitfulness of Mutual Conversation**

The first assertion that can be made is that this analysis has affirmed that it has indeed been fruitful to bring actual case studies of churches facing significant decline into conversation with renewal materials and vice versa. Bringing renewal materials into conversation with actual case studies has revealed limitations in the renewal materials. In particular, it has revealed the inability of the reviewed renewal materials to speak to the postures of powerlessness, ambivalence, and resignation adopted by the churches in our study. Conversely, bringing the case studies into conversation with the



assumptions undergirding the renewal materials has helped to reveal that the churches in our study are operating with assumptions or perspectives that correspond to those found in the renewal materials.

### Perspective and Posture Are Important

The second assertion that can be made is that this analysis has revealed that perspective is indeed crucial in the midst of situations of decline. The assumptions found to undergird the reviewed renewal materials represent perspectives of decline. They represent a point of view from which to see renewal and decline, and as such they bring certain features to the foreground and cause other features to recede into the shadow. Renewal, when viewed from a perspective that oversimplifies our understanding of the divine-human interaction, causes human endeavour and effort to be brought to the foreground and allows God's ongoing activity in renewal and our call to participate with God in God's ongoing activity to recede to the background. Renewal, when viewed as that which has to do with the willingness to embrace significant change, brings our capacity to choose for God to the foreground, and shifts the emphasis from God's ongoing work to move us to desire and do good things (see Phil 2:13, for example). Decline, when viewed as something that has no inherent redemptive potential, causes all of the very real negative aspects of decline to be brought to the foreground, and allows the truth that God is One who paradoxically brings meaning, light and life even out of meaninglessness, the darkness and death of decline to recede to the background. The perspectives offered by the reviewed renewal materials offer a very limited perspective of God's activity in church decline and renewal, and consequently offer a limited perspective of how we can participate with God in church decline and renewal.

Perspective is important because it offers us either a limited or expansive view of God in the midst of decline and renewal. Perspective is also important because it will affect our posture towards decline and renewal, and the degree to which our posture becomes cramped and limited or free and expansive. Powerlessness is a posture towards decline, but it need not be a cramped and limited posture. When a posture of powerlessness is combined with the perspective that God makes God's power perfect in powerlessness, the posture of powerlessness becomes free and expansive. When, however, a posture of powerlessness is combined with a reductionistic perspective of the divine-human interaction that emphasizes human agency in renewal, it becomes cramped and limited. When a posture of ambivalence, which in these cases includes an unwillingness to face the loss of identity, is combined with the perspective that God even works in us so that we might desire God's good will, the posture of ambivalence becomes free and expansive. That same posture, when combined with the perspective that renewal involves the willingness to choose or receive significant change, becomes cramped and limited. The same is also true of the posture of resignation. The posture of resignation to the inevitability of decline, when combined with the perspective that God even brings meaning, light, and life out of meaningless, darkness, death, and decline, brings freedom and expansiveness. That same posture, when combined with the perspective that decline holds within it no redemptive potential, becomes cramped and limited. The posture of denial, when combined with the perspective that God brings comfort to those who mourn (Mt. 5:4), encourages movement away from an unlikely hope, to a posture of hopeful and expansive acceptance. That same posture, when combined with the perspective that hope is located primarily in renewal of the church and its ongoing viability, will exacerbate the tendency to cling to a hope that may no

longer be possible. In doing so it will limit possibility rather than encourage it. We see here the crucial nature of perspective. The postures we have found to emerge out of the experience of decline need not be life limiting or even detrimental to the church, but it will depend on the perspectives that accompany these postures.

### The Need to Conceive of Hope Differently

The third assertion that can be made is that there is a need to conceive of hope differently. As has already been discussed, at least three of the reviewed renewal materials (McGavran and Wagner's approach to church growth, Malphurs' approach to strategic planning, and Schwarz's *Natural Church Development*) locate hope in a specific outcome—renewal, growth, and the avoidance or overcoming of decline. Each of these approaches to renewal essentially operate upon the assumption that decline holds no redemptive potential and that therefore the only hope available to the church is to avoid or overcome decline by seeking new growth and renewal. This tendency to locate hope in a specific outcome is mirrored in each of the churches in our study. Each of these congregations locates hope in their churches' ongoing future. For Gray Friends Meeting, the hope is for the church to be able to continue much as it has in the past. The same is true for Faith Episcopal. Carmel Wesleyan Church simply hopes to remain viable and so does Sanderson United Methodist Church. Even the two churches in our study that have lost much if not all of their hope—Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church—reveal a tendency to locate hope in the ongoing viability of their congregations. The reason they no longer have hope, is in fact because they have tended to locate hope in the ongoing future of their congregations. This tendency to conceive of hope as being located in a particular outcome is not the only option available to declining churches. In contrast to this, it is also possible to conceive of hope as being

located in the God of hope who is good and faithful and at work to accomplish God's will even in situations of decline. To hope in God, instead of a particular outcome, brings life and freedom, and possibly even joy to situations that tend to be characterized by fear and hesitancy. To hope in God is to hope in the One who is "for us" in all things, and to hope in the One who loves us in such a way that even the situation of decline cannot separate us from that love (Rom 8:28, 35). Admittedly this is the more difficult option. The more tangible approach, conceiving hope as the ongoing viability of the church, makes it the more attractive option. For this reason it will be important to consider in some detail what is involved in, and how we might live into, a conception of hope that is less about a particular outcome, and more about the good and faithful God in whom we hope.

Furthermore, there will be a need to assert that the God in whom we hope is one who loves us and meets us and helps us regardless of the stories, perspectives, and postures we inhabit. As the cross and resurrection of Christ reveal, and in fact as the overall narrative of scripture asserts, we hope in one who takes the initiative to reach out to us even when we are lost in darkness, uncertainty, frailty, fear, and even sin. As Gustafson says, we are "obliged to believe in an abyss of love which is deeper than the abyss of death. . ." <sup>177</sup> In situations of decline then, we must hope in One whose abyss of love is deeper than even the abyss of our powerlessness, ambivalence, and resignation.

#### **Section 4: Summary**

In the course of this chapter we identified five broad renewal movements that, to some extent, speak to the situation of decline. Representative texts from each of these movements were chosen and their main tenets described. Three founding assumptions

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<sup>177</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 247.

were identified and discussed. In the course of this discussion it was proposed that: both human agency and divine agency need to be emphasized in renewal, decline can hold redemptive potential, and a process of grief may help to facilitate a church's ability to accept the need for significant change. Following this, the renewal materials and their assumptions were brought into a mutual conversation with our case studies. This mutual conversation revealed that the churches in our case studies held assumptions that corresponded to the assumptions found in the renewal materials. It was also found that the renewal materials failed to meet churches at the point of their need—in the midst of their postures of powerlessness, ambivalence, resignation, and denial. We concluded with some final assertions. We asserted that perspective and posture are important in situations of decline and need attention. It was also asserted that it is necessary to conceive of hope, not in terms of an outcome, but in terms of the God of hope who is for us even when we find ourselves inhabiting postures of powerlessness, ambivalence, resignation, and denial.

CHAPTER THREE  
CONGREGATIONAL GRIEF:  
DECLINING CHURCHES AS VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF GRIEF  
THEORY

We turn now to a consideration of grief theory in relation to church decline, and make this move for two reasons. First, this move is based on the conviction that grief theory, and particularly engagement with a process of mourning, will provide a helpful way forward for churches facing significant decline. Insights and materials already considered, as well as some additional materials provide the rationale for this conviction. Second, this move is based on the conviction that an analysis of the church decline from the perspective of grief theory will serve to deepen our understanding of the experience of decline. Interestingly, the following analysis will reveal that engagement with a process of mourning, while helpful, is not all that is needed for those churches experiencing significant decline.

Some of the materials and one of the insights previously discussed have set the stage for embracing the possibility that engagement with a process of mourning will provide a helpful way forward for churches experiencing decline. Marty, Jinkins, and Bush have come to understand church decline as a kind of death.<sup>1</sup> This association between decline and “dying,” as has been argued by Bush, raises the prospect of the need for a process of mourning within the experience of decline. Other material and one of the insights already discussed also raise this prospect. Heifetz and Linsky, and their understanding of adaptive change, have moved us in this direction. For Heifetz and Linsky, adaptive change, the kind of change called for by most renewal materials,

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<sup>1</sup> Marty, "Death and Birth," 3–40; Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death*; Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*.

involves loss.<sup>2</sup> In their view, it is most often this experience of loss that causes people to resist adaptive change. Their association of loss with this kind of change again raises the prospect of the need for a process of mourning. Finally, one of the insights into the limitations of renewal material discussed previously also helps to point us in the direction of the need for mourning within the experience of church decline. In the previous chapter it was found that renewal materials are often unable to speak to the postures inhabited by declining churches. The case studies revealed that declining churches often struggle with a sense of powerlessness, ambivalence, resignation, and possibly even denial in the face of significant decline. Yet renewal materials often assume the need for churches to be able to sustain a desire to change, a sense of confidence, an ability to effect change, and an ongoing sense of hope in the future of the church. As we will see, grief theory and processes of mourning make no such assumptions. To mourn is to accept the reality of one's current experience, in this case the experience of loss. While it is true that an appreciation of the need for inevitable change is assumed within processes of mourning, it is also understood that such change can only come about through an acceptance of one's current situation and not through a denial of it.

Two other authors not yet discussed also support this move.<sup>3</sup> Gerald Arbuckle has written a book entitled, *Change, Grief, and Renewal in the Church*. Writing earlier, and from a Catholic perspective, Arbuckle is concerned not only about the losses occurring within gospel communities, but also with the wide range of losses and changes

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<sup>2</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 27–28.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that there is a subtle difference between these materials and the perspective espoused by Marty, Jinkins, and Bush. While these materials associate situations of change and decline with dying, and with process of grief and mourning, they do not perceive within these situations the need for God's resurrection.

impacting western society. He contends that believers, both as individual persons, and as gathered apostolic communities, must learn to grieve over these losses so as to be able to let go of the past and receive the new.<sup>4</sup> Arbuckle therefore argues: “Unless we understand and celebrate death we cannot opt for life. The anxiety, pain, anger, fear, and depression that significant loss evokes in us as individuals and groups must be expressed/celebrated, otherwise we cannot embrace the future with freshness and creativity.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Jaco Hamman has written a book entitled *When Steeples Cry*. Like Bush, Hamman understands all significant change in the church, whether positive or negative, as a kind of death that will evoke grief and precipitate a need for mourning.<sup>6</sup> Hamman affirms that a communal process of mourning is necessary to enable congregations to let go of the “relationships, dreams, and visions” of the past and live into a new sense of identity.<sup>7</sup> He further concludes that the work of facilitating mourning within congregations must become a significant aspect of church leadership.<sup>8</sup>

All together the work of these various authors and the affirmation of the need to appreciate the postures inhabited by declining churches point to and support the need for mourning processes within situations of change and decline. We affirm this very important move, but also wish to move beyond it. The aim will also be to analyze the declining churches in our study from the perspective of grief theory, believing that such analysis will deepen our understanding of the experience of decline.

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<sup>4</sup> Arbuckle, *Grief and Renewal*, 3, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Arbuckle, *Grief and Renewal*, 40–41.

<sup>6</sup> Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*, 32; Hamman, *Steeple Cry*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Hamman, *Steeple Cry*, 13, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Hamman, *Steeple Cry*, 10.



## Section 1: Grief Theory and Declining Churches

The above-mentioned resources assume that the losses involved in church decline and even in significant change would lead to an experience of grief that would also precipitate the need for a process of mourning. It is necessary to investigate this assumption in some detail.

### Can Church Decline be Legitimately Associated With Grief?

John Bowlby's seminal work on grief, understood in relation to attachment theory, has long provided a theoretical framework for our understanding of grief. Bowlby postulated that people naturally form "affectional bonds or attachments" over the course of their lives.<sup>9</sup> These bonds develop initially between children and their parents, and later between adults.<sup>10</sup> Attachment bonds are attained and retained by means of attachment behaviour. While the attachment figure remains "accessible and responsive" the attachment behaviour will be relatively subtle, consisting of "little more than checking by eye or ear on the whereabouts of the figure and exchanging occasional glances and greetings."<sup>11</sup> At other times however, attachment behaviour may consist of "following or clinging to the attachment figure. . .and also calling or crying which are likely to elicit his or her caregiving."<sup>12</sup> Once an attachment is formed, attachment behaviour is only active when necessary, such as when encountering strange situations, "fatigue, anything frightening and [the] unavailability or unresponsiveness of an attachment figure."<sup>13</sup> The goal of attachment behaviour is to maintain the bond that

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<sup>9</sup> Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3:39.

<sup>10</sup> Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3:39.

<sup>11</sup> Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3:39.

<sup>12</sup> Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3:39.

<sup>13</sup> Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3:40.

provides one with a sense of security.<sup>14</sup> When the bond is threatened, the threat will elicit attachment behaviour meant to renew the bond. Within this framework of attachment theory, grief responses such as intense distress, anger, yearning, and searching for the loved one who is lost, are understood as attachment behaviour employed as a means to try to restore the lost relationship.<sup>15</sup>

In Bowlby's conception of grief, the grief experience is restricted to the loss of a significant loved one: a parent, a child, a spouse, or other committed partner. Bowlby's conception of grief, while not without critique, is well accepted.<sup>16</sup> And yet it is also accepted that Bowlby's theory does not offer a complete understanding of the experience of grief. Other theorists have posited that grief is not caused merely by the objective loss of a significant person. Instead they suggest that the phenomenon of grief arises more so because losses disrupt and possibly destroy the underlying assumptions that have given shape to the bereaved person's life.<sup>17</sup>

C. Murray Parkes is one such theorist. He argued that whenever a major change occurs in a person's life space—"those parts of the environment with which the self interacts and in relation to which behaviour is organized"<sup>18</sup>—that change will necessitate a restructuring of the way in which the person looks "at the world and his [*sic*] plans for living in it."<sup>19</sup> Parkes uses the term "assumptive world" to refer to the way in which a person looks at the world. The term "assumptive world" refers to "the only world we know and it includes everything we know or think we know. It includes our

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<sup>14</sup> Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3:40, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3:42, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Mikulincer and Shaver, "Attachment Perspective," 87–112.

<sup>17</sup> Weiss, "Nature and Causes of Grief," 37–38.

<sup>18</sup> Parkes, "Psycho-Social Transitions," 103.

<sup>19</sup> Parkes, "Psycho-Social Transitions," 102.

interpretation of the past and our expectations of the future, our plans, and our prejudices.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Parkes, in order to understand a loss it is necessary to not only understand the objective changes the loss brings to a person’s life space, but it is also necessary to understand the changes the loss precipitates in the person’s assumptive world. So, for example, people who lose their jobs will suffer objective losses such as the loss of income, workmates, and something to work at. But they will also potentially experience change to their assumptive world. Their assumptions about money and security may suffer change, as well as their assumptions about their own effectiveness. Their belief in the safety, security, and trustworthiness of the world, as well as their assumptions about their future may also undergo change.<sup>21</sup>

Parkes’ work is important because it provides an explanation as to why grief responses are often elicited from situations other than the loss of a significant other. Parkes understands grief as a process in which our “affectional bonds” to some important part of our life space is severed. This precipitates a need to relinquish old models of self and the world and construct new ones.<sup>22</sup> Some of the affectional bonds that Parkes suggests might lead to a grief process when severed are: the loss of a job; the loss of beloved and meaningful possessions; the loss of a home; emigration and the loss of an ideal assumption about the new home; changes in one’s physical body due to illness, injury, or aging; and changes in mental or psychological function.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Parkes, "Psycho-Social Transitions," 103.

<sup>21</sup> Parkes, "Psycho-Social Transitions," 103–104.

<sup>22</sup> Parkes, "Psycho-Social Transitions," 101 (abstract).

<sup>23</sup> Parkes, "Psycho-Social Transitions," 103–110. Parkes and other researchers have found evidence of grief responses in people experiencing a number of these situations. With respect to job loss, see Archer and Rhodes, "Grief Process and Job Loss," 395–410, and Archer and Rhodes, "Longitudinal Study of Job Loss," 183–188. With respect to changes in one’s physical body, and in this case the loss of a limb, see

The idea that grief is not simply about the loss of a significant person, but also has to do with the loss of a significant part of one's life space is important for our work here. Bowlby's conception of grief, while significant, would not support the contention that those experiencing church decline experience a grief response in the proper sense. Parkes' more expansive theory helps us to understand how grief could indeed be a part of a congregation's experience of church decline. Church members often demonstrate a high degree of commitment and loyalty for their churches. For this reason it is not untoward to assume that church would occupy a significant place within the life space of many church members. It is therefore also not unreasonable to assume that significant changes to the church, and the possibility of future closure, could significantly disrupt the assumptive worlds of congregants.

Weiss reminds us that Parkes' theory is not without its difficulties. Weiss makes the point that we can seemingly experience disruptions to our assumptive worlds without experiencing grief, as might be the case with one who has won a lottery. Weiss contends that Parkes' assertion that it is primarily the disruption that leads to grief, would seem to be too broad and needs greater specification.<sup>24</sup> Weiss is also concerned with the fact that grounding the idea of grief in "meaningfulness and perceived reality," gives cognition primacy over affect in the grief response. Since grief is so often accompanied by strong and complex affective responses, Weiss is concerned not to diminish the place of affect in our understanding of grief.<sup>25</sup> Despite his concerns, Weiss

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Parkes, "Reaction to Loss of a Limb, Spouse or Home," 343–349. With respect to the loss of a home, see Fried, "Lost Home," 151–171. Kastenbaum, due to an anecdotal encounter with an elderly woman in a geriatric facility, suggests that many in our society may be grieving lost worlds. The woman in his account was the last remaining member of her family, and the only person left to remember a past that was all gone and that no one else alive knew about ("Grieving in Contemporary Society," 78).

<sup>24</sup> Weiss, "Nature and Causes of Grief," 38.

<sup>25</sup> Weiss, "Nature and Causes of Grief," 38.

does affirm the value in Parkes' approach, particularly for its capacity to provide an explanation for the variety of losses that can elicit grief, and for its emphasis on the need for the bereaved to reconstruct meaning in the wake of a significant loss.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Losses Involved in Church Decline**

Drawing upon Parkes' distinction between objective losses and the loss of assumptive worlds, it is important to consider the losses involved in church decline in greater detail. For the moment, this discussion will be based upon the theoretical description of decline as offered by church life cycle theory.<sup>27</sup> Consideration of the losses experienced by the churches in our case studies will be given further below.

#### Objective Losses

The objective losses involved in church decline are not difficult to identify. Many of them have already been noted. There is a significant diminishment and sometimes complete loss of programming. Sunday school, Christmas pageants, Sunday School picnics, youth groups, young adult groups, men's groups and sometimes women's groups, Bible studies, and prayer groups are the casualties of church decline. There is a loss of numbers, as young families and even older couples drift away from church or move to different churches. Decline continues as older members die or are unable to attend due to failing health. These losses are felt deeply in decline because unlike in the past they are now accompanied by a corresponding inability on the church's part to attract new members. There is in decline always the loss of children and youth and young adults. With the loss of programs, numbers, and children and youth, comes a related loss of vibrancy and energy. The church that was once a going concern,

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<sup>26</sup> Weiss, "Nature and Causes of Grief," 40.

<sup>27</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages"; Saarinen, *Church Life Cycle*.

bustling with activity and energy now limps along at a much more subdued pace, and with a much more subdued atmosphere. In addition to these losses comes a loss of relationship with the wider community. As decline deepens, there is a turning inward as the church withdraws from the wider community with which it struggles to relate.

The relational and programmatic losses can be exacerbated by financial and infrastructure losses. Some declining churches will struggle with the loss of finances, and the loss of the ability to adequately maintain their church building. These two additional losses are not insubstantial. Although churchgoers tend to affirm that the church is ultimately about the people and not the building, church buildings are not unimportant. Church buildings often contribute significantly to a congregation's identity and culture, and represent an important means for a congregation to express its presence in a community. An inability to adequately maintain church buildings can be demoralizing for congregations. A struggle with finances leads to a further loss, the loss of options and possibilities. The more a church struggles financially, the more it will find itself hemmed in with fewer and fewer options available to it.

Of all these myriad losses, however, the loss that looms the largest is the threat of possible church closure. The threat of church closure is not yet a loss in the strictest sense because the church has not yet actually closed. In another sense, though, the threat of possible closure constitutes a loss in and of itself. The threat of possible closure represents the loss of certainty. Congregations in significant decline lose the luxury of being able to assume that their church will always be there. The future, which in past years held promise, is now dark, unknown, and tainted with fear.

One additional objective loss must be noted before we begin to consider the assumptive worlds that are also lost in the midst of decline. Congregations in significant

decline are essentially experiencing the reality that their way of being church is no longer viable without some kind of change. The church may continue to survive for the moment, but this does not mean that their way of being church can be considered viable.<sup>28</sup>

### The Loss of Assumptive Worlds

The objective losses discussed above will potentially lead to losses in relation to a congregation's assumptive world; the congregation's way of understanding itself, church, God, and the world. In contrast to the objective losses experienced by a congregation in decline, the loss of assumptive worlds is subjective in nature. This kind of loss will depend on an individual's or congregation's subjective assumptions about how the world, God, and the church ought to work. It can therefore be expected that different people and different congregations will potentially experience the same objective losses differently. For this reason, the following discussion should not be considered to be prescriptive. Not every congregation will experience the variety of assumptive losses discussed here. The following discussion should not be considered to be exhaustive either. The aim is to describe at least some of the losses that might reasonably be expected to follow the experience of decline.

A second matter that deserves consideration prior to discussing the kind of assumptive losses that might accompany the experience of church decline relates to the nature of church as both a personal and corporate entity. The question at hand has to do with whether the loss of assumptive worlds relates to the unique persons that make up the congregation, or relates to the church as a whole. We contend that these losses will

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<sup>28</sup> To suggest that a church's way of being is no longer viable does not mean that everything about a church must change. It does mean, however, that the church as it now exists cannot truly thrive again without some kind of fundamental change.

impact not only individual congregants, but also the church as a whole. Churches are gatherings of unique persons, but they are also corporate entities that develop a corporate sense of culture and identity. Hopewell, after closely observing three churches, concluded that “. . . a group of people cannot regularly gather for what they feel to be religious purposes without developing a complex network of signals and symbols and conventions—in short, a subculture—that gains its own logic and then functions in a way peculiar to that group.”<sup>29</sup> Hopewell goes on to say:

What struck me first and most forcefully in these three churches. . . was the surprisingly rich idiom unique to each. As slight and predictable as the language of a congregation might seem on casual inspection, it actually reflects a complex process of human imagination. Each is a negotiation of metaphors, a field of tales and histories and meanings that identify *its life, its world, and God*. Word, gesture, and artifact form a local language. . . that distinguishes a congregation from others around it or like it. Even a plain church on a pale day catches one in a deep current of narrative interpretation and representation by which people give sense and order to their lives.<sup>30</sup>

According to Hopewell, a congregation’s culture or identity represents the coalescence of and gives expression to its understanding of God, the world, and its own life as a congregation. In other words, congregations, as well as the persons that comprise them, will develop their own assumptive worlds that in turn will be challenged by the experience of decline. As we proceed through the following discussion, it will be assumed that these possible losses could be experienced at both the personal and corporate level of church experience. For ease of discussion, however, these losses will be discussed in terms of the congregation as a whole.

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<sup>29</sup> Hopewell, *Congregation*, 5. See also, Ammerman, who has found that a congregation’s culture emerges out of many materials: “A culture includes the congregation’s history and stories of its heroes. It includes its symbols, rituals, and worldview. It is shaped by the cultures in which its members live (represented by their own demographic characteristics), but it takes on its own unique identity and character when those members come together” (“Culture and Identity,” 78).

<sup>30</sup> Hopewell, *Congregation*, 5 emphasis mine.



### *Loss of Congregational Purpose*

The first subjective loss we will consider is a loss of purpose, specifically with respect to a church's engagement with and understanding of its ministry. General theological wisdom understands the church's purpose in terms of four ministry tasks. They are worship, edification, evangelism, and social service.<sup>31</sup> In recent years the connection between these tasks has been emphasized. The tasks are not thought of as being discrete, but as being inter-related and mutually enriching.<sup>32</sup> Vann, for example, has grounded her understanding of the church's ministry in worship. For Vann, all the activities of the church ought to flow out of and feed back into the congregation's worship.<sup>33</sup> Others have grounded an understanding of the church's ministry in a broader theological concept. The missional church movement provides one example of this.<sup>34</sup> For the missional church movement, the *missio dei*, God's ongoing work to bring about God's kingdom, serves as the grounding perspective. The church is not meant to engage in mission as one activity among many, but instead is meant to engage all of the activities of ministry as a means of supporting the call to be mission in the world.<sup>35</sup> This general fourfold conception of the church's ministry, and the interrelationship between the ministries offers us a means of reflecting upon the impact decline can have upon a church's understanding of its purpose and its engagement with this purpose. The situation of church decline can diminish both a congregation's engagement with and understanding of its ministry.

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<sup>31</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1052–1059. See also Grenz, *Community of God*, 490–510, who understands the church's ministry in terms of worship, edification, and outreach, with outreach pertaining to both evangelism and social service.

<sup>32</sup> Grenz, *Community of God*, 490.

<sup>33</sup> Vann, *Gathered before God*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> See, also Grenz, *Community of God*, 490, who understands the various ministries of the church in terms of the broader perspective of the church as the eschatological community of God.

<sup>35</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 29, 31–32, 45; Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 5–6.

Due to the pervasiveness of the tradition of the fourfold ministry of the church, most congregations will understand their purpose in terms of some form of the fourfold ministry of the church.<sup>36</sup> The congregational life cycle observes, however, that churches facing significant decline will tend to lose confidence in their ability to meaningfully relate and minister to those beyond the confines of their congregation.<sup>37</sup> In other words, churches facing significant decline will often retreat from engagement with evangelism and/or social service with their local communities. Such a retreat can leave those congregations that embrace the fourfold ministry of the church feeling as though they have lost an important part of their purpose. More than this, for those churches that appreciate the inter-related nature of their ministries, the loss of one ministry can diminish a church's confidence in its overall ministry. A church that has lost confidence in its ability to evangelize and/or engage in social service, for example, may come to lose confidence in their worship and ministry of edification as well, sensing that it has become self-serving and inwardly focused.

Significant decline can also serve to diminish a church's sense of purpose in another way. As decline looms large on a congregation's horizon, it can in fact become the defining reality of a congregation's decisions and activities. The need to effect renewal, to grow in numbers, and/or to simply survive can come to inform much of a congregation's life and business. In other words, a congregation facing significant decline can come to understand its purpose in terms of overcoming decline, or at least

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<sup>36</sup> Ammerman, for example, observes that a congregation's identity emerges out of, at least in part, the larger theological tradition of which it is a part ("Culture and Identity," 78–79). It is assumed here that many churches will have been formed by the tradition of the fourfold ministry of the church. Ammerman, reminds us however, that congregational identity is always comprised of "a mix of local creativity and larger tradition" (79). Therefore, it is theoretically possible that some churches may not embrace the fourfold ministry of the church, and so may not be impacted by a loss of evangelism and/or social service ministries.

<sup>37</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 82.

surviving it. Such a purpose, while seemingly admirable, is reductionist in nature and severely diminishes a church's understanding of its call. The urgent need to overcome and/or survive decline can supplant a congregation's focus upon its call to worship, grow up into, and share with others the loving reality of the Living God who was, and is, and continues to be at work in the world to accomplish God's good purposes.

Regrettably, certain of the renewal materials discussed previously can tend to reinforce this diminished sense of purpose. This is because they convey the sense that churches will not be fruitful in ministry until they can somehow extricate themselves from decline and be renewed. Congregations can come to feel trapped by the conundrum. They may long to faithfully express the fourfold ministry of the church, but feel frustrated and compelled by the urgent reality of decline to instead focus upon it and its mitigation.

#### *Loss of Congregational Identity and Culture*

Another potential loss pertains to a congregation's identity and culture.

Ammerman notes that a congregation's identity and culture are similar. She prefers the concept of congregational culture to congregational identity because:

. . .thinking about a congregation's culture reminds us that it is something this group of people has created, not a fixed or normative category. Unlike our usual notions about identity, a culture is neither who we always will be nor who we ought to be. It is who we are and all the ways in which we reinforce and recreate who we are.<sup>38</sup>

By favouring the concept of culture to identity, Ammerman is able to emphasize the fact that a congregation's culture will never be static, but will be reformed and renegotiated as entrenched ways of being continually encounter new contingencies.<sup>39</sup> Preferentially

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<sup>38</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 78. She does, however, note that the *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, written earlier, does speak about a congregation's identity in much the same way that she speaks about culture. See, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, eds., *Congregational Studies*, 21–47.

<sup>39</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 82.

we also find the term identity helpful, because it speaks more clearly to the idea of “who” a congregation is. We will therefore assume the use of both terms here but, for ease of use, will refer to identity and culture by the term culture. Given the fact that the re-formation of congregational culture is to be expected, will such change actually be experienced as loss by significantly declining congregations? Three reasons can be offered for why such cultural re-formation can be experienced as loss. First, as Bush and Hamman have argued, change, whether positive or negative, can lead to an experience of loss within a congregation.<sup>40</sup> The fact that cultural re-formation is to be expected, does not mean that such re-formation will always occur without a related experience of loss. Second, as we will see in a moment, the degree of cultural change precipitated by significant church decline is potentially dramatic. The sheer number of changes decline can bring to a congregation’s culture will increase the likelihood that such change will be experienced as loss. Finally, Ammerman observed that some congregations will place more weight on historical continuity than others, and therefore will be more inclined to attempt to resist cultural change.<sup>41</sup> Congregational life cycle theory has observed that a tendency to cling to the past and resist change is one of the characteristics of churches experiencing significant decline.<sup>42</sup> The fact that declining churches demonstrate a tendency to resist change suggests that any cultural change precipitated by decline would be experienced as a significant loss.

Identity and culture, and in this case congregational identity and culture, is an orienting phenomena. It provides persons and groups, as Ammerman says, with a sense

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<sup>40</sup> Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*, 32; Hamman, *Steeple Cry*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 82.

<sup>42</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 84, 86.

of “who we are and the world we have created to live in.”<sup>43</sup> For this reason, any significant change or challenge to a congregation’s identity and culture can be considerably disorienting and therefore also an experience of loss. Hamman offers the example of a church that experienced considerable disorientation and loss. Hamman notes:

The congregation’s teenagers find driving, smoking, tattooing, and binge drinking rites of passage; couples favor the golf club’s new clubhouse as a place in which to get married; and the funeral home has become almost exclusively the place where funeral services are being held. These changes have brought self-doubt to the Gospel community—Who are we?—to which the congregation has responded by rigidly holding on to their traditions.<sup>44</sup>

Significant church decline can challenge a congregation’s identity and culture in a number of ways, and leave a congregation wondering who they are. According to Ammerman, the culture of a congregation is informed by a number of factors. As decline impacts these factors, a congregation’s culture will be impacted as well. A congregation’s culture is shaped in part by its own social and cultural location.<sup>45</sup> When a congregation’s social and cultural location undergoes change, as is often the case in situations of decline, the congregation’s culture will be challenged.<sup>46</sup> Ammerman also notes that a congregation’s culture is shaped in part by its size. Ammerman points to the presence or absence of subcultures in this respect. Larger congregations tend to accommodate a greater number of subcultural units than smaller congregations.<sup>47</sup> A decrease in subcultures due to a decline in numbers could challenge a congregation’s

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<sup>43</sup> Ammerman, “Culture and Identity,” 78.

<sup>44</sup> Hamman, *Steeple Cry*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ammerman, “Culture and Identity,” 78.

<sup>46</sup> Three such changes in social and cultural location can be observed within our case studies. They are the severe decline of a rural community, the suburbanization of a formally rural community, and dramatic demographic change in urban centres.

<sup>47</sup> Ammerman, “Culture and Identity,” 81.

culture. We would also argue, however, that congregations become comfortable with being a certain size. Church practitioners have found that a change in size, even an increase in size can challenge a congregation's sense of culture.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, it can be concluded that those churches that experience a substantial decrease in size will also find their cultures challenged. Congregational culture is formed in part by the identity and life experiences of each individual member. Ammerman therefore concludes:

Each time a new person joins, each time a new pastor or priest or rabbi arrives. . .each time the members themselves change (have children, grow older, lose their jobs, and the like), the life experiences out of which the congregation's culture is made have been altered.<sup>49</sup>

Significant decline always leads to diminished numbers and an aging congregation, changes that will challenge a congregation's culture. Other changes brought about by decline can also challenge a congregation's culture. According to Ammerman, a congregation's culture is expressed and created through its rituals (such as worship, and rites of passage such as baptisms, confirmations, and marriages),<sup>50</sup> its activities (such as religious education, fellowship events, and acts of service),<sup>51</sup> and its artifacts (such as its church building).<sup>52</sup> Decline can diminish each of these, as church choirs and concerts are scaled back, as the number of children and young people decrease, as Bible studies, fellowship times, and service-oriented ministries are dropped, and as buildings deteriorate. In short, the effects of significant church decline can challenge and bring unwanted change to congregational culture in numerous ways.

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<sup>48</sup> Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*, 38–39; Hamman, *Steeple Cry*, 52–53.

<sup>49</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 81–82.

<sup>50</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 84–86.

<sup>51</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 87–88.

<sup>52</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 91–92.

### *Loss of Significance and Reputation*

Churches in decline can also experience a loss of significance and reputation, both within their local communities and within their denominations. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines significance as "the quality of being important."<sup>53</sup> Reputation is defined as "a place in public esteem or regard."<sup>54</sup> Decline can erode a congregation's importance and regard within its local community and also within its denomination. Congregational life cycle theory predicts that as churches decline they lose confidence in their capacity to meaningfully engage their community. As a result, they begin to withdraw from such involvement.<sup>55</sup> Churches that were once leaders in their community can find themselves forgotten and ignored. Churches can also find their reputation and significance diminished within their denomination. In a world of finite resources, declining congregations, particularly financially struggling congregations, will often receive reduced levels of support. Denominations will often choose to invest their limited financial and leadership resources in those churches that are growing or more likely to grow.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, churches that may have once been leaders within their denominations, can find themselves overlooked.<sup>57</sup>

In another respect, Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall would argue that all congregations, declining or not, must come to terms with Christendom's loss of significance within the western world. Hall suggests that one of the losses we might

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<sup>53</sup> Mish, *Webster's Ninth Collegiate*, 1096.

<sup>54</sup> Mish, *Webster's Ninth Collegiate*, 1001.

<sup>55</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 83.

<sup>56</sup> We see this, for example, in the case of Brighton Avenue Baptist Church, who would not qualify for denominational assistance unless they were able to submit a 10-year development plan (Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 77).

<sup>57</sup> Hamman tells the story of a Presbyterian Church that was once a leader in both its community and denomination. Once known as the "Steeple Church" the congregation ceased to engage the new people groups moving into its community, and lost its role within the denomination as a church that could offer guidance and leadership to other congregations (Hamman, *Steeple's Cry*, 31–32).

expect in the midst of decline is the loss of the Christendom narrative. For Hall, the term “Christendom” refers to the dominion of the Christian religion in the western world since the time of Constantine. As such, it also refers to the fact that the Christian religion came to be identified with the foundational values and morals of western society.<sup>58</sup> Hall notes that many North American Christians cannot conceive of Christianity apart from the Christendom narrative.<sup>59</sup> In other words, he contends that many North American Christians equate Christianity with Christendom, and therefore assume that Christianity is and ought to always be the dominant, central, and most influential religion in North America. And yet the experience of decline has the potential to challenge such an understanding of the faith. Declining churches often find themselves increasingly marginalized and perplexed by the values, priorities, and differing cultures of the wider community. As such, they may find their belief in the centrality of the Christian religion and the comfort derived from such a belief significantly challenged.

### *Loss of Hope*

Churches that experience significant decline can also experience a loss of hope. Churches can be said to struggle with hope in three ways. First, churches can experience a loss of hope because the focus of their hoping is most often unattainable. Second, churches can be said to lose hope because their future story has been compromised. Third, it can be said that the issue is not precisely one of a loss of hope, but is in fact one of a lack of hope to begin with. Each of these points will be considered in turn.

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<sup>58</sup> Hall, *Cross in Our Context*, 160, 164–166.

<sup>59</sup> Hall, *Cross in Our Context*, 169.



Declining churches can experience a loss of hope due to the continual frustration of their hoping. According to Capps, hope is not a diffuse experience, but is always grounded in a particular desire. He says: “Hoping is the perception that what one wants to happen will happen. . .”<sup>60</sup> To hope involves hoping in something or for something. In situations of significant decline, that which is most often hoped for is also most often unattainable. Churches in decline often hope for renewal. They hope to see the pews filled once again. They hope to see the Sunday School classrooms filled once again. They hope for a church that is once again bustling with activity and programs. This hope may be spoken of in terms of a hope in God and God’s faithfulness, but most often the hope is focused on the specifics of renewal. It is also important to note that the specifics of the renewal hoped for are most often defined by the past. Declining churches do not often hope for renewal that comes from significant change. They instead hope for the church to become once again what it once was in its prime.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, this is a hope that is most often unattainable. One of the reasons churches experience decline is because they continue to try to recreate a “glorious past” that is no longer viable. To hope for renewal that comes from the recreation of a glorious past cannot help but end in frustration and a potential loss of hope.

Furthermore, renewal materials provide little help in this regard. As was discussed in Chapter 2, they tend to agree that renewal must come through some kind of significant, or in the words of Heifetz and Linsky, adaptive change.<sup>62</sup> Hope, from the perspective of these materials, is located in renewal that comes through some kind of

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<sup>60</sup> Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 53.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Stein, "Letting Go," 208–217, who recounts the story of a synagogue that was unconsciously focused on seeking renewal through a recreation of its past.

<sup>62</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 13.

significant change. As the congregational life cycle has made clear, however, churches experiencing significant decline characteristically lack the resources and the necessary desire and will to make the significant/adaptive changes required to create the possibility of renewal.<sup>63</sup> Declining churches are left with two foci for their hope: to recreate the past and to change in significant ways, both of which will prove largely unattainable, potentially precipitating a loss of hope.

Another way to speak about a church's loss of hope has to do with the fact that decline can serve to compromise its future stories. Andrew Lester, in his book, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, makes the point that our perception of our past and present, as well as our perception of the future, all contribute to our hoping. Nevertheless, he affirms that our hoping is "primarily identified and shaped by the future dimension of human temporality."<sup>64</sup> For this reason he defines hope as "the configuration of cognitive and affective responses to life that believes the future is filled with possibilities and offers a blessing."<sup>65</sup> For Lester, to hope is to believe that the future holds possibility and blessing. Significant decline can serve to compromise a church's perception of the future. Churches may hope for renewal and a return to past glory, but they often find themselves faced week by week with declining numbers, an aging congregation and, in some cases, limited if not scarce financial resources. The persistence of decline makes it difficult over time to continue to believe in a hopeful future defined by some form of renewal.<sup>66</sup> Even those churches that have chosen to hope

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<sup>63</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 83–84, 86.

<sup>64</sup> Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care*, 59.

<sup>65</sup> Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care*, 62. It should be noted that Lester's definition of hope is more diffuse than Capps' definition of hope. Though different, both definitions offer insight into the experience of hope in situations of church decline.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, McMullin's account of the lived experience of church decline: "Pastor's eyes welled up with tears as they talked to me about people leaving their church to find a more vibrant congregation. . .

for mere survival can struggle to maintain hope for the same reasons. Congregants hope that the church may survive as long as themselves,<sup>67</sup> but even this possibility is called into question by the persistent progress of decline. Here finances will often become the deciding factor. Churches with sufficient finances will often go on surviving, while churches without sufficient finances may need to close. It is difficult for churches to sustain a hopeful outlook in the future when the ongoing decline and diminishment is all that is apparent.

On the basis of Capps' work, it might be possible to say that declining churches do not so much lose their hope, as they may have lacked hope to begin with. Capps, following the work of psychologist Paul Pruyser, draws a distinction between hoping and wishing. To wish is to express a desire that is not grounded in reality. In the case of a child who is missing her mother, wishing on the part of the child involves focusing on images and sensations of the absent mother. The wishful child focuses not so much on her actual mother, but on internal images and sensations of her mother.<sup>68</sup> The wishful child creates an internal image and experience of that which will satisfy her desire and wishes for that image and experience to be fulfilled. In contrast to this, hoping is grounded in reality. The child who hopes has moved to believe that her mother will actually return, and will return specifically because the mother herself desires to and is

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.In focus groups, people conveyed feelings of sadness that their children and grandchildren no longer attend their church. In some congregations, focus group participants and pastors predicted that their church would soon be closed. Church members talked to me about the loss of friends who used to attend the same congregation. . . . Nearly all expressed that their everyday lives, their families, and their communities are in some way affected by the diminished influence of religious faith" ("Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 1).

<sup>67</sup> This was the case for many of the older members of Faith Episcopal Church (Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, 203).

<sup>68</sup> Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 36.

able to return.<sup>69</sup> To hope is not so much to desire a specific and imagined outcome, but to believe that the object of one's desire is benevolently disposed towards oneself. Capps continues by recounting the way in which Pruyser relates this understanding of wishing and hoping to ultimate concerns. We can view the benevolence of the universe, or in our terms, God, from the perspective of wishing or hoping. To wish, in relation to God, involves viewing God as One who has promised to deliver specific goods.<sup>70</sup> To hope, in relation to God, involves viewing God as One who is benevolent, and ". . . whose benevolent intention will come through even in incalculable events and unforeseeable forms"<sup>71</sup>

Based on Capps' appropriation of Pruyser's work, it can actually be said that declining churches are, as understood by congregational life cycle theory, more inclined to wish than to hope. Churches that imagine a glorious past and long for the return of that past are involved in wishing.<sup>72</sup> In contrast to this, a hopeful stance would involve a focus not so much upon an imagined and desired outcome, as a focus upon the benevolence of God. It would involve a belief that God is good and desires to be good even in situations of significant decline, and would involve relinquishing any need to specify how God ought to express God's goodness. Capps has offered a conception of hope that could be beneficial for declining churches particularly because it is not tied to a specific outcome. Such hoping could prove resilient in the face of ongoing decline. Unfortunately, this way of conceiving hope is largely absent from those materials that speak to the situation of church decline.

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<sup>69</sup> Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 36.

<sup>70</sup> Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 37.

<sup>71</sup> Pruyser, *Between Belief and Unbelief*, 37.

<sup>72</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 83.

### *Loss of Power*

The experience of significant church decline can also be an experience of powerlessness. It is true that the idea and expression of power is often maligned, but power, understood broadly as the ability to make a difference, to exert influence, to attain a goal, is absolutely necessary to human life.<sup>73</sup> To this end Migliore affirms that,

Every human being, indeed every living creature, possesses and exercises power to some degree. We exercise power in everything we do, even in the smallest step we take. To be human is to have some power, to be able to do something, to reach a goal, to make a difference in the world. There is no life where there is no power. Possession and exercise of power is a necessity of life.<sup>74</sup>

Migliore also notes, however, that the experience of powerlessness is a expected reality of life. To be human is to experience the limits of our power and to, at times, be overwhelmed by the powers that surround us.<sup>75</sup> Despite the fact that powerlessness is a natural part of the human experience, it is also often a state that we deplore.<sup>76</sup> We find it frightening and painful to be rendered powerless. For this reason powerlessness can be experienced as a loss.

At least part of the experience of significant church decline will be marked by powerlessness. The experience of powerlessness will be, in part, because even those churches most ravaged by decline will still possess the power to effect certain tasks and goals. Most of these tasks would be managerial in nature, such as maintaining the building, reducing costs to balance the budget, providing weekly worship services, and maintaining the activities most important for the congregation.<sup>77</sup> Despite this, congregations will also experience the loss of power (loss of influence, loss of ability to

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<sup>73</sup> Migliore, *Power of God*, 3; Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, 7; Lukes, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>74</sup> Migliore, *Power of God*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Migliore, *Power of God*, 3–4.

<sup>76</sup> Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 83, 87.

accomplish a particular goal) in at least four important ways. As was discussed above, decline fosters a desire to recreate a desired past experience of church, a desire which most declining churches find themselves unable to effect. Decline is also an experience of being subject to powers beyond the control of the congregation, such as a changing religious ecology,<sup>78</sup> changing demographics,<sup>79</sup> and changing cultural values.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, decline leads to a loss of confidence in the ability to meaningfully relate to and influence the surrounding community. Finally, decline can also be an experience of being locked into a particular way of being church and being powerless to see beyond and/or to want to see beyond that way of being church.

#### *Loss of Trust in God*

The experience of significant church decline can also lead to a loss of trust in and disillusionment with God. The distinction Capps affirms between hoping and wishing helps to shed light on why this can be the case. Dashed wishes for the fulfillment of imagined goods can lead not only to a loss of hope but also a loss of trust in God. As Pruyser notes, when the goods fail to materialize, we can react as though “we have a case against God.”<sup>81</sup> It is to be expected that those congregations struggling with disillusionment would not readily give voice to their experience of it, yet McMullin did find some evidence of this. An anonymous survey revealed that some congregants confessed to having “religious doubts and misgivings” due to decline.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Eiesland, *A Particular Place*.

<sup>79</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 13–19.

<sup>80</sup> This was identified as being an issue for Carmel Wesleyan Church. The researcher noted that they have been “mystified by the transience of their new Carmel neighbors,” and that the church has found that the “newcomers are not rooted in the traditions that have nurtured the Carmel Wesleyan congregation. . .” (Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 91).

<sup>81</sup> Pruyser, *Between Belief and Unbelief*, 37.

<sup>82</sup> McMullin, “Social Aspects of Religious Decline,” 1.

According to Henri Nouwen, what is ultimately expressed in the wish for a re-creation of the past glory days of the church, is a wish for immortality. Nouwen believes that the human heart is rife with the illusion of immortality, despite our protestations to the contrary.<sup>83</sup> For Nouwen, our desire for immortality is belied in those things we invest with eternal significance. In his words, “. . .we keep giving an eternal value to the things we own, the people we know, the plans we have, and the successes we ‘collect.’”<sup>84</sup> We could add to this, that our desire for immortality is belied in the eternal value we give to our churches—the expectation, perhaps even the demand, that they should continue indefinitely in a form that is most pleasing and comfortable for us. Trust in God can be lost and disillusionment can grow when God does not appear to respond to our seemingly altruistic desire for the re-creation of the past glory days of the church.

### **Summary**

The preceding summary of grief theory has yielded two important results. It has provided a theoretical foundation for associating church decline with the experience of grief. It has also revealed that the losses associated with church decline will not only be objective in nature. They will also have to do with a congregation’s assumptive world—its understanding of God, the church in general, itself as a particular congregation, and the world.

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<sup>83</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 116.

<sup>84</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 116.

## Section 2: Church Decline and Responses to Grief

### Responses to Loss: Clarifying Terms

Therese Rando, in her discussion of anticipatory mourning, makes a helpful distinction between three main responses to loss: grief, mourning, and coping.<sup>85</sup> Clarifying the meaning of these terms will aid our ability to more accurately interpret churches' responses to decline. These terms will initially be described in relation to personal loss, and will subsequently be applied to the congregational context.

#### Grief as a Reaction to Loss

Rando defines grief as the “process of experiencing the psychological, behavioral, social, and physical reactions to the perception of loss.”<sup>86</sup> The experience of grief can be elicited both by objective losses and by the loss of assumptive worlds. The fact that grief is understood to be a reaction to loss connotes the more spontaneous nature of grief. Grief responses often come unbidden when it is perceived that a loss has been experienced.<sup>87</sup>

#### Mourning as a Response to Loss

In contrast to the often unbidden and reactive nature of grief, mourning refers to a more active, although sometimes still unconscious, process of responding to loss.

According to Rando, mourning refers to “the conscious and unconscious process and

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<sup>85</sup> Rando defines anticipatory mourning as “the phenomenon encompassing seven generic operations (grief and mourning, coping, interaction, psychosocial reorganization, planning, balancing conflicting demands, and facilitating an appropriate death) that, within a context of adaptational demands caused by experiences of loss and trauma, is stimulated in response to the awareness of life-threatening or terminal illness in oneself or a significant other and the recognition of associated losses in the past, present, and future” (Rando, “Anticipatory Mourning,” 4). Despite the breadth of the concept of anticipatory mourning, it is the concepts of grief, mourning, and coping that are important for our analysis of the situation of church decline.

<sup>86</sup> Rando, “Six Dimensions,” 60.

<sup>87</sup> Weiss, “Nature and Causes of Grief,” 31–32, describes his own unexpected and unbidden experience of grief when in the midst of feeling grateful for his wife’s successful cancer surgery, he at some level became more aware of the doctor’s statement that they would have two to three years together for sure, but possibly no more than this.



courses of action that promote three operations. . .”<sup>88</sup> The first operation involves the “undoing of the psychosocial ties binding the mourner to the loved one/object.”<sup>89</sup> The focus of the first operation is upon the lost object/person; and the aim is to facilitate the mourner’s eventual ability to establish new ties appropriate to the change that has been caused by the loss of relationship or object. The second operation involves “personally adapting to the loss.”<sup>90</sup> The focus of the second operation is upon the mourner herself or himself, and the mourner’s identity and assumptive worlds. The aim is for the mourner to adapt to the changes and challenges to his/her identity and assumptive worlds precipitated by the loss. The third operation involves “learning how to live in a healthy way in the new world without the deceased/lost object.”<sup>91</sup> The focus of the third operation is the external world. The aim is for the mourner to live in a healthy way in the world that is now devoid of the lost object or lost loved one.

A healthy response to grief requires both grief and mourning. The experience of grief is needed before true mourning can begin. The experience of grief helps the mourner recognize that a significant loss has actually occurred, and as such helps to prepare the mourner for the more active process of adjusting to the loss.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, mourning is needed in order to complete the experience of grief. Grief alone is not sufficient to facilitate a healthy accommodation to loss because it only includes a person’s reactions to the loss, and not the work of adjusting to it.

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<sup>88</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62. The following is summarized from Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62.

<sup>89</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62.

<sup>90</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62.

<sup>91</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62.

<sup>92</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62.

### Coping as a Response to Loss

A third, and necessary response to loss is that of coping. Rando draws upon the work of Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman to develop her understanding of coping.<sup>93</sup> Lazarus and Folkman define coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.”<sup>94</sup> Coping, as a response to loss, speaks to a person’s efforts to handle that which is perceived as stressful. Two main approaches to coping have been identified: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.<sup>95</sup> In problem-focused coping, the efforts to manage the stress are directed towards managing or altering the situation. Problem-focused coping tends to involve strategies similar to problem solving: “defining the problem, generating alternative solutions, weighing alternatives, choosing among them, and acting.”<sup>96</sup> Efforts towards problem-solving coping can be focused upon the outside environment and the management or alteration of the external source of the stress. However, efforts towards problem-solving coping can also be focused inwardly. One can seek to manage the stress of a situation by, for example: “shifting one’s level of aspiration, reducing ego involvement, finding alternative channels of gratification, developing new standards of behavior, or learning new skills and procedures.”<sup>97</sup> Problem-focused coping is most often undertaken when the situation is thought to be amenable to change.

In contrast to this, emotion-focused coping is directed towards managing one’s emotional response to the stressful situation. This form of coping will tend to be

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<sup>93</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 63.

<sup>94</sup> Lazarus and Folkman, *Stress*, 141.

<sup>95</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 64. The following is summarized from Rando, "Six Dimensions," 64.

<sup>96</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 64.

<sup>97</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 64.

employed when it is perceived that the stressful situation cannot be mitigated more directly. At least two main categories of emotion-focused coping have been identified. The first approach employs cognitive strategies meant to decrease the emotional distress. Rando lists several examples of such cognitive strategies, such as: "avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparisons, and wresting positive value from negative events."<sup>98</sup> The second approach employs behavioural strategies to decrease the emotional distress, such as "engaging in physical exercise, medicating, having a drink, venting anger, or seeking emotional support."<sup>99</sup>

Grief, mourning and coping comprise the main responses to loss. Ideally, the person who has experienced loss will employ a combination of these responses, enabling them to respond to loss in the best possible way.<sup>100</sup> This does not always happen, however. Stephen Connor found that some people will respond to loss or the threat of it with avoidant and denial-like coping strategies.<sup>101</sup> When they do, it is less likely that a loss or impending loss will be perceived, and as a result the experience of grief and mourning will be forestalled.<sup>102</sup>

This clarification of terms is important for at least two reasons. First, it distinguishes between grief and mourning and asserts that the experience of a grief reaction alone does not constitute a healthy response to loss. Second, Connor's insights are important because they alert us to the fact that coping strategies, which can be employed in support of a healthy response to loss, can also be employed in an unhealthy

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<sup>98</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 64.

<sup>99</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 65.

<sup>100</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62.

<sup>101</sup> Connor, "Denial," 259.

<sup>102</sup> Connor, "Denial," 263.

way. It is possible to respond to loss with coping strategies that forestall an experience of grief and mourning.

### **Grief and Mourning in Declining Congregations**

Of the three responses to loss, we are most interested here in both grief and mourning. Our end goal will be to assess whether the churches in our case studies demonstrate evidence of both grief and mourning. In order to aid this goal, three matters will now be discussed. Corporate grief and mourning will be the first matter to be discussed. Do congregations experience grief and mourning and do they experience it corporately, or do the various congregants experience it personally? Following this, an outline of the grief reactions that might be common to declining congregations will be offered. Last, four tasks involved in mourning will be described, along with a theoretical consideration of how these tasks might be applied to congregational loss.

#### Do Congregations Experience Grief and Do They Need to Mourn?

It has been argued that church decline involves significant loss, both in terms of the objective aspects of a congregation such as its resources and programs and so on, and in terms of a congregation's assumptive world. Two questions must now be addressed. Can it be assumed, however, that congregations will experience grief reactions as a result of these losses, and therefore also require engagement with a process of mourning? Furthermore, can psychological theories of grief and mourning be justifiably used to describe the experience of loss and grief related to church decline?

#### *Grief and Mourning in Congregations*

Support for the contention that congregations do experience grief, and therefore require a process of mourning can be found from several sources. The works of Bush, Hamman, and Arbuckle have already been discussed. Each of these authors assumes

that congregations will experience grief in response to loss that will also precipitate the need for a mourning process.<sup>103</sup> Further support for this assumption can be found within the broader field of organizational studies. Those who study organizations have found evidence of grief and the need for mourning within organizations that experience death-like situations such as closure, transition, and downsizing.<sup>104</sup> Gary Blau and Melinda Milligan both found that employees could experience the closure of an organization or site as a death.<sup>105</sup> Blau also found that stage models of grief provide a good explanation of employees' responses to organizational downsizing.<sup>106</sup> Deone Zell would concur, finding that Kübler-Ross's stages of dying strongly resembled individuals' and a group's responses to change.<sup>107</sup> With respect to the need for mourning, Stuart Albert found that organizational transitions require a mourning process, and recommends organizational funerals as a means of enabling members to grieve the loss of what was as a way of preparing for the future.<sup>108</sup> Zell also concludes that a deliberate process of working through the loss involved in change is needed, at both the personal and group level, before members will be able to embrace the change.<sup>109</sup> Likewise, Stanley Harris and Robert Sutton found that ritual acts could help organization members cope with organizational death.<sup>110</sup> Howard Stein, an expert in what he calls the change-loss-grief

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<sup>103</sup> Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*; Hamman, *Steeple's Cry*; Arbuckle, *Grief and Renewal*.

<sup>104</sup> Bell and Taylor acknowledge that: "care must be taken in generalizing findings from studies of individual bereavement to organizational contexts." Nevertheless, they have found that many scholars studying the phenomenon of organizational grief have argued that the "reactions of loss and grief that such collective situations provoke are broadly similar to those associated with the death of an individual person. Theories of individual bereavement have thereby acquired the potential to inform understandings of loss and grief at the collective level" ("Beyond Letting Go," 1).

<sup>105</sup> Blau, "Process Model," 12–28; Milligan, "Loss of Site," 411–431.

<sup>106</sup> Blau, "Process Model," 12–28.

<sup>107</sup> Zell, "Organizational Change," 73–96.

<sup>108</sup> Albert, "Successful Transitions," 169–191.

<sup>109</sup> Zell, "Organizational Change," 73–96.

<sup>110</sup> Harris and Sutton, "Parting Ceremonies," 5–30.

triad in organizations,<sup>111</sup> worked with a Jewish synagogue experiencing decline. He found an organization that was unable to mourn, and that was in a sense frozen in the past and focused on the need to recreate the past.<sup>112</sup> Stein found that as he facilitated a process of mourning, blaming and mistrust diminished, and empathy and the desire to listen grew amongst the congregants, as well as a tentative desire to begin to narrate new stories.<sup>113</sup> In general, the argument that organizations do experience grief and can benefit from processes of mourning as a means of coming to accept and move beyond the loss is supported.

*Grief and Mourning in Congregations: A Personal or Corporate Experience?*

A closer look at the above-mentioned studies, however, reveals that a further question must be addressed. Is the grief that occurs in organizations, and in this case congregations, of a personal or corporate nature? Do the individual members experience their own personal grief as an aggregate when the congregation declines, or does the congregation as a whole experience grief as a shared experience? Two of the studies described above, while speaking of organizational grief, understand that particular grief to be experienced by individual persons as opposed to the organization as a whole.<sup>114</sup> Only Zell looked for and found evidence of movement through the stages of grief at both an individual and group level.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, Albert, and Harris and Sutton, when writing about the importance of corporate mourning rituals, understand these rituals to be of benefit to individual group members.<sup>116</sup> The question is important because it raises the issue of how to conceive of grief and mourning in a congregational setting. If grief were

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<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Stein, "Change, Loss," 66–80.

<sup>112</sup> Stein, "Letting Go," 204–223.

<sup>113</sup> Stein, "Letting Go," 216, 218.

<sup>114</sup> Blau, "Process Model," 12–28; Milligan, "Loss of Site," 411–431 .

<sup>115</sup> Zell, "Organizational Change," 73–96.

<sup>116</sup> Albert, "Successful Transitions," 169–191; Harris and Sutton, "Parting Ceremonies," 5–30.

found to be experienced by the persons in a group alone, then it would be justifiable to apply psychological conceptions of grief and mourning to the situation of church decline—conceptions that have been developed from an individualistic perspective. The situation might be different, however, if it were to be found that the grief of church decline was experienced, not only by the individual members of the group, but as a shared experience of the group itself. Do groups as a collective whole experience grief and move through a process of mourning in the same way that individuals do? Can psychological understandings of grief and mourning, developed from an individualistic perspective, be applied to the experience of corporate or shared grief?

It is generally accepted that groups can become something more than the sum of their parts. This would certainly be true of church communities as a particular instance of a group. According to Robert Bellah et al., a religious community is an example of a “community of memory.”<sup>117</sup> As a community, it has a collective narrative that contributes to the constitution (or in-formation) of the persons that make up that community.<sup>118</sup> Likewise Jeffrey Olick argues that it is not enough to conceive of groups on an individualistic basis only. It is not enough, as some would argue, to think of groups and group experience as being constituted by the individuals that comprise the group.<sup>119</sup> Instead, he agrees with the assertion that “. . .collectivities have memories, just like they have identities, and that ideas, styles, genres, and discourses, among other

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<sup>117</sup> Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 153.

<sup>118</sup> Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 153. See also Lawrence, "Organizational Behavior," 4, who affirms that groups cannot only be understood in terms of their constituent parts, but must as be understood as a corporate entity.

<sup>119</sup> Olick, "Collective Memory," 338. In this article Olick studies collective memory, but his insights into the nature of groups would apply to situations of collective grief as well. This is a view that corresponds well to that espoused by congregational studies. See for example, Hopewell, *Congregation*, and Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 78–104.

things, are more than the aggregation of individual subjectivities. . .”<sup>120</sup> In the end, Olick concludes that groups ought to be understood as both aggregates of individual members, and as collectives that constitute their members.<sup>121</sup> He therefore suggests that it is necessary to study the functioning of groups through a wide variety of means—means that appreciate the personal and therefore psychological aspect of group functioning and means that also appreciate the social and collective aspect of group functioning.<sup>122</sup>

It would be ideal to be able to draw upon work that has studied organizational grief from a socio-cultural perspective. Unfortunately, according to Emma Bell and Scott Taylor, those perspectives that understand organizations to be a group of individuals have so far dominated the work in this field.<sup>123</sup> What does this mean for our work here? It means that because churches, as an instance of a group, are constituted at least in part by the aggregation of a number of persons, that it is justifiable to apply psychological theories of grief and mourning to the experience of church decline. It also means that we can speak in terms of a shared or corporate experience of grief as the individual group members experience together their grief.<sup>124</sup> It also means, however, that at this point it will not be possible to bring a collectivist or socio-cultural understanding of grief and mourning into the discussion.

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<sup>120</sup> Olick, "Collective Memory," 342.

<sup>121</sup> Olick, "Collective Memory," 346.

<sup>122</sup> Olick, "Collective Memory," 340, 346.

<sup>123</sup> Bell and Taylor, "Beyond Letting Go," 8. Bell and Taylor argue the need for studies that develop and operate from a socio-cultural perspective of organizational loss and grief.

<sup>124</sup> To view groups from an individualistic perspective does not preclude the possibility of shared experience. From this perspective, though, the shared experience is constituted not by "symbols and their systems of relations [that] have a degree of autonomy from the subjective perceptions of individuals" (Olick, "Collective Memory," 341), but is constituted by the experience of the individuals participating in the group (338).



### Grief Reactions in Declining Congregations

Since Erich Lindemann's seminal work on the symptomatology of acute grief,<sup>125</sup> much research has been conducted for the purpose of describing the experience of grief that results from the loss of a significant other. George Bonanno and Stacey Kaltman reviewed a large body of this research and summarized the results. They found that the experience of grief is composed of four types of disruptions in the first year after the loss of a loved one. They are: "cognitive disorganization, dysphoria [or intensified negative emotions], health deficits, and disruptions in social and occupational functioning."<sup>126</sup>

While research into the loss of a loved one has formed the foundation for an understanding of grief, it is also understood that not all losses will evoke this full range of grief reactions.<sup>127</sup> A clue as to the kind of grief reactions that might be most commonly experienced within situations of church decline comes from two studies.

Marc Fried found what he concluded to be grief reactions among those who had been

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<sup>125</sup> Lindemann, "Symptomatology and Management," 8–18.

<sup>126</sup> Bonanno and Kaltman, "Varieties of Grief Experience," 715. Cognitive disorganization refers to: a difficulty accepting the loss as well as a sense of disorganization and preoccupation; a sense of lost identity or a merger of identity with the deceased; uncertainty about the future, and an enduring search for some sense of meaning in the loss (715–716). The dysphoria involves: a variety of emotions including "anger, irritability, hostility, sadness, fear, and guilt" (717); an intense pining or yearning for the deceased; and feelings of intense loneliness (717–718). The health deficits include: "increased somatic difficulties, including shortness of breath, palpitations, digestive difficulties, loss of appetite, restlessness, and insomnia" (719); and the increased possibility of mortality (720–721). Finally, the social and occupational disruptions include increased social withdrawal, difficulties fulfilling work and family roles, as well as difficulty managing spare time, and difficulties with the formation and maintenance of new intimate relationships (721–722).

<sup>127</sup> John Archer and Valerie Rhodes, for example, found a range of grief reactions amongst those who had lost a job. The most common reactions were restlessness, depression, and irritability found in over 70% of the respondents. Anxiety was found in 60% of the respondents. Shock and distress, and anger and bitterness were found in 46.6% of the respondents. Other reactions found in 38% to 26% of the respondents were: pangs (feelings of strongly missing work); loss of appetite and weight loss; sleeplessness; preoccupation with thoughts of the former job or the circumstances of the loss; physical symptoms such as palpitations, feelings of panic, bowel disturbances, headaches and other aches and pains; denial and searching behaviour such as seeking out old workmates and visiting the former workplace ("Grief Process and Job Loss," 398, 401–402).

forcibly relocated from one neighbourhood in Boston to another. These reactions were: painful loss; continued longing; a depressive tone; symptoms of psychological, social, and somatic distress; feelings of helplessness; anger, and tendencies to idealize the lost home.<sup>128</sup> Dorothy Barra et al. found anecdotal evidence of grief reactions amongst those who experienced a threatened or actual loss of religious identity, community, and/or spirituality. The authors interviewed clergy and lay people who had either experienced this kind of loss themselves, or who had worked with those who had experienced this kind of loss. They found reports of grief reactions such as anger, sadness, a sense of alienation, feelings of emptiness and despair, feelings of fear and anxiety, discontent, and a sense of hopelessness.<sup>129</sup> Congregations may not experience the full range of grief reactions in response to the losses that accompany church decline; this does not mean, however, that they are not experiencing some form of grief.

#### Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning in the Declining Congregation

Mourning, for the purpose of this work, will be understood in terms of William Worden's four tasks of mourning. It is recognized that various approaches to mourning have been proposed over the years,<sup>130</sup> and that each of these various approaches will have certain strengths and limitations. It is not within the scope of this study to appraise

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<sup>128</sup> Fried, "Lost Home," 151.

<sup>129</sup> Barra et al., "Loss in Religious Identity," 295. Based on the anecdotal evidence, the authors conducted research among college students to empirically study the extent to which these students experienced grief-like responses following a loss of religious identity. The research found that fewer respondents than expected experienced grief-like reactions to the loss of religious identity. They identified various reasons for these unexpected results—one reason being that among college students, a change in religious affiliation can be seen as a sign of growth and development of independent thought. In conclusion, they still suspect that grief-like responses would tend to accompany the loss of religious identity, and emphasized the need for further research (305–307).

<sup>130</sup> The stage approach to mourning was made famous by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (*On Death and Dying*). Although her intent was to describe the psychological experience of dying, her work has also been applied to the process of mourning (Maciejewski et al., "Stage Theory of Grief," 716–723). Parkes and Bowlby both affirmed a phase approach to mourning (Parkes, *Bereavement*; Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3). Stroebe and Schut have proposed a dual-process model of mourning in which the mourner oscillates between a focus on loss and a focus on restoration (Stroebe and Schut, "Dual Process Model," 223–240).

the various approaches. While recognizing that it too will have its limitations, Worden's task approach has been chosen to provide the framework for our discussion of mourning for several reasons. Worden's use of the term "task" as opposed to "phase" connotes that mourning is not just a passive response, but involves a form of active engagement on the part of the mourner.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, he conceives of his tasks in a non-linear and flexible way. He understands that mourners will move back and forth between the tasks as needed, can engage in more than one task simultaneously and can back away from engaging in the tasks when necessary.<sup>132</sup> Worden has incorporated into his tasks an appreciation of the research that reveals that grief does not involve detaching wholly from the lost loved one.<sup>133</sup> For this reason Worden's fourth task is understood as finding ". . .an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life."<sup>134</sup> Finally, Worden has also incorporated into his third task an appreciation of the fact that mourning involves a process of meaning-making. Mourning involves the process of developing a meaningful life without the lost person or object.<sup>135</sup>

It must be noted that Worden assumes that the grief at issue has been caused by the loss of a loved one. For our purposes here, and on the basis of the support provided earlier regarding congregational grief and mourning, Worden's work will be applied to the situation of church decline. We will proceed by first outlining the content of Worden's tasks, as he has done, in reference to the loss of a loved one. We will then consider how each task might apply to the situation of church decline.

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<sup>131</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 38. Worden notes that there is validity to a phase approach epitomized by the saying "time heals all wounds." He believes that "There is also truth to the notion that mourning creates tasks that need to be accomplished. . . This can be a powerful antidote to feelings of helplessness that most mourners experience" (38).

<sup>132</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 53.

<sup>133</sup> See, for example, Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, eds., *Continuing Bonds*.

<sup>134</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 50.

<sup>135</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 4. See, for example, Neimeyer, ed. *Meaning Reconstruction*.

*Task One: Accepting the Reality of the Loss*

Worden's first task involves coming to full acceptance of the fact that the loved one is dead, and will not and cannot return.<sup>136</sup> Yearning, and in a sense searching for the one who has been lost, are key responses associated with engaging this task. He notes that many mourners will, for a time, seek to deny the reality and finality of the loss as a means of protecting themselves from it. They may also seek to protect themselves from the reality of the loss by denying the meaning of it in an attempt to render it less significant than it actually is. Mourners who have lost a loved one will tell themselves, for example, that they were not really that close to the person in an attempt to diminish the significance of the loss. The task of accepting the reality of a loss will take time, and requires not only intellectual acceptance of the loss, but also emotional acceptance of it. Often those working on this task will alternate between periods of belief and disbelief that the person is actually gone. In fact, Worden notes that it is possible even for the mourner to both believe and disbelieve at the same time.

*Task Two: Processing the Pain of the Loss*

Worden's second task involves processing the pain associated with a loss.<sup>137</sup> Worden contends that it is absolutely necessary for the mourner to not only acknowledge the loss, but to experience and work through the pain of the loss. This pain will often be felt as sadness and intense grief, but may also be felt as anger, anxiety, guilt, depression, and loneliness. He affirms that to fail to acknowledge and process the pain will lead to a prolongation of the mourning process. He also notes that while different people will

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<sup>136</sup> The following is summarized from Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 39–43.

<sup>137</sup> The following is summarized from Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 43–46. Worden's conception of mourning does correspond to Rando's conception of mourning mentioned earlier. Worden's first two tasks, which involve accepting the reality of the loss, and working through the pain of it, correspond to Rando's first operation of mourning which involves undoing the ties binding the mourner to the lost loved one or object (Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62).

experience different intensities of pain associated with loss, it would be impossible for someone to lose a significant other without feeling some kind of pain. Mourners can often try to avoid the pain of loss. Unfortunately this tendency can be supported by the wider society that often communicates the message that it is not really necessary, and perhaps even ill-adjusted to allow oneself to experience the pain of loss.

The application of Worden's first two tasks to the situation of church decline can be discerned. Based on Worden's work, if churches wish to actively mourn the losses they have experienced as a result of decline, they will need to accept the reality of the losses they have incurred and allow themselves to experience and work through the pain associated with them. With respect to the list of objective losses offered above, two of the most foundational losses that must be accepted are the loss of future certainty, and loss of viability. These two losses lie at the heart of the experience of decline, and in a sense give power to the other losses described above. A loss of programs, numbers, and vibrancy will be much easier and less painful to accept if, for example, the future and future viability of the church is assured. For this reason, these two objective losses and related losses of assumptive worlds will form the focus of our consideration of the way in which Worden's tasks relate to the situation of church decline.

It must not be underestimated the difficulty a church might have coming to accept these two losses and allowing itself to experience the pain of them. According to life cycle theory, every impetus within declining churches has to do with preserving the church as it is, and seeking to make it work again as it has in the past. To suggest that a church as it has been is no longer viable is to assert that no amount of effort, or even prayer, will enable the church to thrive again as it now stands. It is to ask the congregation to wonder about and feel the pain of God's seeming refusal to breathe life

back into the church in its current form. Similarly, it would also be difficult for a congregation to come to accept the reality of their uncertain future. Many churchgoers have grown up assuming that their church will always be there. What could it mean that God might allow one's church to come to what seems to be such a meaningless end? Churches provide a source of identity and sense of belonging as well as a sense of comfort and security to congregants. Asking a congregation to accept the fact that the church may not have a future means asking the congregation to accept that they may need to find an alternate source of these goods. This is compounded by the fact that it is simply difficult to live with uncertainty. Capps and Carlin's exploration of the experience of being in a state of limbo, discussed earlier, demonstrated this point. We spend a great deal of energy in our own lives in an effort to wrest at least the illusion of control and certainty out of an uncertain future. To ask a congregation to accept a loss of certainty is to ask them to give up a tangible source of their hope. It is, in a sense, to ask a congregation to strip themselves of one of the most fundamental things they have come to depend on and stand naked before an unpredictable God. In light of what is involved in a church coming to accept the reality and pain of even these two losses, Worden's caution, that such a process of acceptance will take time, is apt.

*Task Three: Adjusting to the World in Light of the Loss*

Adjusting to a world without the lost loved one constitutes Worden's third task of mourning.<sup>138</sup> Three adjustments must be made in this respect: internal, external, and spiritual. External adjustments are the changes one needs to make to accommodate for the fact that the loved one is no longer present. These external adjustments usually have

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<sup>138</sup> The following is summarized from Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 46–49. Worden's third task corresponds to Rando's second operation of personally adapting to the loss (Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62).

to do with learning to fill the roles that were performed by the lost loved one. Internal adjustments pertain to the fact that the loss of a loved one usually affects the mourner's "self-definition, self-esteem, and sense of self-efficacy."<sup>139</sup> After losing a loved one, the mourner often needs to reconsider who they are, the source of their worth, and the aspects of their lives over which they can realistically expect to effect control. Spiritual adjustments, for Worden, refer to those adjustments a mourner must make to their way of understanding the world. There is a need to search for meaning in the loss, and a need to give due consideration to the ways in which the death has challenged the mourner's beliefs about the world. Worden contends that this third task is pivotal in the mourning process. Failure to reassess oneself and one's situation and beliefs in light of the external, internal, and spiritual challenges presented by a loss will result in a stagnation of the mourning process. The person who cannot adjust to the changes presented by the loss will find himself or herself unable to consider new possibilities for living without the loved one.

Of the three kinds of adjustments involved in Worden's third task of mourning, it is the internal and spiritual adjustments that are most important for our discussion of loss in the context of church decline. This is because the two objective losses that are providing the focus for our discussion, the loss of viability, and the loss of certainty, do not readily lead to the immediate need to make external adjustments. They do, however, lead to the need to make what Worden refers to as internal and spiritual adjustments.

A declining congregation that has begun to come to terms with these two fundamental losses will need to ask some penetrating questions. Who are we now as a congregation, if the way in which we have been church together is no longer viable? In

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<sup>139</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 47.

what can we place our hope as a congregation if not in the future certainty of the church? What meaning can we find in this experience of decline? Where is God in this? If a congregation is to mourn the losses that come with the experience of decline, then they must be willing to wrestle with these penetrating questions, and wrestle with them honestly. It will be important for a congregation to be willing to live with the questions, and not abbreviate the process in a rush for answers. Worden, in relation to this, recounts the story of a woman who lost her young son in a plane crash. She noted that sometimes “there is no clear answer,” and it becomes more important to live with the questions than to rush to find answers.<sup>140</sup>

*Task Four: Moving Towards Newness*

Worden’s fourth task involves moving towards a new life while finding an enduring connection with the deceased.<sup>141</sup> Worden has embraced the research which has demonstrated that bereaved persons must learn to let go of the lost loved one and develop new attachments, even while maintaining continuing bonds with the one who was lost. This task asks mourners to keep the lost loved one close, in memories, and in the “influences, the inspirations, the values, and the meanings embodied in their lives,”<sup>142</sup> while incorporating these goods into new patterns for living effectively without the one who was lost. Worden describes the non-completion of this task as “not living.”<sup>143</sup> For the person who is unable to engage this task, it is as if “One’s life has

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<sup>140</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 49–52. Worden’s fourth task corresponds to Rando’s third operation of establishing new ties appropriate to the loss that has occurred (Rando, “Six Dimensions,” 62).

<sup>141</sup> The following is summarized from Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 50–53.

<sup>142</sup> Attig, W. D., *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 189. Quoted in Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 52.

<sup>143</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 52.



stopped with the death and has not resumed. The fourth task is hindered when one holds on to the past attachment in a way that precludes one from forming new ones.”<sup>144</sup>

Worden’s fourth task suggests that in order for a church to mourn the losses that come with decline, there will be a need for the church to continue to embrace what has been, while moving on to become something new. We will begin by considering this task with respect to the loss of viability of the church as it had been. According to Worden’s fourth task, there will be a need for the congregation to find a way to embrace and retain all the good that has come from being church as they have been, all the while moving forward into a new way of being church that is more viable now. Put another way, mourning means that the congregation must not hold on to the church, as it has been, in a way that will impede the congregation from moving forward into a new way of being church. In a previous edition of Worden’s book, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, Worden uses the phrase “not loving” instead of “not living” to describe the non-completion of task four.<sup>145</sup> This difference in terminology is helpful. To mourn means not loving the way they have been church to such an extent that they cannot move forward to express love in the community in new and effective ways. Understandably, this will not be an easy task for a congregation. Worden acknowledges that, of all the tasks, this is the most difficult, because it can be so easy to become stuck in one’s past attachments.<sup>146</sup>

It is more difficult, but not impossible to discern how Worden’s fourth task might pertain to the loss of the future certainty of the church. This is because the loss of future viability is much less tangible than even the loss of a church’s viability. The

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<sup>144</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 52.

<sup>145</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 17.

<sup>146</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling*, 52.

assuredness of a church's future provides congregants with a sense of comfort, security, and confidence. This is despite the fact that many churchgoers will attest to the fact that God alone is the source of these goods. It is difficult to become aware of the degree to which we derive these goods from our churches, until the future of the church is challenged. The loss of the future certainty of a church means the loss of a significant source of a congregation's comfort, security, and confidence. Mourning, in this respect, would mean letting go of the assuredness of the church's future as a source of comfort, security, and confidence, and finding a new source for these goods. Ideally, it would mean finding a new kind of confidence and security and comfort in God, even when God proves to be unpredictable.

The biblical account of the Israelites during the exodus from Egypt provides an illustration of this kind of process. Time and again, the Israelites longed to return to Egypt because, at least, there they had a degree of certainty about their lives. In Egypt they knew what to expect, and had meat to eat and water to drink on a regular basis (see, for example, Ex 16:3; 17:3; 14:1-4; 20:4-5; 21:4-5). At least part of their journey to the promised land through forty years of wandering in the desert had to do with them coming to find a greater sense of security, comfort, and confidence in God than in their former lives in Egypt.

One can see from this brief discussion of the tasks of mourning as described by Worden that mourning the losses inherent in church decline is a far different approach to the situation of decline than those discussed in the previous chapter. And yet it is a process that aims for a similar result, the movement of the church into a new and more effective way of being church. Engagement with the tasks of mourning would require much penetrating soul-searching on the part of churches. It would require a deep

acceptance of the church's fundamental losses and a willingness to experience and process the accompanying pain. It would also require a willingness to engage the questions, doubts, and challenges to meaning raised by the losses. Furthermore, it would require a willingness to embrace the past while becoming something new, all the while embracing a sometimes unpredictable God as the church's source of security, confidence, and comfort.

### **Doka's Concept of Disenfranchised Grief and Church Decline**

One possible facet of the grief experienced by churches in decline is that the congregation's grief may be, according to theorist Kenneth Doka, disenfranchised. Doka coined the term "disenfranchised grief" to describe those instances of loss and grief that are not socially recognized or sanctioned. He therefore defines disenfranchised grief as "the grief that persons experience when they mourn a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported."<sup>147</sup> Those who experience disenfranchised grief are those who experience a grief response to a significant loss, while receiving no social recognition or support for their grief.<sup>148</sup>

The reason grief can be disenfranchised is because loss and grief are subject to a society's or community's grieving rules. Doka draws upon the work of Arlie Hochschild to establish his point. Hochschild concluded that societies develop "feeling rules." These are the norms that govern what a person should feel in any given situation.<sup>149</sup> Building on Hochschild's point, Doka concludes that societies also develop "thinking rules," norms that govern how one ought to think in any given situation. For

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<sup>147</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief," 4. See also Doka, "Introduction," 5; and Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 224.

<sup>148</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 224.

<sup>149</sup> Hochschild, "Emotion Work," 563–566.

this reason, he then concludes that every society will also establish norms that govern what losses and manifestations of grief are acceptable.<sup>150</sup> Doka says:

Every society has norms that frame grieving. These norms include not only expected behaviors but also norms for feeling, thinking, and spiritual expression. . . they govern what losses one grieves, how one grieves them, who legitimately can grieve the loss, and how and to whom others respond with sympathy and support.<sup>151</sup>

Doka identified three main reasons for why grief can become disenfranchised. Grief can be disenfranchised because the relationship is not recognized as being close enough, socially acceptable, or current enough to warrant the bereaved a full opportunity to grieve.<sup>152</sup> Grief can also be disenfranchised because the griever is essentially deemed to be incapable of grief. The very old, the very young, and those with developmental disabilities are often deemed to be incapable of grief in this respect.<sup>153</sup> Most important for our work here is the third reason for why grief may be disenfranchised. The third reason grief may be disenfranchised is because the society or community does not acknowledge the loss as a being significant enough to warrant grief. Doka offers a few examples by way of illustration.<sup>154</sup> He notes that research has demonstrated that perinatal deaths, which can lead to strong grief reactions, are often perceived as being a relatively minor loss. The grief resulting from an abortion can be disenfranchised by both those who do not sanction the act, and also by those who sanction the act but minimize the loss. Those experiencing a terminal but prolonged illness can experience

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<sup>150</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief," 4; Doka, "Introduction," 6; Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 225.

<sup>151</sup> Doka, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>152</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief," 5; Doka, "Introduction," 10–11; Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 229–231.

<sup>153</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief," 6–7; Doka, "Introduction," 13; Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 232.

<sup>154</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief," 5–6; Doka, "Introduction," 11–13; Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 231–232.

multiple significant losses as the disease progresses that are not socially recognized. Many instances of loss could lead to an experience of disenfranchised grief such as: infertility, job loss, the loss of reputation due to a scandal, the loss of one's hopes when a child is born with a disability, and so on. The concept of disenfranchised grief is sufficiently intriguing to consider whether this concept might apply to situations of church decline. Might the grief evoked by church decline go unacknowledged and unrecognized because the congregation has developed feeling and thinking rules that prevent it from acknowledging the grief?

#### Might Declining Churches Experience Disenfranchised Grief?

In order to argue that the grief engendered by church decline can be disenfranchised, we must affirm one point and demonstrate a second. First, we must affirm that churches are communities that are likely to develop feeling, thinking, and subsequently grieving rules in general. Second, we must demonstrate that it is likely for norms to exist that would preclude churches from grieving in situations of church decline. We will consider each of these matters in turn.

Are churches capable of developing feeling and thinking rules unique to them? Doka addresses large-scale societies when he states that "every society has norms that govern not only behavior but also affect and cognition," and that "every society has norms that frame grieving."<sup>155</sup> But he also acknowledges that subcultures within the dominant society are capable of developing their own unique grieving rules, and that these subcultures can be defined by any number of organizing factors.<sup>156</sup> Congregations, particularly when viewed through the lens of congregational studies, can be easily seen

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<sup>155</sup> Doka, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>156</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 227.

to be subcultures capable of developing their own feeling, thinking and, subsequently, grieving rules. Hopewell, in his seminal book, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, defines a congregation as “*a group that possesses a special name and recognized members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practiced worship but who communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story.*”<sup>157</sup> Ammerman asserts that congregations develop their own culture and identity.<sup>158</sup> According to her, a congregation’s culture develops out of its history and important stories. It is shaped by the larger culture(s) of its members, but develops its own unique shape when the various members are gathered together.<sup>159</sup> Ammerman notes: “Just as our larger culture tells us how to greet people and how to eat properly and what sorts of clothes to wear, so a congregational culture gives those rules its own special twist.”<sup>160</sup> Both Ammerman and Hopewell affirm that congregations will develop unique ways of viewing the world and of behaving. It is to be expected then that they will also develop feeling and thinking rules, and indeed even grieving rules in the same way that larger societies and other subcultures do.

Is it likely that churches might develop grieving rules that would preclude them from acknowledging their grief in situations of church decline? According to Doka, for grief to be truly disenfranchised, the norms governing grief must exist as laws that carry with them sanctions when transgressed. In other words, the norms cannot just exist as “folkways, or informally expected behaviors” that carry no inherent sanctions.<sup>161</sup>

Furthermore, Charles Corr clarifies that disenfranchising grief is an active process.

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<sup>157</sup> Hopewell, *Congregation*, 12–13, emphasis original.

<sup>158</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 78.

<sup>159</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 78.

<sup>160</sup> Ammerman, "Culture and Identity," 78.

<sup>161</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 225.

Simply not being aware of a particular grief does not constitute disenfranchisement. According to Corr, for grief to be disenfranchised “suggests a more or less active process of disavowal, renunciation and rejection.”<sup>162</sup>

The sanctions and active process of disavowing grief can be applied from without, interpersonally, but they can also be applied from within, intrapersonally. Jeffrey Kauffman recognized that not only can grief be disavowed by one’s community or society, but that grief can be disavowed by oneself as well. He uses the term “self-disenfranchisement” to describe two instances of this tendency. First, he uses the term self-disenfranchisement to describe the fact that any process of the social disenfranchisement of grief is supported by a corresponding psychological phenomenon. He argues that in situations of social disenfranchisement, the griever actually becomes the agent of the disenfranchisement, and withholds from himself or herself the right to acknowledge loss and grief.<sup>163</sup> Second, however, he acknowledges that a special case of self-disenfranchisement, more properly termed self-initiated disenfranchisement, occurs when a person initiates the disavowal of loss and grief quite apart from any societal input.<sup>164</sup> Kauffman acknowledges, therefore, that it is possible for us to disenfranchise our own grief apart from the presence of any corresponding societal norms or sanctions. In both instances of self-disenfranchisement, shame is understood to be the operative psychological force. Kauffman understands shame, as both an affect (I feel ashamed) and cognition (I shouldn’t feel this way), to operate as the regulator of experience and behaviour.<sup>165</sup> Shame is the psychological force that allows or disallows, in this case, the

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<sup>162</sup> Corr, "Revisiting Disenfranchised Grief," 40.

<sup>163</sup> Kauffman, "Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 61–62.

<sup>164</sup> Kauffman, "Intrapsychic Dimensions," 25–26; Kauffman, "Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 61.

<sup>165</sup> Kauffman, "Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 62–63.

experience of grief and related responses. One's emotions in grief are one of the main reasons people will feel shame in the midst of grief. Whether based on real or perceived societal norms, people can tend to feel ashamed of the guilt, anger, loneliness, sense of helplessness, and sense of exposure and vulnerability that often comprise the grief response.<sup>166</sup> They will therefore seek to disallow their experience of loss and grief.

Recognizing that the disenfranchisement of grief is understood to be an active process of disavowal, based on real or perceived societal norms and sanctions, can it be said that the grief experienced in church decline is truly disenfranchised? It will be impossible for us to definitively answer this question given the limitations of this work. In order to do so, it would be necessary to conduct an empirical study of the experience of grief in declining churches. It is possible, however, to construct a case for the likelihood that the grief experienced in church decline will be actively disenfranchised due to either real or perceived congregational norms and sanctions.

#### Disenfranchised Grief in Church Decline: Contributing Factors

The nature of the situation of decline, and aspects of Christian theology work together to contribute to the likelihood that churches in decline will disavow their experience of loss and grief. The nature of the situation of church decline—the fact that the situation is grave but not yet terminal—can contribute to the disenfranchisement of the accompanying grief. The churches are struggling, but not yet dead. More than this, the content of the Christian faith, which in many Christian traditions affirms God's ability to perform miraculous acts against all odds, can easily lead those experiencing church decline to assume that while the church is still alive, it is still possible for God to work a miracle and bring renewal. One can see how an acknowledgement of loss and

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<sup>166</sup> Kauffman, "Intrapsychic Dimensions," 27.



grief in the midst of decline could be perceived as being premature and a potential “giving up on” and possibly even betrayal of the church, of God, and even of ourselves.

It would not be surprising for a church to disavow its grief with respect to its objective losses because of the fact that, despite these losses, the church has not yet had to close. Churches can tend to focus on what they still have, rather than facing the pain of what they have lost. Billman and Migliore offer support for this assertion. In their book, *Rachel's Cry*, they argue that churches need to recover the biblical tradition of lament as part of their practice of prayer and worship. They define lament as that “unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, protest to God.”<sup>167</sup> They observed that churches today tend to offer worship services that emphasize the positive and do not offer space for complaint, protest, and grief.<sup>168</sup> Additionally, they suggest that the North American church has tended to follow the attitude of the wider society, that at best has an ambivalent response to the grief and anger that comes with loss, and at worst minimizes the importance of expressions of lament.<sup>169</sup> In offering their observations, Billman and Migliore do not intend to be critical of the positive emphasis in Christian worship that focuses on praise and thanksgiving. What they are critical of is the tendency to emphasize the positive while almost, if not completely, excluding the need for expressions of protest and grief in Christian worship as well.<sup>170</sup> While Billman and Migliore have not written this book with church decline in mind, their insights apply. Churches that struggle with the

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<sup>167</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 6.

<sup>168</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 14.

<sup>169</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 15.

<sup>170</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 14.

practice of lament in general will also find it difficult to practice lament in relation to church decline and its accompanying losses.

It would also not be surprising for a church to disavow its grief with respect to the threat of future closure, and the uncertainty that comes with that. James Woodward, a pastoral caregiver and pastoral theologian helps us to understand this likelihood. In his book, *Befriending Death*, Woodward draws attention to the fact that our lives prior to death consist in contradiction. We are alive but also dying. Our lives consist of both a fighting against death, and a surrendering to it.<sup>171</sup> Yet despite this fact, which none of us can escape, we also live in a society that Woodward labels “death-denying.”<sup>172</sup> For this reason, Woodward asserts that we will tend to avoid those aspects of life that threaten our sense of security and confidence, and that raise doubts and fears. He says:

We are perhaps conditioned to avoid confronting fear, to avoid the wilderness and the desert places in our own hearts and world. We live under a kind of tyranny of certainty where strength, confidence, life, success and security dominate our emotional, social, ecclesiastical and political lives. In our healing we seek those things that reassure us rather than those things that speak of our fears and doubts. We do not like to give way to these feelings. This is hardly surprising – it takes courage to stay with our doubts, pains and insecurities.<sup>173</sup>

While Woodward’s immediate concern is the experience of death, his insights apply to the situation of church decline as well. If, as people, we tend to avoid confronting those realities that shake our security and confidence, it stands to reason that churches will tend to avoid these realities as well. It stands to reason that a congregation that has come to find its strength, comfort, and identity in a particular way of being church will shy away from confronting the reality and pain of possible closure.

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<sup>171</sup> Woodward, *Befriending Death*, 2–3.

<sup>172</sup> Woodward, *Befriending Death*, 12.

<sup>173</sup> Woodward, *Befriending Death*, 12.

The situation of decline also has the potential to challenge a congregation's understanding and expectations of God. It has the potential to raise deeply painful and disturbing questions. Why has God allowed us to decline to this state? Why hasn't God honoured our efforts to work for renewal? Why isn't God answering our prayers? Has God abandoned us? It has the potential to shake a church's faith to the core, and has the potential to leave the church disappointed, dismayed, and angry. It also has the potential to strip the church of all that it has put its confidence in, and leave it feeling deeply afraid, shaken, vulnerable, and unsure. Such questions and feelings can cut a church to the core, and raise the spectre of a church's deepest fears: Will we find you in the dark?<sup>174</sup> Will we find you even in the midst of this terrible decline? To acknowledge these questions and feelings means facing the devastating possibility that the beliefs and expectations upon which we have built our relationship with God may have somehow been misplaced.

#### The Costs of Disenfranchised Grief

It is important to identify situations of disenfranchised grief because there are significant costs associated with it. Two of the potential costs are pertinent for this discussion. First, losses (and the accompanying grief reactions) that go unacknowledged are losses that will not be mourned. This is a concern because, according to the definition given above, it is the process of mourning that helps one adjust to the reality of the loss and begin to adopt ways of being, thinking, and acting in the world that are appropriate to the reality of the loss. A declining church that does not acknowledge its losses and allow itself to experience its grief, is a church that will find itself unable to

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<sup>174</sup> This is one of the penetrating questions Nicholas Wolterstorff asks of God in the face of his son's death in a mountain climbing accident (Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 69).

effectively adjust to the new realities its losses precipitate. The second cost associated with disenfranchised grief is an exacerbation of the experience of grief. Doka has found that when loss and grief go unacknowledged, the emotional reactions associated with grief are often intensified. Doka notes that a number of studies have reported that feelings such as anger, guilt, and powerlessness are intensified in situations where grief is disenfranchised.<sup>175</sup> This is important to note because this dynamic itself could serve as a further contributing factor to the disenfranchisement of grief in situations of church decline. Presumably the longer the situation goes unacknowledged, the more intense the feelings of grief. The more intense the feelings, the more likely it is that congregants will feel uncomfortable acknowledging publically what it is they are experiencing.

#### The Persistence of Church Decline Viewed Through the Lens of Disenfranchised Grief

The concept of disenfranchised grief is important because we find in it another lens through which to analyze a church's tendency to languish in a state of decline. Churches' tendencies to remain locked in a state of significant decline is often analyzed in organizational terms. It is thought to have to do with the failure of churches to seek well-reasoned or effective paths to renewal and new growth,<sup>176</sup> or it is attributed to resistance that requires skilled and courageous leadership to overcome.<sup>177</sup> Doka's concept of disenfranchised grief provides insight into another, and perhaps foundational, factor that can contribute to the tendency of churches to languish in significant decline: unacknowledged and un-mourning loss. Such an insight subsequently leads us to recognize, along with Bush, that what may be most needed, at the very least in addition

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<sup>175</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief," 7; Doka, "Introduction," 17; Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical Perspective," 234.

<sup>176</sup> As, for example, in the church growth materials, congregational life cycle theory, and some forms of strategic planning materials discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>177</sup> As, for example, in Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*.

other organizational strategies, is a process to facilitate engagement with grief and mourning.

### **Section 3: Grief Theory and Cases of Church Decline**

Having considered various facets of grief theory and how this theory might apply to a theoretical description of church decline, we turn now to bring grief theory into conversation with our actual case studies of church decline.<sup>178</sup> This analysis will demonstrate that each of the churches in our study have suffered losses, both objective losses and the loss of their assumptive worlds, and therefore have reason to grieve and mourn those losses. It will also demonstrate that none of the churches are yet fully engaging the tasks of mourning. Finally, it will demonstrate that while finances would seem to contribute to a congregation's failure to mourn, it is not the only factor in this regard.

#### **Gray Friends Meeting, Carmel Indiana<sup>179</sup>**

Gray Friends Meeting has experienced some significant losses. They have experienced a variety of objective losses. They experienced a loss of membership from 210 in 1930 to 50 in the early 1990s. They have lost numerous programs such as a large Sunday School program, a travelling orchestra, and a variety of Bible studies, prayer groups, and youth meetings. The church also faces the threat of losing its rural setting as the suburbs of Carmel continue to expand. The church has also faced challenges to its assumptive world. The threat of possibly losing their rural setting may pose a challenge to their strong identity as a rural church that is tied to the land. In addition to this, they

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<sup>178</sup> In the following analysis every effort will be made to avoid assumptions and confine the analysis to the available data alone.

<sup>179</sup> All details are summarized from the original case study as presented in Chapter 1, unless otherwise noted.

may find their sense of significance challenged by their diminishing influence within the community. Their Quaker forebears were amongst the first settlers to this area, and were influential in establishing the first churches and schools, as well as the incorporation of the town then named Bethlehem.<sup>180</sup> In contrast to these early influential beginnings, the researcher noted that since the 1950s, the time when Carmel began to grow, the church has remained fairly isolated from the town.<sup>181</sup> Finally, their way of understanding and expressing their Quaker identity is also being challenged. As a congregation they know that they need to recruit new members, but they are also very aware that their identity as Quakers leads them to shy away from aggressive evangelism.

Despite these losses, however, the data does not indicate the presence of any grief reactions or mourning activity. This may be due to the researcher's choice to not attend to this kind of data. But it may also be due to the fact that despite the losses, the church is still relatively viable due to an active (even though aging) membership and ongoing financial self-sufficiency. The losses experienced to date may not yet be acute enough to evoke grief and mourning because the church is, for the moment, still functioning fairly well. In addition to this, the data suggests that the church may be responding to the losses with coping behaviour more so than mourning behaviour. Two examples can be given. In 1993, the church received a large bequest. Instead of creating a large endowment fund for possible future need, it chose instead to invest most of the money in capital improvements to the building in order to ensure the congregation's current financial self-sufficiency.<sup>182</sup> This choice can be interpreted as problem-focused coping as described by Rando. It can be interpreted as an effort on the

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<sup>180</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 81.

<sup>181</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 82.

<sup>182</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 83.

part of the congregation to manage its challenges by choosing a course of action that minimized its current level of stress. The second example pertains to the congregation's strong identification with the idea that to be Quaker is to "swim upstream" against the prevailing current. Part of what this expression means to this congregation is that it is important to maintain the Quaker ways of living and worshipping simply, even if these ways run counter to the ways of the wider community.<sup>183</sup> Given this congregation's strong identification with this metaphor, it is quite possible that they have chosen to interpret their losses as evidence that they are indeed "swimming upstream." We cannot conclude this definitively, but if this were the case, it would indicate the presence of another form of coping behaviour. In this case it would indicate a form of emotion-focused coping; namely an effort to wrest a positive interpretation from negative events.

In summary we can say that this congregation's losses have not yet become acute enough to cause the congregation to begin to wrestle with its understanding of the Quaker identity. The congregation is aware that it needs to recruit and integrate new members, but they have not yet begun to actively wrestle with the challenges this need might pose to their understanding of what it is to be Quaker. As long as the congregation is able to continue coping with its losses, it is unlikely that they will engage the mourning process, and begin to find new and effective ways to express their Quaker identity.

### **Carmel Wesleyan Church, Carmel Indiana<sup>184</sup>**

Carmel Wesleyan Church has also experienced some significant losses, and probably even more so than Gray Friends Meeting. Although it has always been a

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<sup>183</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 84.

<sup>184</sup> All details are summarized from the original case study presented in Chapter 1 unless otherwise noted.

relatively small church, it has experienced a decline in numbers since the mid-1950s, with the membership now standing at 53. It has experienced the loss of new members that joined the church in a recent merger, and the ongoing loss of pastor after pastor, after relatively short periods of ministry. Its most poignant losses, however, have to do with finances and the frustration of their efforts to attract new members. Carmel Wesleyan, unlike Gray Friends Meeting, has been in a financially precarious position for some time. In the 1980s they required financial assistance from their denomination, and in turn were required to hand over control of the congregation to their denomination. While they have once again become financially independent, their financial situation remains tenuous. They are able to meet their obligations, but have little extra in the way of finances to pursue new options and possibilities. With respect to the frustration of their efforts to attract new members, this has seemed to be a trend since the 1950s. Even at that time, the church was unable to capitalize on newcomers moving to Carmel.<sup>185</sup> Since then the church has experienced frustration after frustration. Their leap of faith to build a new sanctuary in the 1980s did not yield new members and resulted in their financial struggles. Furthermore, countless plans and efforts to reach out to the wider community have yielded few results.

These difficulties and frustrations hold the potential to challenge the church's assumptions about God, themselves, and the world. This is a church that has found its identity in the Wesleyan ways of "personal witnessing to the immediate neighborhood, reaching out to friends and family and revivals."<sup>186</sup> It is also a church that is highly motivated to generously minister to newcomers. It is therefore quite likely that their

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<sup>185</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 86.

<sup>186</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 87.



identity and sense of purpose are being challenged by the frustration of their efforts in these regards. It is also quite possible that their sense of power and efficacy are being challenged by this same frustration, evidenced by their sense of discouragement. More than this, it is possible that their trust in God is being challenged. They believed God for a stronger church in the 1950s<sup>187</sup> and took a “leap of faith” to build the new sanctuary in the 1980s,<sup>188</sup> only to meet with frustration. It would not be surprising to find this congregation beginning to wonder why God has not blessed their sincere efforts to reach out to the community. Finally, this congregation exhibits evidence that their understanding of the wider culture is being challenged. The researcher reports that the congregation is mystified over the transience of the community. It would seem that the congregation is coming to experience the fact that their way of understanding life no longer resonates with that of the wider community.

Carmel Wesleyan is demonstrating evidence of what appear to be grief reactions, but they do not yet appear to have entered an active mourning process. The researcher noted a sense of discouragement among the congregation, and also noted that the congregation remembered fondly the days when the Sunday School was full of children. These suggest that the congregation is experiencing grief in response to the various losses it has incurred; the first, an expression of pain, and the second, an expression of pining and yearning for what once was. The available data do not suggest however, that the congregation has begun to actively mourn their losses. Put another way, the data does not suggest that the congregation has begun to face the reality that their way of being church is not working. There is a sense that the church will try yet again to make

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<sup>187</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 86.

<sup>188</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 89.

it work, as evidenced by one member's comment about the church's struggles: "I can't say we always really enjoyed it, but we just don't quit."<sup>189</sup>

The data raise the possibility that this congregation could be experiencing disenfranchised grief. For grief to be disenfranchised, norms with accompanying real or perceived sanctions must be present, preventing the acknowledgment and/or expression of grief. The available data do reveal a possible norm that may be hindering the congregation's grief and mourning—the idea that mourning and accepting the reality of the church's losses might be equated with quitting. It is clear from the comment cited above, with respect to the church refusing to "quit," that quitting carries with it negative and potentially shameful connotations. If the congregation is experiencing disenfranchised grief, it would need to be helped to understand that mourning need not be equated with "quitting" in a negative sense. Grief theory can help with this, since it asserts that it is in fact healthier to accept and adjust to the losses, than it is to continue functioning as if they had not occurred. Grief theory might not be enough in this case, however. It is quite possible that the congregation's theology is also contributing to the disavowal of their grief. It is possible that the idea of "quitting" and coming to terms with the reality of their losses connotes not only giving up on the church, but giving up on God as well. In this eventuality, it would be necessary to do more than provide a psychological rationale for the importance of mourning. It would be necessary to provide a theological rationale as well. Theological insights that emphasize the manifestation of God's resurrection power in the midst of weakness and powerlessness

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<sup>189</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 91.

would be important here.<sup>190</sup> These insights embrace the paradox that new and renewed life comes not from a striving after that life, but from an acceptance of inability that allows for God to work in new ways.

### **Brighton Avenue Baptist Church<sup>191</sup>**

Brighton Avenue Baptist Church has experienced significant objective losses. Their numbers have dropped from a membership high of 500 to 12-15 attendees on a Sunday morning. While not in debt, they have lost financial flexibility in that they only just have enough to meet their needs. They have lost virtually all of their programs. Their confidence in their capacity to establish relationships with the wider community has been lost, along with their hope that the church can be revitalized and renewed. Perhaps most notably, they have lost their last best resource, their full-time pastor.

Given the significant degree of objective losses experienced by this church, related losses to its assumptive world would also be expected. This being said, the data have not provided any clues as to what these losses might be. Interestingly, it can be affirmed that at some level the congregation has not lost faith in God or a certain sense of purpose. When asked about their faith, for example, they asserted that God gives them the strength to carry on.<sup>192</sup> With respect to their sense of purpose, they have come to see the rental agreements facilitated by their former pastor not only as a financial necessity, but also as an expression of their ministry to the community.<sup>193</sup> It is expected that a closer investigation of this congregation would yield evidence of losses in terms of its assumptive world. Even if this were not the case, however, the objective losses

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<sup>190</sup> See, for example, Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, and Gorman, *Cruciformity*. See also Moltmann, who says: "The new creation of life for the whole world begins precisely with those who now exist on the edge of death" ("Life Signs," 45).

<sup>191</sup> All details are summarized from the original case study presented in Chapter 1 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>192</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 78.

<sup>193</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 79.

suffered by this congregation are more than enough to warrant an experience of grief and the need for mourning.

With respect to the process of mourning, the data suggests that the congregation has engaged part of the process but not all of it. The congregation has come to accept that the church as it now stands is no longer viable, and will not likely survive this decline. In the words of the researcher, “. . . the path of decline seems to its members inevitable.”<sup>194</sup> Furthermore, the congregation has begun to experience the pain of this loss. Members speak of the memories that permeate the rooms of the church, suggesting that they are processing the losses and experiencing the pain of them.<sup>195</sup> There is acknowledgement that it would hurt if the church ever had to close, suggesting that the congregation has already begun to experience the pain of such an eventuality.<sup>196</sup> Based on this, it can be said that the congregation has at least begun to engage the first two tasks of mourning as described by Worden. What is most notable in its absence, however, is any sense that the congregation has moved beyond these first two steps of mourning. There is no indication that the congregation has sought to adjust to the reality of the loss of viability (Worden’s third task), or that it has sought to embrace the past while moving forward into a new way of being church (Worden’s fourth task). It is as if the congregation has chosen to cling to its past identity and its experience of loss, rather than adjust to it and seek a new way forward. Admittedly, it is not surprising for such a small and elderly congregation to cling to the security of what they have always known over the insecurity of something new. It must also be noted, however, that this congregation has been experiencing steady decline since the 1950s, and has made a habit

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<sup>194</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 79.

<sup>195</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 78.

<sup>196</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 79.

of failing to adjust to the reality of their losses over those years. They have instead chosen to cling again and again to the “identity that made them a thriving part of the community in the years after World War II.”<sup>197</sup> This pattern illustrates the necessity to engage all four of the tasks of mourning, most importantly tasks three and four. Had this congregation been able to do this earlier in its decline, it might not have arrived at this point of near closure.

### **City Centre Church<sup>198</sup>**

The received data reveals that City Centre Church has experienced significant objective losses, and may be experiencing at least one notable loss in regards to its assumptive world. With respect to objective losses, its numbers have dropped from a membership high of 488 in 1961 to an average Sunday attendance of 39-52 in 2010. Very few programs remain, although surprisingly it still runs a weekly lunch program for local high school students. The most notable loss, however, is financial. The church’s endowment funds have been depleted, and the church no longer raises enough money to maintain its large and expensive building. With the loss of finances has come a related loss of options for the congregation. The congregation can essentially see no option but to close. With respect to the loss of its assumptive world, the congregation has lost hope. The congregation has not just lost hope in the continuance of the church, but it has lost any sense of hope in general. No mention is made, for example, of the potential good that could come out the closure.<sup>199</sup> Most notable by its absence is any reference to hope in God’s help and/or presence in the midst of this difficult situation.

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<sup>197</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 80.

<sup>198</sup> All details are summarized from the original case study presented in Chapter 1 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>199</sup> Recall Gaede’s assertion that even church closures can be approached with hope (Gaede, *Ending with Hope*).

As with Brighton Avenue Baptist Church, City Centre Church appears to have engaged in part, but not all, of the mourning process. It is a church that has and seems to be in the process of acknowledging its loss of viability, and its need to close. The congregation is heavily engaged in remembering the past. This could be interpreted as a yearning for the past, which Worden identifies as a key response associated with engaging in the task of accepting the reality of a loss. Furthermore, one member of the researcher's focus group exhibited strong emotion as she talked about the fact that the congregation will likely close and disperse to other churches.<sup>200</sup> This could point to the fact that others in the congregation are also feeling the pain of the impending closure. There is, however, no evidence that this congregation has sought to become adjusted to these losses, or has sought to imagine a new way of being church (Worden's third and fourth tasks of mourning). The researcher's account conveys a strong impression that this congregation cannot yet imagine being church in any way new ways. When asked about their future, they talk about the church's past. When affirming the need for change, they concede again and again that this would significantly upset the current membership. These points suggest that, although the congregation has essentially accepted the fact that it is no longer viable as is, it has not yet significantly engaged in the internal and spiritual adjustments that would accompany this loss. Furthermore, there is no evidence this congregation has sought to re-imagine its identity in light of the loss.

Instead, one is left with the sense that the congregation has simply found ways to cope with the situation. According to Rando, coping behaviours can work in tandem

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<sup>200</sup> McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 149.

with grief and mourning to produce a healthy response to loss.<sup>201</sup> Coping behaviours can also be employed as a means of avoiding grief and mourning.<sup>202</sup> The evidence here would suggest that this congregation has sought to cope with the reality of decline rather than to mourn it. The church's movement towards closure speaks more of a problem-solving strategy, than it does of a process of mourning. The situation has been assessed, options have been considered, and in the words of one of the trustees, "the thing is, we are too small to be able to continue to function as a congregation."<sup>203</sup> The data also suggests that the congregation might be employing emotion-focused coping in the form of a cognitive strategy of minimization. At least one couple has sought to minimize the significance of the loss, arguing that people in society are not interested in church anymore, and by affirming that all churches are facing decline these days.<sup>204</sup> This is a congregation that has not engaged all four of the tasks of mourning. Doing so may not have saved this congregation from eventual closure. It may, however, have contributed to a change of tenor within the congregation, from one of hopelessness to one of hope. Engaging in the tasks of mourning may have helped this congregation to identify evidence of God's presence and signs of God's new life even in the midst of closure.

#### **Faith Episcopal Church, Hartford Connecticut<sup>205</sup>**

Faith Episcopal Church has experienced some losses, but these losses do not yet seem to have impacted the church's central identity and reason for being. The church's numbers have dropped from a membership of 200 in the 1960s to a current membership of 150. Now just fewer than 100 actively attend Sunday morning worship services. The

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<sup>201</sup> Rando, "Six Dimensions," 62.

<sup>202</sup> Connor, "Denial," 259, 263.

<sup>203</sup> McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 162.

<sup>204</sup> McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 144–145.

<sup>205</sup> All details summarized from the original case study presented in chapter one unless otherwise noted.

congregation has lost a significant amount of its programming, including the complete loss of its Sunday School. Of those who still attend, no children or youth remain, with most of the current members in their 50s or older. Despite these losses, however, the church continues to enjoy healthy financial resources. This is due to large and growing endowment funds that can easily cover the rector's salary and building maintenance. As a result, the church will be able to continue for some time as is. With respect to the loss of assumptive worlds, the data suggests that, while the church has lost confidence in its ability to connect with its surrounding community, it has not lost a sense of purpose. This is because the congregation's sense of purpose, since the late 1960s, has been grounded in its being able to maintain a rich Anglo-Catholic liturgy.<sup>206</sup>

It is inconclusive as to whether Faith Episcopal Church has engaged in the tasks of mourning or not. The received data do not suggest that the church has engaged in any of the tasks of mourning. It may be that this lack is due to limitations in the data, or it may be that the church has not yet experienced losses acute enough to elicit a mourning response. The fact that the church is still financially viable and able to fulfill its sense of purpose as a centre of Anglo-Catholic worship may for the moment overshadow its objective losses, and therefore also contribute to a minimization of the church's experience of loss and need to mourn.

### **Sanderson United Methodist Church<sup>207</sup>**

Sanderson United Methodist Church has suffered some significant objective losses. Most notably, they have gone from a membership of 249 in 1907, to 9 attendees, including the organist and pastor, in 2011. This significant loss of numbers has been

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<sup>206</sup> Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, *Religious Presence*, 201.

<sup>207</sup> All details summarized from the original case study presented in chapter one unless otherwise noted.



followed by corresponding loss of programming. Their children's and youth programming, in the form of Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and youth group meetings and Christmas pageants have all come to an end. Much of the adult programming has ceased as well, although the United Methodist woman's group still meets to organize the rummage sales and clothing bank, and the church still runs a weekly Bible study and regularly eats together at a local diner. In addition to these losses, the church has also experienced the loss of members due to death and ill health, the decline of their overall health, energy, and vitality, and the decline of their surrounding community. Overall, the congregation has lost a sense of future certainty by coming to acknowledge that the church may indeed need to close in their lifetime. In the midst of these losses the church has also experienced the destruction of the church parsonage due to fire. Paradoxically, this resulted in benefits for the congregation. While the congregation did lose the space originally used for their rummage sale and clothing bank ministry, they also benefited in a number of ways. They benefited financially due to the insurance settlement. They gained an appreciation of their congregation's tenuous situation. Furthermore, they gained a renewed sense of connection with the surrounding community, and have been spurred on to offer their property for use during the town's fall festival.

Regarding the loss of the congregation's assumptive world, the data points to two potential losses in particular. It is clear from the data that the congregants have derived a tremendous sense of security, safety, and comfort from their involvement with this church.<sup>208</sup> For this reason it is quite possible that the acknowledged threat of closure and future uncertainty will have challenged the church members in these regards. It would

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<sup>208</sup> Quist, "We Aren't Dying Yet," 51-53.

also seem evident from the data that the congregation has lost confidence in their ability to effectively minister to the wider community. The congregation themselves have spoken to this fact. They believe that they are too old to relate to the younger members of the community. They have also found that the older community members they know either already attend a church, or would be too infirm to attend any church. The congregation is also very aware of its own age and health constraints, and has lost hope in being able to effectively minister to their surrounding community, apart from offering financial and material help. Before leaving this topic of discussion, it is also worth noting that the congregation does not appear to have lost or had their hope and trust in God challenged by the losses they have faced. Quist notes:

They express realistic views on church matters, notably, that the church is small and the community is small. However they have faith that as long as God is on their side, there is always hope. They all believe that God is present in their church. They can just feel it.<sup>209</sup>

The question of whether this congregation has begun to engage in the tasks of mourning is an interesting one. They have certainly come to acknowledge that the future of the church is no longer certain. It is not clear, however, whether they have come to accept the full reality of this uncertainty, and have begun to adjust to it internally and spiritually. To say this another way, it does not appear, at least by what they have expressed, that the congregation has begun to wrestle with the question of where to place their hope now that the future of the church is no longer certain. Furthermore, it does not appear that the congregation has begun to imagine a way to embrace the past while forging a new way forward. These points are suggested by the fact that the congregation, while acknowledging the uncertainty of the church's future, is

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<sup>209</sup> Quist, "We Aren't Dying Yet," 117.

still focusing their discussion of hope upon the possible continuance of the church.<sup>210</sup> It is also interesting to consider the role the parsonage fire has played in the congregation's mourning. On the one hand, the fire helped to raise the awareness that the church may in fact need to close in the congregation's lifetime. In this respect it could be concluded that the fire has helped to initiate a process of mourning for the congregation. On the other hand, however, the fire has spurred on the congregation to not give up, and to do whatever they can to increase the viability of their church in its current form. In this respect the fire could be said to have contributed to the inability of the congregation to come to accept the full reality of their losses, including the loss of viability of the church. If so, the fire has potentially contributed to the stagnation of the mourning process.

At the very least this study highlights a number of important questions. When do churches actually die? Do they die only when the light is turned out in the building for the last time, or do they die before this point, even while the congregation still gathers?<sup>211</sup> Should a congregation come to accept that it is essentially dead even though it has not yet shut its doors? Or should it always fight on to the bitter end and only give in to death reluctantly? The case studies have revealed, particularly in the case of Brighton Avenue Baptist Church, that it is possible to give up too late. Is it possible to give up too soon? Or has the value we have placed on "not giving up" become seriously detrimental to the ongoing life and health of our churches? Stein found that, in the case of a synagogue, the congregation lived in a chronic state of mourning that actually

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<sup>210</sup> Quist, "We Aren't Dying Yet," 104.

<sup>211</sup> This question was asked by the Rabbi of the declining Jewish synagogue studied by Stein ("Letting Go," 216). Anderson et al., "Dearly Departed," 325, would certainly argue that the relatively low mortality rate among congregations in comparison to other organizations is not evidence that congregations are necessarily doing well. It is simply evidence that congregations, in contrast to other organizations, have more opportunity to live on in a weakened state for a longer period of time.

served to prevent them from facing the truth that their congregation, as it had been and as they wished it to continue, was actually dead and no longer viable.<sup>212</sup> How might churches be helped to, in a sense, “give up” and give in to a process of mourning before closure becomes inevitable?

#### **Section 4: Concluding Thoughts**

We will bring this chapter to a conclusion by affirming two main points. First, it will be affirmed that grief theory can offer a way forward for churches experiencing significant decline. Second, it will also be affirmed that grief theory, while helpful, is not sufficient in itself to provide significantly declining churches with the support they need to live fruitfully in the midst of decline.

#### **The Benefits of Applying Grief Theory to the Situation of Church Decline**

On the basis of the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that bringing the experience of significant church decline into discussion with grief theory is an important move for three reasons.<sup>213</sup> The first reason that grief theory is important for situations of church decline is because it allows declining churches the freedom to embrace the reality of their struggles. Church decline causes loss. Loss of programs and resources for example, and the loss of less tangible goods like hope, confidence, and sometimes even trust in God. Grief theory affirms that the way forward through loss comes not by ignoring or diminishing the experience of it, but comes by acknowledging it and allowing the experience of loss to lead one into a process of mourning. In this respect, nothing a declining church comes to experience need be censored, because every aspect of the experience can become a part of the mourning process. How different this

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<sup>212</sup> Stein, "Letting Go," 217.

<sup>213</sup> In this we affirm the work others who have also made this move such as, Bush, *In Dying We Are Born*; Stein, "Letting Go," 204–223; Hamman, *Steeple's Cry*; and Arbuckle, *Grief and Renewal*.

approach is from those espoused by so many renewal materials. As was discussed in Chapter 2, renewal materials assume postures very different from the ones most significantly declining churches inhabit. The declining churches in our study tended to inhabit postures of powerlessness, ambivalence, and resignation, whereas renewal materials assumed a sense of efficacy to effect change, a desire to change, and a sense of hope in an ongoing future for the church. These expectations are not necessarily misguided, they are simply misplaced and are unsuited to be of much benefit to churches experiencing significant decline. Viewing the situation of church decline as an experience of loss allows declining churches to be what they are - declining churches - and affirms that, even so, there is a way forward through a process of mourning.

The second reason that grief theory is important in situations of significant decline is because grief theory, like the renewal materials discussed earlier, acknowledges the need for change. All of the renewal materials reviewed earlier affirmed the need for significant/adaptive change of some kind or another. Grief theory affirms this too. Grief theory affirms that to cling to the past (the lost loved one) to the extent that it precludes moving forward into new forms of life is maladaptive. Importantly though, it also affirms that the past must not be forgotten altogether. Instead, a way must be found to continue to embrace the past in a manner that does not hinder movement forward into a new experience of life without the one who was lost. For churches experiencing decline, this means finding a way to embrace and celebrate all that the church has been, even while moving forward into a new way of being church. What this will actually mean in practice will differ from church to church and context to context. The point is that, according to grief theory, the experience of grief should never be an end in itself, but a necessary part of the journey towards experiencing healing and

new life in the midst of loss. Those churches seeking to respond to decline through a process of mourning will still be called to move forward into some kind of new life. That movement forward will come again not by ignoring the reality of the loss, but by embracing it.

The third reason that grief theory is important in situations of church decline is because grief theory affirms that even something good can come of something as terrible as the loss of a loved one. Grief theory does not deny the terrible nature of loss, especially the loss of a loved one, but also losses of other kinds. It appreciates the depth of the pain—physical, mental, and emotional—that can come from it. Nevertheless, it also affirms that loss need not be the final word in a person’s experience. Loss can be worked through, and new capacities to live and to love can emerge from it. Such a perspective is important for situations of church decline. Decline can be a terrible experience too. It bewilders. It weakens. It raises doubt. It deadens. Nevertheless, decline need not be the final word in a church’s experience. Decline can be mourned, and the church can find new impetus to live and to love even in the midst of decline. Mourning decline does not ensure that a church will be renewed in such a way as to guarantee ongoing life. The church that mourns decline may still have to close, but even closure, when mourned well, can be imbued with renewed life and love.

### **Declining Churches Need More Support Than Grief Theory Provides**

While the application of grief theory to situations of church decline brings many benefits, it is not all that is needed. It is in fact the analysis of case studies of church decline in light of grief theory that demonstrates this point. In order for significantly declining churches to live fruitfully in the midst of decline, support of a theological and spiritual nature is also needed.

The analysis of our case studies in light of grief theory revealed that none of the churches in our study are fully engaging in the tasks of mourning. It was demonstrated that all of the churches in our study have suffered significant loss both objectively and in terms of their assumptive worlds. Yet, it was also found that at least four of our six churches (Gray Friends Meeting, Carmel Wesleyan Church, Faith Episcopal Church, and Sanderson United Methodist Church) have demonstrated no evidence of engaging in any of the four tasks of mourning. They have not demonstrated any evidence of acknowledging the reality of their losses or of experiencing the pain of them. They have also not demonstrated any evidence of adjusting to the reality of their losses or seeking for ways to embrace the past while also moving forward into something new. Furthermore, the two churches that have demonstrated some evidence of acknowledging the reality of their losses (Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church), have also not shown any evidence of adjusting to these losses or embracing the past while moving forward into something new.

Some thoughts can be offered as to why the churches in our study have largely failed to engage in the tasks of mourning. First, it can be said that finances can play a role in preventing churches from engaging in the tasks of mourning. Those churches in our study that are most financially sound (Gray Friends Meeting and Faith Episcopal Church) appear to be the least engaged with mourning their losses. Good finances mean that any threat of church closure is generally lessened in the short term. As long as a church can continue to pay its bills and maintain its building, it can continue on in a weakened state for some time. In these situations the loss of viability and the loss of future certainty become less of a factor. In addition to this, the significance of other objective losses may also diminish in the eyes of the congregants. A church may lose its

Sunday School, for example, but because its future is not yet under imminent threat, such a loss, while not minor, may not evoke an experience of loss and grief.

It is clear, however, that finances are not the only factor that contributes to a failure to engage in the tasks of mourning. Carmel Wesleyan Church is a case in point. While they no longer require financial assistance from their denomination, their financial situation remains tentative. They are able to pay their bills, but do not have the luxury of having much money in reserve. Yet they too have failed to engage in the tasks of mourning. In light of this, we would argue that at least three other factors contribute to the lack of mourning evidenced in the churches in our case studies. Each of these factors will be discussed in turn. In the process, support will also be given for the contention that additional support besides grief theory is needed in order for churches to live fruitfully in the midst of decline.

#### Grief Theory: A Relatively Uncommon Response to the Situation of Church Decline

We would suggest that one of the reasons virtually all of the churches in our study failed to engage in the tasks of mourning in any significant way is because grief theory is a relatively uncommon response to the situation of church decline. We found three main books espousing the presence of grief and the need for mourning in the midst of church decline. Given the multitude of resources offering other responses to church decline, it is not surprising that the application of grief theory to situations of church decline is relatively uncommon.

In light of this, we conclude that more needs to be done to promote the application of grief theory to situations of church decline. We also conclude, however, that this is not all that is required. At least some of the renewal materials, reviewed in Chapter 2, revealed a tendency to view decline as having no redemptive potential.



These materials viewed decline as something to be avoided and/or surmounted at all cost. It was assumed that decline must be overcome, and that churches must become healthy once more, before they could begin to be fruitful again. This assumption could prove detrimental to the application of grief theory to situations of church decline, because grief theory assumes that new life must emerge; in this case, from an intimate engagement with the experience of decline and not apart from it. Churches holding the assumption that decline has no redemptive potential will either eschew the insights of grief theory altogether, or run the risk of applying grief theory as a formula for overcoming decline. To mourn well is to grow, to learn, to become changed in sometimes profound ways. These potentialities will be missed if grief theory is applied as yet another technique for overcoming church decline. For this reason, it is necessary to do more than simply champion the benefits of grief theory in situations of church decline. It will also be necessary to help churches discover an altogether different perspective of church decline, one that appreciates that new life can even come from within the experience of decline.

#### Misunderstanding Mourning and the Ambiguity of Loss in Situations of Church Decline

It is also suggested that churches are not fully engaging in the tasks of mourning because of a combination of two other reasons. First, the situation of church decline carries with it a significant degree of ambiguity. Questions raised by the Rabbi in Stein's article encapsulate the difficulty: "How do you define the end of a congregation? When you turn the light out?"<sup>214</sup> It unfortunately becomes relatively easy to diminish the significance of the gradual losses that come with decline when the definition of "death" is so ambiguous. We have stated that significant decline leads to two important

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<sup>214</sup> Stein, "Letting Go," 216.

objective losses: the loss of viability of the congregation, and the loss of future certainty. While we believe this to be true, we also appreciate that congregations will tend to downplay the significance of these losses as long as their churches are still functioning. It is not surprising given this fact that the only two churches that demonstrated any evidence of mourning were those two churches closest to closure. Congregations will tend not to mourn until the reality of the losses become more unambiguous.

This tendency is exacerbated by another tendency to misunderstand the aim of mourning. So often people understand mourning in terms of a false dichotomy. To mourn is to give up, to stop fighting, to roll over and accept death. Therefore, to embrace life means to not mourn. Nothing could be further from the truth, but the perception that mourning involves giving up can be persistent. Too often we equate mourning with grief and assume that mourning consists only of wallowing in our grief. We forget that the ultimate aim of mourning is to experience healing and find new ways to embrace life even in the midst of our losses. This healing must come through an experience of grief, but grief is never meant to be the end result of mourning.

One can see how the ambiguity of the losses involved in church decline and a misunderstanding of the process of mourning can combine in detrimental ways. A church that is already inclined to diminish the significance of its losses will be even more inclined to do so if it conceives of mourning in terms of giving up. The question asked by the Rabbi belies the fear. When is it okay to begin mourning? We do not want to give up too soon. We do not want to mourn before we know the congregation is really dead. In response to this, we need to reframe the question. Instead of asking when it is okay to begin mourning, we need to ask about whether it is really ever too soon to mourn. As said, mourning is ultimately about healing and the embrace of life.

For this reason it is really never too soon to mourn the losses involved in significant church decline. We can mourn the loss of the church's viability and can mourn the loss of future certainty well before the death of the congregation is imminent. This is because mourning is not about giving up, but is about adjusting to the reality of our losses and new finding ways to embrace life even in the midst of them.

This discussion has made clear that it will be necessary to clarify churches' understanding of the tasks of mourning. This is not all that is needed, however. We have found that churches can tend to define hope, in situations of decline, in terms of renewed growth and the ongoing viability of the church. Engagement with the tasks of mourning does not guarantee this result. It offers a process by which to find life in the midst of loss, but it does not guarantee what form that new expression of life will take. Those churches that approach the tasks of mourning with the assumption (or possibly even the intention) that it will lead to a particular result will distort the process. It will therefore be necessary to do more than affirm the appropriateness of mourning and clarify its aims. It will also be necessary to help churches discover a different conception of hope in the face of decline, particularly a conception of hope that is not so tied to a specific result.

#### Disenfranchised Grief and the Failure to Mourn

Finally, it is suggested that at least some churches are unable to mourn because their grief has been disenfranchised. When grief is disenfranchised it means that the congregation will have disavowed its grief because of real or perceived norms and sanctions at the social or personal level. In situations where this is the case, any discussion of the need for mourning will not be enough to help the church live fruitfully

in the midst of decline. This is because the congregation has already arrived at the conclusion that grief and mourning ought to be disavowed.

Insight into the possible reasons for a congregation's grief to be disenfranchised will shed light on the additional kind of support required. We have already discussed three factors that could lead a congregation to disavow its grief. The first pertains to the fact that, while experiencing significant decline, a church's situation is grave but not yet terminal. We have already spoken to this issue in the previous point. The second factor pertains to the human and therefore also likely congregational tendency to avoid confronting those realities that challenge our sense of security, strength, comfort, and sense of control. We naturally resist confronting the reality of our weaknesses, limitations, frailty, and lack of control. For those churches that have resisted mourning because of this, a discussion of the importance of mourning will not be enough. These churches will require help to see their limitations and weaknesses in a new light, particularly in light of a God who manifests power in the midst of weakness, and who is faithful even in the midst of uncertainty, and who manifests life even in the midst of death. The third factor that can contribute to disenfranchised grief pertains to the fact that church decline can evoke painful questions about God in relation to decline. Why has God allowed us to decline in this way? Why has God not honoured our efforts to work for renewal? Why has God not answered our prayers? Doubt and disillusionment can follow in the wake of significant decline, and it can be very difficult for congregations to give voice to this aspect of their pain. These churches too will require support beyond merely an affirmation of the importance of mourning. They will require assurance that it is acceptable in the eyes of God and in the eyes of the congregation to give voice to the doubts and disillusionment that can come with decline.

## **Looking Forward**

Grief theory has proved itself to be beneficial to the understanding and experience of significant church decline. Yet, as we have discovered, this is not yet all that declining churches need. We have identified the need for a new perspective of decline; one that believes that new life can emerge from decline and not just apart from it. We have identified the need for a conception of hope that is not tied to specific outcomes, such as the renewed growth of the church. We have identified the need to be able to see the reality of our weaknesses and limitations in a different light. Finally, we have identified the need for congregations to be able to speak honestly with God, even about their doubts and disillusionment with God in the face of decline. We turn now to a discussion of theological resources that will help us speak to these needs.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A REORIENTING PERSPECTIVE: SHARING JESUS EVEN IN DECLINE

In this chapter an attempt will be made to challenge a core assumption about church decline—the assumption that declining churches cannot be fruitful and engage in meaningful ministry until they are renewed. The belief that decline can only be “bad,” was evidenced within some of the renewal materials reviewed previously. Such a belief promotes the idea that the only fruitful course of action for declining churches is to pursue renewal. To seek renewal is to move towards life and renewed fruitfulness. To not seek renewal is to essentially choose fruitlessness and eventual closure. This dissertation, however, argues that this dichotomous perspective is in fact mistaken. Drawing upon aspects of Hans Frei’s theology, we will demonstrate that it is indeed possible for churches to engage in meaningful ministry even in the midst of significant decline.

This chapter will proceed through five sections. We will begin by affirming that the perspectives held by the churches in our study are shaped by their past experience of church and are largely influenced by the experiences and effects of decline. The work of Hans Frei will then be introduced. In particular, his contention is that Christians are to be shaped by Christ’s narrative. The implications of Frei’s work for those churches experiencing significant decline will then be elucidated. In light of Frei’s work, it will be argued that declining churches need to shift their perspectives from a focus upon the church’s past and from a focus upon decline and the desperate need for renewal, to a focus upon sharing what is known of Christ for the sake of it. Next, the benefits of the proposed shift in perspective will be made clear. Finally, a consideration of certain issues arising from the discussion will serve to bring the chapter to a close.

## Section 1: The Importance of Perspective

Perspective is important.<sup>1</sup> Perspective has to do with what we see and what we do not see—to what we pay attention, and to what we do not pay attention.<sup>2</sup> Perspective is important because it shapes and informs our understanding of the world and all things in it. What we see, what we pay attention to, and conversely, what we choose not to pay attention to will ultimately affect the way in which we respond to and act in the world.

Gustafson says:

If one believes that the goodness of God and the goodness of life as created, governed and redeemed by God are ultimately and really greater than any particular occasion of evil, or all occasions of evil collected, one will move with a fundamental confidence in the world, with an openness toward the world, with a sensitivity to change and the opportunities it provides, and without a debilitating despair. If one believes that evil has a status and a power equal to the good, one will move from fear to a crusading mentality that forecloses sensitivity to the changing constellations out of which new good can emerge, that seeks to destroy the evil rather than reform it, that seeks to abolish rather than to reconcile. Jesus Christ makes possible a confidence in the power of the good; he provides a basic posture and perspective to those who are loyal to him.<sup>3</sup>

Gustafson's example speaks to the broad issue of the perspective of good and evil in relation to God. Nevertheless, his point can be applied to perspectives of all kinds. In the case of church decline, it can be said that the perspectives a church holds within the situation of decline will affect the way in which it responds to decline.

### A Perspective of Church that is Focused on the Past

The congregations in our study demonstrate a perspective of church that is centred in the past. Their understanding of what it is to be church is largely defined by

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<sup>1</sup> Gustafson speaks not just of perspective, but of perspective and posture together as being foundational to the Christian moral life (*Moral Life*, 240–242). The posture of declining churches has been discussed earlier. It is necessary here to focus specifically upon the perspectives they hold.

<sup>2</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 242.

<sup>3</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 244. See also, Pinches, *Theology and Action*, 182–187, who following Hauerwas, argues for the importance of vision. The vision we have of the world will give shape to our moral action in it. For Pinches our moral action must be shaped by the Christian faith, which offers a corrected vision of “the substance of the world” (187).

what they have been. Some of the churches in our study have almost entirely cast their field of vision backwards. It is visions of the past that penetrate their thoughts about church.<sup>4</sup> This fact demonstrated by the churches in our study<sup>5</sup> is affirmed by congregational life cycle theory—which identifies a backward looking focus as a key characteristic of significantly declining churches.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, it can be said that this backwards-looking perspective has informed the way in which these churches have responded to the situation of decline.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Carmel Wesleyan Church, the aim has been to recreate the past. The congregation's efforts to reach out to the community have consisted of traditional Wesleyan practices such as personal witnessing, reaching out to friends and family and revivals. It was noted that their church's programming has remained largely unchanged for 30 years. In the case of Gray Friends Meeting and Faith Episcopal Church, the aim in the face of decline has been to maintain the past as long as possible. Gray Friends Meeting has sought to maintain the family-oriented and rural feel of their congregation, not to mention their strong sense of Quaker identity. Maintaining the culture and structure of their congregation, as they have grown accustomed to it, has constituted their foremost response to decline. The same is true of Faith Episcopal Church. In the face of decline they have affirmed their determination to maintain the Anglo-Catholic identity of their worship above all else. In the case of Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre

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<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil observes that when attention is paid to an object, that object will come to penetrate one's thoughts. She says: "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. . ." ("Reflections," 62).

<sup>5</sup> Gray Friends Meeting has demonstrated a strong desire to maintain the culture and structures of the congregation as they have grown accustomed to them. They have also identified strongly with the family oriented and rural feel of their congregation.

<sup>6</sup> Bullard, "Congregational Passages," 83, 86.

<sup>7</sup> All details are summarized from the original case studies as presented in Chapter one, unless otherwise noted.



Church, the aim in the face of decline has been to continue living in the past as long as it is possible to do so. Brighton Avenue Baptist Church has made a series of decisions to this effect over the years. Again and again they have opted to maintain the status quo of their congregation. At this point they cannot conceive of change and are grateful that the church has not yet closed. City Centre Church also cannot conceive of change. When asked about the future, they can only respond by talking about the past. Members wish that the church could continue on, but they are coming to realize that closure is imminent.

With respect to Sanderson United Methodist Church, it is more difficult to ascertain the extent of their focus upon the past. It is clear from the information offered that their approach to church and ministry has remained largely unchanged despite their desire to do what they can to ensure the survival of the church. They have continued to worship as they have in the past and have continued to engage in the ministries they have grown accustomed to (providing the rummage sale and offering material help as they can to those who need it). Furthermore, their new initiative consists of offering the church building and grounds for use during the fall fair—an initiative that does not require any significant change on their part. The question arises, because unlike the other churches, there is nothing in the information provided that indicates that this congregation is averse to change. Despite this, it would appear that this church is also focused on the past, and it is likely that they will continue to respond to decline in kind.

On the one hand, it is reasonable for declining churches to adopt such a perspective and to respond to decline as they do. The past is all they know. It is what is familiar and comfortable. It is understandably difficult to see beyond the known into the unknown. Often this is what renewal materials ask of declining churches—to see

beyond what is known into the unknown. Renewal materials ask for a shift in perspective, but that shift in perspective consists of exchanging a past perspective of church for a new perspective of church. It is not altogether unreasonable for declining churches to resist the unknown and continue to cling to that which is known. It is important to recognize, however, that the shift in perspective proposed by renewal materials is not the only shift available to declining churches, as we will soon see.

### **Decline Looms Larger the Deeper Churches Sink into Decline**

The data also reveal another trend with respect to perspective. The deeper congregations sink into decline, the more decline and the effects of decline fill their field of vision and define their overall perspective.<sup>8</sup> This trend is illustrated well by Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church—the two churches in our study that have declined deeply into the old age stage of the life cycle. Decline and its symptoms loom large on the horizon for both Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church. Both of these churches are aware of the tremendous losses they have experienced over the years in terms of people, children, and programs. Brighton Avenue Church is aware of the vast difference that exists between their culture as a congregation and the cultures found in the surrounding community. City Centre Church is aware that, while they need to change in order to survive, they do not really want to change. In both cases limited or depleted finances are a significant concern. As a result, both of these churches have largely lost hope in their future, and have essentially come to conclude that it is not going to be possible to reverse the pattern of decline and prevent eventual closure. The deeper the decline, the more prominent decline figures in their perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> As was pointed out in Chapter one, McMullin has noted this inclination as well (McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 8).

It could be argued that this second trend is not worth mentioning, given that it stands to reason that decline should loom the largest on the horizon of those churches most deeply affected by it. Such a perspective seems self-evident until we recognize that this is not the only perspective available to these churches. We will turn now to consider an alternate perspective offered to us through the work of theologian Hans Frei.

### *Section 2: Hans Frei and Being Shaped By Christ's Narrative*

Frei's work is complex. We will begin by offering a brief introduction to some of his thoughts, and then consider in greater depth the aspects of his work most pertinent to our study. Frei understood that there was a need to ask questions about the relationship between faith and history. In particular he was interested in two main questions. One question has to do with how the ongoing history of the world is ordered in the history of Jesus. The second question, the one that will occupy us here, has to do with the relationship between the Christian claims about Jesus' significance, and his particular humanity as described in the Gospels.<sup>9</sup> Mike Higton summarizes this second question of Frei's well. Higton explains that the:

... question is to ask whether we can allow our claims about Jesus' significance, about his power to save, about the cosmic scope of what is enacted in him, about his relationship to the Father, to be inherently shaped by the details of his humanity. Can we let our claims about Jesus' conformity to God be *constituted* by reference to the particular content of his life?<sup>10</sup>

In the course of answering this question, Frei came to affirm that the history-like and realistic narratives of the Old and New Testaments function as what he terms "realistic narratives."<sup>11</sup> For Frei, the implication is that the meaning of these narratives is found within the texts as they are written, and not in something that lies behind or beyond the

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<sup>9</sup> Higton, *Christ, Providence and History*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Higton, *Christ, Providence and History*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 10.

literal sense of the text.<sup>12</sup> This also means that for Frei, the characters we encounter in these narratives represent themselves, and do not represent something symbolic beyond themselves.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Frei would argue that the Gospel narratives tell us about Jesus of Nazareth and his particular identity, and do not tell us about some symbolic ideal that can be distilled from the stories of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> On the basis of this, Frei has concluded that the Christian claims about Jesus' significance are indeed substantiated by Jesus' unique humanity as revealed in the realistic narratives about him.

### **Being Shaped by Christ's Narrative**

Reading the gospels as realistic narratives, Frei found that the gospels themselves insist that the story of God's salvation is identical with the story of Jesus; the gospels themselves insist that Jesus has come to fully embody God's story of salvation. Frei argues:

The story told in the Gospels, which became the cornerstone of the Christian tradition of belief, is distinguished from other, parallel accounts by its urgent insistence that the story of salvation is completely and exclusively that of the savior Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. This exclusiveness distinguishes the story both from ancient dying and rising savior myths and from a kind of story to

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<sup>12</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, xiii–xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 13–14. So, for example, Frei refers to Jesus' enacted miracles, which even if not historically factual are realistic because Jesus' actions represent themselves (Jesus performing a miracle) and do not refer symbolically to something else.

<sup>14</sup> Frei makes this point referring to the way in which Jesus enacts a particular relationship between power and helplessness. He says: "Unlike what one finds in so many Christ figures, Jesus has, in his story, a clearly personal center, a self-focused identity. It is he who makes the pattern of coexistence as well as the pattern of transition between power and helplessness flow together in their complex harmony. They are not a set of paradoxically or otherwise related states or qualities for which he is the empty personal receptacle. These states or qualities do not exist apart from his person. Instead, he makes them instruments of his saving efficacy, making them all internal to his obedience to God. There is no power for salvation in such pre-established, paradoxical qualities as helplessness and power, guilt and purity, either in themselves or apart from him. They become efficacious for salvation because they are *his* [emphasis original] and because he holds them together in the enactment of his obedience to God" (*Identity of Jesus Christ*, 108). Campbell's discussion of this idea is also helpful. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 191, affirms that:

"... Jesus is the subject of his own predicates. The predicates applied to Jesus cannot be abstracted from his unique, unsubstitutable enactment of them in the gospel narratives. Jesus cannot be 'identified' primarily in terms of abstract qualities applied to him (e.g., love), but rather Jesus himself as rendered in the gospel narratives owns and defines those qualities as a unique, unsubstitutable person."

which it is formally much closer: that of the Christ figures of some modern novels. The form of the Gospel story is sufficiently novel-like that we have to say that the pattern of redemptive action exhibited in Jesus is so identical with his personal story that he preempts the pattern. It is *his* story and cannot be reiterated in full by the story of anybody else. . .”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Frei concludes that one of the central characteristics of Jesus’ identity, as encountered in the gospel narratives, is that he offers himself as the one who sums up in his particular identity the history of the whole people of Israel and, by implication, all of humanity. Put together, the gospels reveal that Jesus offers himself as the one who now defines what Saviour is, what the Kingdom is, who Israel is, and who all of humanity is called to be.<sup>16</sup>

Frei’s assertion that the story of God’s salvation is identical with the historical humanity of Christ may seem straightforward enough, but an implication of this insight can often be overlooked. The fact that Jesus offers himself as the one who defines what Saviour is and what all of humanity is called to be, means that Jesus is the one to whom we are called to conform our lives. Put another way, and most pertinent for our discussion here, we are to come to see Jesus and his narratives as that which gives shape and meaning to our narratives.<sup>17</sup> Frei affirms this point by describing the way in which the resurrection of Jesus becomes meaningful to us. The resurrection was a singular event that happened 2,000 years ago. Its meaningfulness comes not from our ability to

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<sup>15</sup> Frei, "Jesus' Death and Resurrection," 46. Of this idea Campbell says: "The gospels are not stories about elemental human experience, but rather stories that render the identity of a particular person whose life, death, and resurrection accomplish God’s purposes for the world" (*Preaching Jesus*, 192).

<sup>16</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 153–154. In discussing this point, Frei points to the evangelical piety of the eighteenth century by way of illustration. Though the cross was central to evangelical piety, the narrative framework that the believer was encouraged to fit his/her life into was the model pilgrim journey from sin to perfection. The believer was encouraged to see their lives in terms of the "pilgrim" narrative. They were not encouraged to see themselves as a figure or character within Christ’s narrative. It can be seen here that Frei operates from a theological perspective that is different from the theological perspective that undergirds the methodology employed in this work, which has taken experience, in this case the experience of church decline, and not the narratives and identity of Jesus as the founding discussion point. This difference in perspective will be addressed further below.

reenact the story in our imaginations and appreciate its meaning. Its meaning comes from the extent to which our lives are shaped by the narratives of Jesus and his resurrection. Frei says:

For whomever [the resurrection] becomes truth it does so not by imaginative obliteration of time but by hammering out a shape of life patterned after its own shape. That does not mean that we repeat the original events literally in our lives, and certainly not completely, but it means that our lives reflect the story as in a glass darkly. The shape of the story being mirrored in the shape of our life is the condition for its being meaningful for us.<sup>18</sup>

For Frei, Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection become meaningful to us as Jesus' narratives and identity become mirrored in our own lives.

Charles Campbell, the author of *Preaching Jesus*, a book on the application of Frei's thinking to the ministry of preaching, helps us to appreciate what Frei means when he calls us to look to the narratives of Jesus to give shape to our narratives. Frei's assertion does not mean that we should begin with the stories of our lives and then come to see Jesus and his narratives as a part of our story. So often this is our tendency. This is the tendency we saw earlier with those churches that looked to God, but from within the grounding reality of decline. We begin with our stories, our questions and our difficulties, and ask of the gospel narratives what meaning, answers, and solutions Jesus can bring to these.<sup>19</sup> The danger in this is that Jesus' unique identity often becomes subsumed into our experience. Campbell says of this tendency:

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<sup>18</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 170–171.

<sup>19</sup> To illustrate this point, Campbell in *Preaching Jesus*, 194–196, describes a sermon that begins by identifying a common human condition, that of bad things happening to good people. The sermon then proceeds to suggest that we can learn from Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness how best to respond when bad things do happen. We can learn that: there are things in this world over which we do not have control; that like Jesus we will not be spared experiences of testing; and that like Jesus we will not be left alone, but will be helped by God in those difficult experiences. In this sermon all understanding of the role Jesus' temptations played in the shape of his ministry and his understanding of the reign of God in the world is lost.

The unsubstitutable identity of Jesus is lost as he becomes simply a representative of a ‘common human experience,’ a symbolic embodiment of general principles about life. . . Jesus is not a unique subject independent of us, but is rather absorbed into human experience and general ‘truths’ about life; he is not the subject of his own predicates, but is in fact the predicate of another subject: ‘human experience.’<sup>20</sup>

When we begin with experience, we are in danger of adopting an understanding of Christ that is shaped by our experience. For Frei, such an approach directly contradicts the gospel’s insistence that it is Christ who must give shape to our understanding of our experience.

Frei’s assertion also does not mean that we should think to begin with our stories, and then look to see how our stories fit into Jesus’ story.<sup>21</sup> In support of this point, Campbell refers here to Brueggemann, who suggests that it is impossible for us to be able to properly understand our stories independent of the Biblical stories of Jesus. Any effort to fit our stories into Jesus’ stories suggests that we have somehow gained an understanding of our story apart from scripture that is able to give us sufficient insight to appreciate how our stories best fit with Jesus’ stories.<sup>22</sup>

Instead, Frei’s assertion that we are to look to Jesus’ narratives as those which give shape and meaning to our narratives means that we are to start with the narratives of Jesus, and then allow those narratives to describe, and perhaps more likely, re-describe our narratives.<sup>23</sup> To illustrate this point, Campbell describes a sermon written by Walter Brueggemann.<sup>24</sup> Instead of beginning with a general human experience, Brueggemann begins with a story of Jesus, in this case the story of the woman with the

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 196.

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 197.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 197.

<sup>23</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 197–200.

issue of blood who is healed when she touches Jesus' cloak (Mk 5:24–34). In his sermon Brueggemann re-enacts the story of Jesus, all the while inviting his listeners to pay attention to the ways in which this story of Jesus and the woman re-describe their own stories. What follows is a thorough account of Jesus' identity as enacted in this story, emphasizing the fact that in this story we encounter Jesus responding with power in a new way to the woman's pain. At the conclusion, the listeners are called to discipleship. Particularly they are called to let Jesus' story to give shape to the way in which they respond to those who are powerless and in pain. Frei's proposal encourages us to let the biblical stories of Jesus give shape to our story.

### **The Coexistence and Transition Between Power and Powerlessness Enacted by Jesus**

An important aspect of Jesus' identity, as revealed in Frei's analysis of the gospel narratives, involves the particular way Jesus enacted both the coexistence of and pattern of transition between power and powerlessness in his ministry, death, and resurrection. We will begin with a consideration of the pattern of transition between power and powerlessness. Frei noted that Jesus' ministry of witnessing to and embodying the reign of God, in his preaching, healing, and other deeds, was conducted with authority and power.<sup>25</sup> Jesus' preaching and deeds came to challenge and offend the powers of the world, however, and so these powers turned against him and sought to destroy him.<sup>26</sup> Rather than seeking to overthrow these powers violently, Jesus chose to turn towards Jerusalem and the cross. He thus began to transition from a ministry of power and authority, of freedom and scope of movement, to a response of powerlessness

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<sup>25</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 114, 131.

<sup>26</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 116.



that reached its climax on the cross.<sup>27</sup> For Frei, the final transition between power and powerlessness came in the events of the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus freely chose to surrender to the actions of the authorities, and in doing so chose the path of powerlessness. Frei says:

The transition in the story is from a certain liberty of action to an equally certain elimination of it. This transition is effected through [Jesus'] own decision, as well as through the action of the authorities. The process in the story is irreversible. Once Jesus gives himself over to the authorities, his liberty of action will be at an end, and the result will be almost certain death for him. In his agony he remains obedient to his mission and consents to powerlessness, even unto death.<sup>28</sup>

Frei maintains that Jesus' transition from power to powerlessness is motivated by his obedience to God. Jesus enacts this transition from power to powerlessness, but not because this particular pattern is salvific in its own right. He enacts this pattern of transition because it was the necessary result of his obedience to God,<sup>29</sup> as God's purposes could not be accomplished in violent ways.<sup>30</sup> This pattern of transition became salvific as Jesus freely obeyed God in all aspects of his ministry, death, and resurrection.<sup>31</sup>

In his obedience, Jesus also enacted the coexistence of power and powerlessness in his ministry, death, and resurrection. Frei draws attention to the fact that Jesus remains powerful even when caught in situations of utter powerlessness. Frei points to occasions during Jesus' trial and crucifixion to illustrate his point.<sup>32</sup> When questioned by Pilate, Jesus breaks the silence only when he chooses, and responds in a way that

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<sup>27</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 114, 133.

<sup>28</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 113.

<sup>29</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 112.

<sup>30</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 110. Frei refers here to Matthew's account of Jesus' arrest in the garden (Mt. 26:51–54). Jesus prevents one of his companions from violently defending himself, affirming that God's purposes will not be fulfilled in such actions.

<sup>31</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 112.

turns Pilate's question into a testimony about himself (Mt. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk 23:3). In Luke's account of Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus takes the initiative in promising that the thief would be with him in paradise, and actively commits his spirit into God's hands (Lk. 23:43–46). In John's gospel Jesus is portrayed as actively laying down his life for his sheep (Jn. 10:17–18), and as understanding even his crucifixion and death as the active completion of his work (Jn. 19:30). More than this, Frei understands that a mysterious coexistence between Jesus' power and powerlessness lies at the heart of the salvation he brings. It is in fact Jesus' transition to powerlessness that becomes his power to save.

Frei says:

It is his vicarious identification with the guilty and, at the climax of the story, his identification with the helplessness of the guilty that provide the Gospel's story of salvation. Yet this helplessness is his power for the salvation of others. Something of his power abides and is accentuated as he becomes helpless. . . In the description of Jesus, one has to keep coming back to the ironic truth of the words of the priests and the scribes, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself' (Mark 15:31). These words detail the pattern of the saving action and suggest that, if Jesus had not forsaken the power to save himself, he could not have saved others. Thus the transition from power to helplessness is at the same time the realization of his saving power.<sup>33</sup>

In Jesus' obedience to the will of God, power and powerlessness coexist, and powerlessness becomes the enactment of saving power by virtue of God's intervention.

### ***Section 3: The Implications of Frei's Concepts for our Perspective of Church Decline***

Frei has argued that Jesus' enacted identity, as found in the narratives about him, ought to be allowed to re-describe our narratives and identity. He also argued that a

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<sup>33</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 104. Gorman, in his account of Paul's cruciform spirituality speaks to Paul's understanding of the mysterious coexistence of power and powerlessness in Jesus, particularly evidenced in his crucifixion. Gorman says: "Paul means that Christ as the crucified Messiah—and *only* as the crucified Messiah—is the power of God. . . It is absolutely crucial to note here that Paul never denies the weakness of the crucified Messiah. God's decisive act in Jesus stands all forms of power and authority on their heads. Indeed, it is in and as weakness—as humans normally understand weakness—that Christ is God's power. Christ is thus the locus and revelation of divine power only as the weak, the crucified one. *Christ is, for Paul, God's power-in-weakness*" (Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 277–278).

crucial aspect of Jesus' enacted identity is the coexistence of and transition from power to powerlessness that is the result of Jesus' obedience to God's will in every aspect of his life, death, and resurrection. We now come to the central question. How does Frei's understanding of Jesus, with respect to the priority of his identity and with respect to power and powerlessness in the context of obedience, re-describe churches' experiences and narratives of decline? Churches will come to be shaped by Jesus' identity as they shift their perspective away from a focus upon decline and their pasts, to a focus upon Jesus and sharing what is known of Jesus for the sake of sharing what is known of Jesus.

This is an important assertion, and as such it requires further explanation and demonstration. We will begin by delineating the meaning of this assertion and the ways in which this assertion relates to Frei's thinking. We will then demonstrate the ways in which an ongoing focus upon decline and the need to seek renewal or the maintenance of congregational identity at all cost, would keep a church from being shaped by Jesus' pattern of power and powerlessness. Finally we will demonstrate the ways in which this proposed shift in perspective will help churches to be shaped by Jesus' pattern of power and powerlessness.

### **To Share What is Known of Jesus: Expounding on the Meaning of the Assertion**

Describing in greater detail the key terms of this assertion will serve to elucidate the meaning of it. We will begin by considering what is meant by the phrase "to share what is known of Jesus." An understanding of the word "know," as it is used here, is crucial. In this context the word "know" is defined as: "to have experience of."<sup>34</sup> The intent is to make a distinction between acquiring information about Jesus, and experiencing something of Jesus. Spiritual theologian Sandra Schneider's definition of

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<sup>34</sup> Mish, *Webster's Ninth Collegiate*, 665.

spiritual theology in contrast to systematic theology can serve to illustrate what is meant by this distinction. Systematic theology is generally thought to be concerned with the content of the faith, whereas spiritual theology is generally concerned with the lived experience of the faith.<sup>35</sup> We do not wish to press the distinction too far. Our experience of Jesus is certainly related to the content of the information we have about Jesus. It is to be affirmed, however, that the word “know,” will be used here to indicate knowledge of Jesus that has come by experience, and that has come to affect and give shape to our way of living.<sup>36</sup>

The phrase “to share what is known of Jesus” also conveys the sense of the need for an audience. To share what is known of Jesus implies sharing Jesus with one another in the church, and with those outside the church. It is necessary to stipulate this aspect of sharing, particularly in situations of decline. As has already been pointed out, churches in decline tend to become insular, and lose confidence in their capacity to meaningfully interact with the surrounding community. Asserting that the way forward for declining churches is to share what is known of Jesus does mean challenging these churches to share Jesus with those outside the church as well as with one another in the church.

Having clarified the meaning of the word, “know” we turn now to emphasize that the invitation is to share what is known of *Jesus*. Such an assertion would appear to be self-evident, but can often be misunderstood. Considering what the call does not mean will help to bring clarification. First, the call to share what is known of Jesus does

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<sup>35</sup> Schneiders, “What Is Christian Spirituality?” 17.

<sup>36</sup> On this note see Kretzschmar who emphasizes the need for what she refers to as an integrated spirituality. Kretzschmar says: “An integrated spirituality is a spirituality in which who we are and what we do are intimately related” (“Being and Doing,” 38). In the context of our discussion it is a call for our witness to Christ to flow out of who we actually have come to be in Christ, and not out of what we think a Christian should be in Christ.

not mean sharing our allegiance to and belief in Jesus. It does not mean drawing attention to ourselves, and to the fact that we are ones who believe in Jesus and seek to serve him. Second, the call to share Jesus does not mean bearing witness to proofs in support of the person, claims, and meaningfulness of Jesus. While this task may be an important one, it is not what is meant here. Third, the invitation is not to share certain ideals such as “love” or “justice” that can be distilled from the story of Jesus. As has already been discussed, this tendency runs counter to Frei’s thinking, and involves making these ideals, and not the person of Jesus, the focus of our sharing. Fourth, the invitation is not to share Christianity as a particular and beneficial way of life. Instead, the invitation is to share what is known of Jesus, and his unique identity as enacted in the Gospel narratives.<sup>37</sup> As Frei has asserted, Jesus is the one who in obedience to God came bearing witness to and embodying the reign of God;<sup>38</sup> a reign marked by the love of God towards humankind,<sup>39</sup> and embodied in his ministry, death and resurrection.<sup>40</sup>

We are invited to share what is known of this Jesus.

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<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that while the missional church movement would support the call to share Jesus as we have discussed it here (see, for example, Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing Missional Church*, 43–44), it prefers the use of more expansive language. It speaks in terms of the church becoming a sign, foretaste, instrument, and agent of the already come and coming Kingdom of God (Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 101). It calls the church to embody the comprehensive claims of the bible’s story of the world, and therefore live as a counter-cultural community in the world (Newbiggin, *Pluralist Society*, 38). We do not dispute the language used here. In fact a focus upon sharing what is known of Jesus can be understood to correspond with these expansive understandings of the church’s call. It has been chosen, however, to retain the simple, but no less profound language, of “sharing what is known of Jesus,” believing that it will be more accessible and therefore also more meaningful.

<sup>38</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 130–132.

<sup>39</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 75, 110–111.

<sup>40</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 214–215, notes that Frei makes an odd distinction between Jesus’ ministry and his death and resurrection in terms of his witness to the reign of God. For Frei, it is as if Jesus’ witness to the reign of God comes to a close when he turns towards Jerusalem and crucifixion. Campbell acknowledges that Frei does suggest that the resurrection signals God’s vindication of Jesus’ way, and that the connection between Jesus and God’s reign is re-established at that point. For Campbell, however, this is not enough. He sees Jesus’ surrender to powerlessness and his refusal to exert power against the opposing forces as “. . .in fact his most profound challenge to those forces and his most crucial witness to and embodiment of God’s reign” (*Preaching Jesus*, 215).

Finally, it is important to note that the call is to share what is known of Jesus *for the sake of sharing what is known of Jesus*. This is a crucial aspect of the assertion. The distinction Parker Palmer draws between instrumental and expressive action will illuminate the importance of this.

In his book, *The Active Life*, Palmer argues that action and contemplation need not be thought of as opposites, or mutually exclusive modes of being. Instead he understands action and contemplation as two aspects of a paradox that must be held together in tension. Without contemplation, action “flies off into a frenzy,” and without action, contemplation “flies off into escapism.”<sup>41</sup> In the course of describing the nature of action, Palmer differentiates between instrumental and expressive action. An instrumental action is enacted as a means to a predetermined end.<sup>42</sup> Something is done in order to achieve something else. Work is done in order to make a living. A relationship is made in order to further a business deal. A book is written in order to sell many copies. Church renewal is sought in order to secure the future viability of the church. As Palmer says, instrumental action is “governed by the logic of success and failure.”<sup>43</sup> Action done for the purpose of achieving a predetermined end can only be evaluated by the degree to which that predetermined end is achieved. Action that achieves the desired end is a success, while action that does not achieve the desired end is a failure.

Expressive action, on the other hand, is action that is enacted to express something about the person doing it. Expressive acts are not governed by outcomes. They are governed by the need to express something internal to the actor. Palmer says:

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<sup>41</sup> Palmer, *Active Life*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Palmer, *Active Life*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Palmer, *Active Life*, 23.

“An expressive act is one that I take not to achieve a goal outside myself but to express a conviction, a leading, a truth that is within me. An expressive act is one taken because if I did not take it I would be denying my own insight, gift, nature.”<sup>44</sup> Palmer notes that one of the most successful activities of the modern world, science, is in its purest forms an expressive act.<sup>45</sup> Science can be pursued instrumentally, and its results are often used for instrumental purposes, but at its heart science has been practiced expressively.<sup>46</sup> Scientists engage their work out of a desire to learn the truth. As a result, even experimental failures become learning opportunities. For Palmer, the reason that science, in this pure form, has become so fruitful in the world is because it has been freed from the need to yield specific results. Expressive acts, by their very nature, are acts that are true to themselves, and so are more likely to achieve real ends.<sup>47</sup>

Asserting that churches in decline share what they know of Jesus for the sake of *sharing what they know of Jesus* emphasizes the need to share expressively, rather than instrumentally. It emphasizes the invitation to share Jesus not for the purpose of attracting more people into the church, but for the purpose of expressing their deep

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<sup>44</sup> Palmer, *Active Life*, 24. Rilke advises a young poet to, in Palmer’s terms, write expressively rather than instrumentally. He says: “You ask whether your verses are any good. You ask me. You have asked others before this. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems, and you are upset when certain editors reject your work. Now. . . I beg you to stop doing that sort of thing. You are looking outside, and that is what you should most avoid right now. . . There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: *must* I write? . . . if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple “I must,” then build your life in accordance with this necessity. . .” (*Letters*, 5–6).

<sup>45</sup> Palmer, *Active Life*, 23–24.

<sup>46</sup> Palmer, *Active Life*, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Palmer says: “Paradoxically, as science demonstrates, an expressive act is more likely to achieve real ends than is an instrumental act calculated to reach such ends but not rooted in the actor’s own reality. When an act is true to one’s nature it is more likely to have outcomes that are true to the field of action. I do not mean that we will always find the outcomes of expressive action to be acceptable, pleasing, or ‘good.’ I mean simply that whatever the outcomes may be, they will be convergent with a larger sustaining truth. They will not be temporary illusions imposed on reality by our false and frail images of how things ought to be” (*Active Life*, 24).

convictions about Jesus that they cannot help but want to express. Having said this, Palmer acknowledges that we cannot operate solely on the basis of expressive action. Instrumental action will always be necessary as long as we live embodied lives in a world of infinite needs and finite resources.<sup>48</sup> He contends, however, that instrumental action must not be allowed to dominate. He argues that whenever “the standards of instrumentalism dominate, our action is impoverished and our lives are diminished.”<sup>49</sup> In our assertion we have emphasized the need for expressive action—sharing what is known of Jesus for the sake of it—because we have seen that it is not unusual for churches in decline to be dominated by instrumentalism.<sup>50</sup> In Frei’s terms, to mirror Jesus’ identity involves bearing witness to him in a way that is consistent with his own approach to ministry.

Taken together, the invitation is for declining churches to shift their focus away from decline, and place it instead upon Jesus and sharing what is known of him. The invitation is for churches to simply do what they can, given their current circumstances and resources, to share Jesus. This invitation is important not only because it follows from Frei’s work, but also because it will be of benefit to churches in decline as will be discussed further below. For the moment we will demonstrate the way in which a persistent focus on the past and decline hinders churches in their being shaped by Jesus and the way in which he enacted power and powerlessness.

### **Hindrances to Being Shaped by Jesus**

A continuing focus upon the past, the ongoing effects of decline and the need for

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<sup>48</sup> Palmer, *Active Life*, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Palmer, *Active Life*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> As has already been shown, declining churches are prompted to reach out to their surrounding community, to make significant change, to engage strategic planning processes, to seek health, all so that these churches might be renewed and become viable again.



renewal, and a desire to maintain identity at all cost will hinder churches in their being shaped by the coexistence of, and transition of power to powerlessness embodied in Jesus. A consideration of the churches in our study will ably demonstrate this fact. Before continuing, however, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the words “power” and “powerlessness” as they will be used in relation to the churches that are the subjects of the following analysis. Power, as it is used here, is understood to mean “the ability to act or produce effect.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the word “powerlessness” will be understood to mean the inability to act or produce a desired effect. In relation to the churches being analyzed, these words are being used in a way that is devoid of theological nuance.

Two of the churches in our study have acted, or are attempting to act with power to effect renewal. Carmel Wesleyan Church has made several attempts to effect renewal through a building plan and through various plans for evangelism. Furthermore, they are determined to not give up and to keep on trying. Yet their efforts to effect renewal have failed to bring the desired results. The church has not grown in any significant measure due to these efforts and is still struggling. Sanderson United Methodist Church, with a Sunday attendance of less than ten people and located within a severely declining town, is focused upon doing whatever they can to effect renewal. They are aware that any efforts they make may not result in the renewal of the church. They too do not wish to give up, and so are focused upon doing what they can to effect renewal, such as opening their church and church grounds for use during the town fair. While the church still survives, it is difficult to imagine that their efforts will result in actual renewal, given the extent of the town’s decline. In both cases the drive to effect renewal, which constitutes attempts to act in power, is also a drive to stave off powerlessness. Neither of these

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<sup>51</sup> Mish, *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate*, 922.

churches wishes to give up, and so the only option they can conceive of is to continue working for renewal as best they can.

Both of these churches' stories contain elements of power and powerlessness, but their stories do not show evidence of being shaped by the Jesus' expression of power and powerlessness. As Frei has noted, the Jesus of the Gospel narratives is one who witnesses with power to the reign of God, and who chose to embody a powerlessness that is indwelt with power, as the opposition against him intensified. Jesus' acts of power were effectual; so effectual that it raised the ire of his opposition. He freely chose to transition to powerlessness, and even this powerlessness was mysteriously imbued with saving power. The experience of these two churches with respect to power and powerlessness is very different. Their focus upon decline has led both of them to attempt acts of power that have been or are likely to be ineffectual. More revealing, their acts of power have not so much been focused upon witnessing to God's reign, as they have been focused upon staving off the powerlessness of decline. The powerlessness of decline, far from being willingly accepted, continues to force itself upon them, and holds within it no promise of coexisting power.

Two other churches in our study have acquiesced to a sense of powerlessness with respect to decline. These churches are Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church. Both of these churches are highly focused upon the experience and devastating effects of decline. They have both essentially given up hope that there is anything they can do to prevent ongoing decline. Unlike what we see enacted in Christ, this powerless does not appear to be imbued with any experience of power. It is an experience of powerlessness that appears devoid of any hope that God's power can be made manifest in the midst of their powerlessness.

Finally, two churches have come to focus primarily on their congregational identity, and the maintenance of that identity at all cost. We see evidence in the stories of both Gray Friends Meeting and Faith Episcopal Church, of a tendency to cling to their current congregational identity regardless of the fact that this might contribute to the ongoing decline of their churches. Such a determination is an act of power, as it is an effect that these churches can produce. These churches have acted to guard their identity, and for the moment it is an act that can be successfully effected due to their current financial viability. The content of this act of power, however, fails to mirror the content of Christ's ministry of power. Christ's ministry of power was focused upon witnessing to and embodying God's reign of love for humankind. It was power expressed in service for others motivated by obedience to God. For these churches it is an act of power that is more focused upon serving their own need to maintain a meaningful identity.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, it is an act of power that is likely to precipitate ongoing decline and therefore also an increasing state of powerlessness. Should this occur, it is unlikely that a state of increasing powerlessness would be one that will be indwelt with a corresponding power.

In every case, an ongoing focus upon the past, decline, the need for renewal, and the need to hold on to congregational identity, has led to acts of power and expressions of powerlessness that show no evidence of being shaped by Jesus and his expression of power and powerlessness. We turn now to consider the way in which churches can be supported in their being shaped by Jesus, through a focus upon him and sharing what is known of him for the sake of it.

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<sup>52</sup> It is possible that these churches assume that they can best witness to Jesus and God's reign of love by maintaining their unique congregational identities. The data about these churches suggest, however, that their main priority is not sharing Jesus, but the maintenance of their preferred congregational identities.

### **Being Shaped By Jesus in Relation to Power and Powerlessness**

Expressing the way in which the church can be shaped by Jesus, and in particular by his expression of power and powerlessness, requires a certain precision. Campbell will help with this. Campbell asserts that the act of preaching requires embodiment of God's reign after the pattern of Jesus. Simply offering content about God's reign in Jesus, while most important, is not enough.<sup>53</sup> For this reason, Campbell understands preaching to be an act of boldness that challenges the powers of the world. Preaching eschews passivity and involves active engagement with the "powers that be."<sup>54</sup> What Campbell says of preaching can be applied to this discussion. To share what is known about Jesus for the sake of sharing what is known about Jesus is an act of boldness that challenges the powers of the world. That boldness may be expressed gently and even quietly at times, but it is still an act of boldness. To share what is known of Jesus, because one cannot help but do so, is to eschew passivity. As such it is an act of power, in the sense that the church has acted as opposed to not acted.

It is an act imbued with power in another sense too. To share what is known of Jesus for the sake of it is an act that is permeated by the work and power of the Holy Spirit. We come to know something of Jesus through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:26). We are moved to share what we know of Jesus through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17–18). Our sharing will be empowered by the Holy Spirit (Mt. 10:2). To share what is known of Jesus for the sake of sharing what is known of Jesus is to participate with the Spirit in the Spirit's ongoing work to bear witness to Christ (Jn 15:26). This act is permeated with the Spirit's power, just as Jesus' acts were permeated

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<sup>53</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 216.

<sup>54</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 216.

with the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way sharing what is known of Jesus involves being shaped by—mirroring as in a glass darkly—Jesus’ expression of a bold and Spirit-filled ministry to the reign of God in the world.

### Sharing Jesus—An Act of Power Available to Declining Churches

Sharing what is known of Jesus for the sake of sharing what is known of Jesus is an act of power after the pattern of Jesus. Moreover, it is an act of power that is available even to those churches that find themselves enmeshed in the deepest stages of decline. We turn now to imagine the ways in which those churches in our study might share Jesus. Gray Friends Meeting could embrace its Quaker identity by entering into a discernment process for the purpose of seeking God’s leading with respect to how it might share what is known of Jesus with one another and with those outside the church. This congregation has assumed that the only way forward is to evangelize more aggressively, an act that runs counter to their Quaker identity. This need not be their only option, however. Through a process of discernment, for example, they may find themselves being led towards sharing Jesus by offering service to their community. Both the practice of discernment and an emphasis upon prophetic social action have featured largely within Quaker spirituality.<sup>55</sup> Engaged for the sheer sake of it, this church could leave behind any sense that this act should result in, for example, increased Sunday morning attendance. In one way this proposal is a prelude to sharing Jesus. In another way, the act of seeking God’s leading is in fact a means of witnessing to Jesus’ lordship and God’s reign. It is an act of witnessing to the ongoing presence of the resurrected Lord in the midst of the church, and expresses trust and a willingness to live in obedience to God’s leading, even as Jesus did.

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<sup>55</sup> Birkel, “Quaker Spirituality;” Spencer, “Quaker Spirituality.”

The story of Carmel Wesleyan Church suggests at least a few possibilities for sharing Jesus. This congregation has demonstrated their willingness to act lovingly and generously towards even those who are newcomers to their congregation. There is no reason why this congregation could not seek God's leading as to how they might extend that loving generosity to those outside their church community. Prayer is also important to this congregation. This congregation could pray for the needs of their town, and for the accomplishment of God's will in their community. If they felt so led, they could take a further step and solicit requests for specific prayers from their fellow townspeople, praying for them simply for the joy of it. Carmel Wesleyan Church demonstrates that some churches may also simply need to embrace and celebrate the ways in which they are already sharing Jesus. Carmel Wesleyan is described as being a diverse congregation made up of those who are "black and white, young and old, couples and families, farmers and professionals."<sup>56</sup> Such diversity already witnesses to the diversity in Christ's body, the church. This is an aspect of their congregation that they can celebrate and possibly seek to deepen. The congregants' willingness to be vulnerable in prayer is also notable. Their willingness to make their needs known, and to even confess their difficulties with each other is an expression of sharing Jesus and his forgiveness with each other. This too is an aspect of their congregation that can be celebrated as a means of sharing what is known of Jesus.

Brighton Avenue Baptist Church has suffered the terrible depletion of resources that often comes with deep decline. Nevertheless, it would still be possible for this congregation to shift their focus from decline to one of sharing what is known of Jesus for the sake of it. Prayer could play a significant role in this shift. Although this

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<sup>56</sup> Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 88.

congregation feels ill-equipped to connect with the surrounding community, there is no reason why they could not focus upon praying for the needs of their community. At some point, if they felt so led, they could approach community leaders and ask for guidance as to how they could best pray. In this same way they could focus upon praying for the needs of the various groups that rent space in their building. Furthermore, while this congregation may not be able to realize their dream of converting part of their building into a housing/daycare facility for the elderly, they could still pray for this need to be met in some other way. Even as severely depleted as this congregation is, there is no reason why they cannot share what is known of Jesus, in this case primarily through prayer.

City Centre Church is in a difficult situation, given the fact that by the time the researcher had left the congregation, the church had already voted to lay off the pastor and organist. It would certainly appear that closure would be the next step. Acknowledging that this opportunity might be past, it is still worth noting that this congregation has had a tremendous opportunity to share what is known of Jesus for the sake of it through their high school lunch program. The researcher offers little information about the program, but does note that the pastor's determination to listen to the students, more than speaking to them about Jesus, has drawn criticism from the congregation.<sup>57</sup> On the basis of this, it could be said that the pastor has missed an opportunity to share Jesus with the students. The criticism leveled against the pastor, however, reveals that the congregation would need to make changes in order for this program to become an instance of sharing what is known of Jesus for the sake of sharing what is known of Jesus. First, there is the sense that this congregation's contention for a

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<sup>57</sup> McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 156.

more evangelistic approach has more to do with providing information about Jesus, than it does have to do with a desire to share what they have experienced of Jesus. Secondly, the data make it clear that the congregation has understood this program in instrumental, as opposed to expressive, terms. Those criticizing the pastor's approach have understood this program as a means to an end. They want this well-attended student program to lead to more young people sitting in the pews on Sunday morning.<sup>58</sup> If, in contrast to both of these points, the congregation was able to approach the program expressively as an opportunity to share Jesus and the loving reign of God for the sheer love and joy of it, the possibilities for real-life change (amongst both the students and even the congregants) are tremendous.

The student program aside, City Centre Church still has an opportunity to share what is known of Jesus even in the midst of a potential closure. As was noted previously, Gaede understands that even church closures can be a kind of resurrection experience when resources are released in such a way as to support God's ongoing work. Although likely facing closure, this congregation has the opportunity to seek God's guidance even now, if not for leading as to how they might be able to serve God in ongoing ministry, then for leading as to how they might be able to serve God even in closure.

Faith Episcopal Church presents a challenge. The issue is not so much a lack of opportunity to share what is known of Jesus for the sake of it. The issue has more to do with the nature and habits of this congregation. The congregants are willing to make the journey from the suburbs to participate in Sunday morning worship, but have little interest in becoming involved with the community surrounding the church. For this

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<sup>58</sup> McMullin, "Social Aspects of Religious Decline," 156.



reason, one way forward would be to focus upon celebrating and then deepening the way in which Jesus is already shared through the Sunday morning worship service. Without more detail from the researcher, it is difficult to specify how this might actually be accomplished. The goal would be to deepen the congregation's focus upon Jesus and the loving reign of God through the vehicle of the Anglo-Catholic worship service that is so central to the congregation's identity. Initially, the impact of such a shift would be largely limited to the existing congregation. The hope would be that such a move would generate a greater desire to discern opportunities for sharing Jesus beyond the confines of the church building.

Sanderson United Methodist Church is the smallest of all the congregations documented in this work, but it is a study in determination. Not only does this congregation of fewer than ten still employ a pastor and meet regularly for worship, but the women still run a large clothing bank, and the congregation meets regularly for bible study and a meal at the local diner.<sup>59</sup> A possible way forward for this congregation would be to begin by celebrating the fact that their ongoing presence and ministry within the community is in fact an instance of sharing what they know of Jesus. Another possibility suggested by the data would be for this congregation to pay attention for ways in which they could proactively serve those in their community who are in need. With respect to the clothing bank, the church currently waits for people to approach them for help. In such a small community, where the congregants are more likely to know their neighbours, the church need not wait for the community to come to them. The congregation could look for ways to proactively offer the community what they can offer, simply for the joy of it.

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<sup>59</sup> Quist, "We Aren't Dying Yet," 62.

Again and again we come to see that one of the most crucial aspects of this proposed shift in focus is the willingness to share Jesus *for the sheer joy of it*. The invitation is to share with others that which has “spread its roots into the very depths of your heart”<sup>60</sup> and that which you cannot help but share. It is this aspect that helps to ensure that our sharing is focused on Jesus. The logic of it is clear once we pause to reflect upon it. Any act ostensibly carried out in Jesus’ name, but actually offered for the satisfaction of ulterior motives will be more focused on those ulterior motives than anything else. It is a joy to realize that even declining churches can engage the act of sharing Jesus for no reason other than they simply cannot help but do so.

It has been necessary to think about how the churches in our study might be able to share what is known of Jesus for the sake of sharing what is known of Jesus. Having done this, we must guard against the tendency to think that enacting the described activities is the goal. The goal is not to promote certain activities. The goal remains to promote a focus upon Jesus and sharing what is known of him. The invitation is to pay attention to Jesus, and to be “penetrated”<sup>61</sup> by experience of him, “just as he is, in all his truth.”<sup>62</sup> The above possibilities have been offered as suggestions only, and are meant primarily to demonstrate that even those churches facing significant decline can participate in the act of sharing Jesus for the sake of it. The possibilities for sharing

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<sup>60</sup> Rilke, *Letters*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> This startling word used by Weil captures well the sense of what it is to know something of Jesus (“Reflections,” 62).

<sup>62</sup> Weil, “Reflections,” 65. Weil emphasizes the importance of “paying attention.” To pay attention to someone, in this case Jesus, involves seeing him as he is, and not seeing him as we might imagine him to be. In a similar, but tangential vein, Pattison espouses the need to pay closer attention to the physical artefacts in our lives—even ordinary objects such as coins, maps, and cutlery (*Seeing Things*, 230). He wonders: “Maybe my life, perceptive powers, and capacity to enter into appreciative, personlike relations with them would be substantially deepened by offering them some sustained attention.” This insight, although directed towards our relationship with the physical world, applies to relationship with Jesus as well. If our lives can be enhanced, even by paying closer attention to the most mundane of objects, how much more will our lives be enhanced, by paying closer attention to Jesus?” (229)

Jesus are virtually infinite. It may be as simple as offering a glass of water to someone who needs it. It may also involve choosing to embrace a perpetrator of violence because this is the kind of embrace that is embodied by Jesus on the cross.<sup>63</sup> Churches are not called to share Jesus in some ideal way. They are simply invited to share what they have experienced of Jesus, and what they cannot help but want to share.

#### Sharing Jesus—The Coexistence of Power and Powerlessness

Having explored the ways in which sharing Jesus is an expression of power, we turn now to discuss the way in which this same focus will also constitute an act of powerlessness.<sup>64</sup> The act, in the end, becomes one in which power and powerlessness coexist.

The act of sharing Jesus for the sake of sharing Jesus constitutes an expression of powerlessness in two ways. Such acts become expressions of powerlessness in that we must rely upon God to make the acts fruitful. Sharing Jesus for the sheer sake of it involves relinquishing all efforts to coerce, manipulate, or force receptivity in those to whom we are witnessing. It involves surrendering our sharing to God, trusting that God will make them effective and bring fruit out of them in accordance with God's will and ways. Here we see again why it is so important for churches to engage the act of making Jesus evident for the sheer love and joy of it. Any motive less than this, particularly any instrumental motive such as witnessing for the sake of accomplishing church renewal, runs the danger of degrading into an act of coercion and manipulation.

Sharing Jesus for the sake of it also becomes an expression of powerlessness, because it involves surrendering the future of our declining churches to God. It involves

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<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

<sup>64</sup> Thanks to Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 216–217, whose discussion of preaching as an act of both power and powerlessness inspired the following insights.

relinquishing the belief that we are responsible for ensuring the future of our churches. Furthermore, it involves relinquishing our drive and compulsion to take on the responsibility for ensuring the future of our churches. It is, in essence, a compulsion.<sup>65</sup> As such it also means letting go of the tendency to be driven by fear in situations of decline. Churches in decline experience a great deal of fear. They fear closure. They fear the loss of identity. They fear losing what precious resources they still have. They fear making a mistake that could have devastating results. A focus absorbed with decline can only but lead to these kinds of fears. To shift focus away from decline and the drive to be responsible for renewal, to one of sharing Jesus for the sake of it, involves moving away from fear and those acts that are driven by it. It means moving towards those acts that are governed by love, recognizing that love and fear cannot coexist (1 John 4:18).<sup>66</sup> Sharing what is known of Jesus for no reason other than to share Jesus, is an act that is free of fear and therefore is also an act of love; an act of love towards God and towards humanity. Michael Gorman, affirms that cruciform power—power that is shaped by Christ’s expression of power-in-weakness—is by its very nature power that is expressed for the good of others. Acts of cruciform power will, in fact, be acts of love.<sup>67</sup> Acts of service, evangelism, and fellowship engaged essentially for the purpose of staving off the devastating effects of decline and the fear that comes with it are not acts of love done for the good of others. They are acts that are essentially done

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<sup>65</sup> Nouwen speaks to this point when he says: “A huge network of anxious questions surrounds us and begins to guide many, if not most of our daily decisions. Clearly, those who can pose these fearful questions which bind us within have true power over us. For hidden under their questions lies the threat that not following their directions will make our worst fears come true. Once we accept these questions as our own, and our convinced that *we must find answers to them*, we become more and more settled in the house of fear [emphasis added]” (*Lifesigns*, 5–6). Declining churches can often give over power to the situation of decline. They often become defined by the questions and fears of decline, and so come to feel compelled to have find a solution to the situation.

<sup>66</sup> As Nouwen says: “Fear never gives birth to love” (*Lifesigns*, 6).

<sup>67</sup> Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 396.

for the benefit of the church. Such a shift can only be made, as declining churches are willing to accept the reality of their powerlessness and surrender their congregational future to God.

It is important to point out that a shift in focus from decline to one of sharing Jesus will not necessarily secure the future viability of declining churches. Some churches may make this shift in perspective and find themselves caught up in the emergence of renewed growth. Other churches may make this shift and continue to experience decline. Again we see how critical it is to embrace the expressive nature of this shift in perspective, and acknowledge the powerlessness inherent in it. The invitation is to share what is known of Jesus for the sake of it, not for the purpose of securing the future viability of the church.<sup>68</sup>

#### ***Section 4: The Potential Benefits of a Focus Upon Sharing Jesus***

To this point, we have argued for the proposed shift in perspective on the basis of its consistency with Frei's assertion that the church is called to be shaped by Christ's identity, including his relation to power and powerlessness. We turn now to illuminate the numerous ways in which such a shift in perspective can benefit declining churches. Before doing so, we must add a cautionary note. While speaking in terms of the benefits such a shift in perspective can provide, it is absolutely critical to remember once again the expressive nature of this proposal. This shift in perspective may bring about benefits for declining churches, but this does not mean that churches should adopt this perspective for the purpose of gaining these benefits. The call to focus upon Jesus and share what is known of him remains again for the sake of sharing Jesus.

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<sup>68</sup> This point raises a question that will be addressed. Should declining churches focus only upon making Christ evident, and forgo any instrumental activity aimed at seeking renewal, or at the very least the maintenance of the church as it is?

### **Sharing Jesus Brings Numerous Potential Benefits**

Such a shift in perspective can bring encouragement to declining churches by re-describing their responsibility in decline. Decline often brings discouragement and weariness to the churches experiencing it. As we have seen, churches grow discouraged when their ongoing efforts to bring renewal fail to yield the desired results. Churches grow weary of the incessant call to seek change so that they might become more attractive and more effective. In the end, churches become overwhelmed and defeated by the tyranny of the belief that they are wholly responsible for the future of their churches. The proposed shift in perspective alleviates this ill-conceived sense of responsibility and can bring encouragement. It re-describes our responsibility; not allowing us to become passive altogether, but re-focusing our attention on that to which we are called.

This shift in perspective also brings encouragement by affirming that meaningful ministry with Christ is still available to those churches that are struggling with significant decline. Over time, decline relentlessly undermines a congregation's confidence in its ability to minister effectively. The corresponding assumption is that churches must be renewed in order for them to be able to minister effectively again. Such a perspective can initiate a pernicious cycle. How much renewal is enough? When can the church cease focusing on renewal and begin focusing on ministry again? It is not so much the need for renewal that becomes problematic here, but our tendency to assume that decline is only "bad," and that some level of renewal must be achieved before meaningful and effective ministry can be resumed. The shift in perspective proposed here undermines our assumptions in this regard by boldly asserting that any

church, no matter how weak or depleted, can meaningfully participate in the invitation to share what is known of Jesus for the sake of sharing Jesus.

This shift in perspective re-describes our understanding of power and powerlessness in situations of decline, and does so in a way that is more likely to be enlivening and fruitful. One of the hallmarks of decline is a lack of fruitfulness both in attempted expressions of power and in expressions of powerlessness. Looking to the churches in our study we see acts of power, attempts to effect renewal, which continue to end in futility. We see deliberate choices to maintain the status quo of congregational identity (a kind of act of power), that will likely lead to further decline. We see acquiescence to powerlessness that is grounded in discouragement rather than hope. Churches are seeking to act in power, but their acts of power are failing to yield fruit. Churches have yielded to powerlessness, but it is a powerlessness that has no sense of life about it. In contrast to this, the proposed shift in perspective re-describes power and powerlessness in life-giving ways. The act of power espoused—that of sharing what is known of Jesus for the sake of sharing what is known of Jesus—is life-giving and more likely to bear fruit because it is an act that is grounded in trusting love, and not driven by the fearful need to yield results. The expressions of powerlessness espoused—trusting God to make our witness effective, and trusting God with the future of our churches—are more enlivening and likely to bear fruit because they are grounded in God’s gracious and faithful ability, and not in our inability and failings. With this shift in perspective we come to see that as followers of Christ, our acts of power will actually lack power until they are paired with an appropriate expression of powerlessness. We come to see also that our expressions of powerlessness speak not of our inability to act, but speak instead of our willingness to live in dependence upon God.

Our understanding of obedience is also re-described in a beneficial way by this shift in perspective. Many churches believe—a belief subtly supported by many renewal materials—that to be obedient to God in situations of decline is to be willing to doggedly pursue renewal. There is a sense that to give up on seeking renewal is to be unfaithful to God. This ever-so-subtle belief, demonstrated most clearly in our study by Carmel Wesleyan Church, leads churches into a terrible double bind. To go on trying to effect renewal with little or no results leads to greater and greater discouragement, while the possibility of giving up is unthinkable. A devastating picture of God and of ourselves potentially emerges from this. It evokes a picture of a God who demands ongoing work for renewal, seemingly without offering any help. It can also lead to a sense of tremendous discouragement because we will be inclined to internalize any failure and attribute it to our failings and weaknesses. In contrast to this, the re-description of obedience found in the proposed shift in perspective cannot help but bring relief. Churches are still called to follow Jesus in obedience to God—the challenge inherent in this call must not be underestimated—but it is a call in which the exercise of obedience will no longer be marked by futility. The call to share what is known of Jesus for the sake of it asks of churches a willingness to express what it is that they have encountered of Jesus.<sup>69</sup> It asks churches to risk drawing attention, not to the church, not to the benefits of the Christian life, but to Jesus. Such a call may seem foolish. It may even lead churches to engage in acts that bring derision if not opposition. Despite these very real challenges, however, the call has a lightness about it. It is a call that is marked by

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<sup>69</sup> Such an understanding corresponds to the definition of obedience offered by Nouwen et al. They say: “The word obedience is derived from the Latin word *audire*, which means “to listen.” Obedience, as it is embodied in Jesus Christ, is a total listening, a giving attention with no hesitation or limitation, a being “all ear” (*Compassion*, 34).



grace and not by law. There is no demand of right and wrong in it. It is not a call “to get it right.” It is instead a call for the church to simply share what it is they have encountered of Jesus, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant their efforts are.

The proposed shift in perspective provides a profound lens for assessing a church’s current ministry, and may even contribute to the growth of new vision. Those materials that promote a strategic planning approach to renewal encourage churches to conduct some form of internal and external ministry assessment. The acronym *SWOT*—which stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—is often referred to in this regard.<sup>70</sup> The *SWOT* tool has the potential to elicit valuable reflection from a congregation, but it is unlikely that it would encourage the congregation to reflect upon what it knows of Jesus that it cannot help but want to share. This is reflection of a different order that the proposed shift in perspective has the potential to evoke. It is true that any tool or lens will only be as effective as it is allowed to be. Churches can choose to apprehend the proposed shift in perspective in superficial ways. Nevertheless, such a shift in perspective is much more likely to evoke thoughtful reflection in this regard, than a general ministry assessment would.

Furthermore, this same shift in perspective might actually contribute to the birth of new vision. A focus upon decline and a preoccupation with fear generates an environment that is anything but conducive to the birth of new vision. Such an environment constricts a congregation’s vision in every way. The questions formed in such an environment are telling. How do we renew the church? How do we keep it from closing? How do we get more people into the pews? How do we solve this dilemma? The questions evoked by a focus upon sharing Jesus stand in stark contrast to

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<sup>70</sup> Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 18.

these. What do we know of Jesus that we cannot help but want to express? How are we already making Jesus evident? What other possibilities are within our reach given our resources and circumstances? These questions are life-giving because the aim is to express Jesus instead of solving the problem of decline. The possibilities for making sharing Jesus for the sheer joy of it are virtually limitless. Most importantly there is no right and wrong. The church is liberated from the need to “get it right” and freed to simply express the heart of who they have come to know. While the birth of new vision is not guaranteed, the environment created by this shift in perspective will surely be more conducive to it.

### **A Focus Upon Sharing Jesus Addresses Previously Identified Issues**

In addition to all of the benefits already listed, this shift in perspective has the potential to address some of the issues identified earlier in this work. To begin with this shift in perspective offers churches a new understanding of hope. Hope is no longer located in the possibility of renewal, or at the very least in the continued viability of the church. With this shift in perspective, hope becomes located in God and God’s gracious goodness and faithfulness. The future of the church is left to God. The effectiveness of our sharing is left to God. This shift in perspective lifts our eyes to God as the one on whom we need to depend in decline, and as the one in whom we can hope. For regardless of the outcome, whether churches find renewal, or continue to decline, we can trust and hope in God who is faithful to bring good fruit out of any and all situations.

It is a shift in perspective that is doable even for those churches facing the depletion of resources that comes with significant decline. As such, it runs counter to much of what is espoused in renewal materials. As has been noted, many of the renewal materials fail to meet declining churches where they are at, and end up proposing

courses of action that are well beyond their ability and resources to engage. In contrast to this the call to share what is known of Jesus for the sake of it does not ask more of declining churches than what they can do. It does not call them to share Jesus in the ways that a well-funded, well-staffed, and well-attended church can. It simply calls them to share Jesus as they can, with the resources they have at their disposal. Yet this call, so seemingly simple in one respect, is quite profound in another. For though it is a call for churches to simply do what they can to share Jesus, it is nonetheless a call to participate with God in work of infinite value. Even those churches that can only act in very small ways in this regard can be assured, by the parables of the mustard seed and yeast in the dough, that even their small efforts can, in God's hands, yield significant fruit (Mt. 13: 31–33; Mk. 4:30–32; Lk. 13:18–21).

This shift in perspective can also serve to alleviate some of the concerns that keep churches from grieving their losses in decline. It has been found that, while all of the churches in our study have experienced significant losses due to decline, they display little evidence of engaging the tasks of mourning. They have not accepted the reality of, or processed the pain of their losses. They have not made the internal and spiritual adjustments prompted by the losses, and they have not moved on in new directions while maintaining healthy attachments to that which has been lost. We postulated that churches are often hesitant to mourn the losses of decline because to do so is tantamount to giving up on the church and being unfaithful to God. This shift in perspective can help churches to engage the tasks of mourning in at least two ways. First, the call to share Jesus for the sake of it is a call to move forward in meaningful living and loving even in the midst of the losses of decline (the fourth task of mourning). Second, the call to surrender the future of the church to God is a first step towards helping churches

accept and process the pain of their losses. It would be very difficult for any church to grieve the losses of decline when they believe that they are responsible for turning the situation around. Any expression of grief in this case, would likely be perceived as an expression of “giving up.” Therefore, lifting that assumed responsibility from the church is a necessary first step towards helping churches accept and process the pain of their losses. It is not necessarily the only step needed, however. Even with this shift, churches may still struggle to express their grief because they may believe that doing so reveals a lack of faith in God to bring renewal. We will address this matter in Chapter five. For the moment it can be said that this shift in perspective has the potential to begin to remove some of the hindrances to grief.

Idolatry was one of the issues we identified earlier. We noted that the drive for renewal might in some cases have more to do with a drive to seek security in the things of this world, rather than in God. The proposed shift in perspective directly addresses this possibility by calling churches to surrender themselves and their futures to God.

Another issue raised earlier pertained to the reductionistic approach to the divine-human interaction in certain of the renewal materials. As a result of this approach, an emphasis is often placed upon human activity and responsibility in renewal, with little being said about God’s activity and responsibility in it. As a result of this, it was argued that any approach to renewal developed here must emphasize a divine-human interaction in renewal. This shift in perspective does just that. It calls the church to share what they cannot help but want to share about Jesus, while also calling the church to trust God in those matters that are ultimately beyond its power to control.

Again and again we find ourselves circling back to this call to accept powerlessness, even while acting in power. How critical this call is. The call to accept

that powerlessness must coexist with power represents a kind of death. To live is to move, to act, and to have an effect. Death ultimately leads to the end of our ability to move, to act, and to have any effect, and so does surrender to powerlessness. To accept our powerlessness in a situation is to accept our inability move, to act, and to have any effect in that situation. No wonder we resist powerlessness so vehemently. It is critical to remember, however, that the call to powerlessness espoused here is not a call to *only* embrace our sometimes-painful limitations. Such an interpretation of the call should be resisted because it has no life in it. It leads only to a painful awareness of our weaknesses and inabilities and nothing more. The call espoused here does include the need to accept the reality of our limitations, but it is also much more than that. It is also a call to embrace and depend on the infinite goodness of God's power. This call involves not only death, but also life. This call does not just focus on weakness, but power manifested in the midst of weakness. More than this, it gives the church the opportunity to cooperate with God in God's desire to do much more than just save local churches. The resurrection—as God's response of loving power to Jesus' surrender to powerlessness—was about much more than God bringing vindication to Jesus. It has, of course, had far-reaching salvific effect. So it can be surmised that God's desire in the midst of our faithful surrender to the limitations we face in the midst of decline will be to bring about much more than just the vindication of some local churches.

### **Sharing Jesus Potentially Leads to Fruitfulness**

Finally, as the last point hints, we would contend that this shift in perspective offers a means to fruitfulness even while in the midst of decline. First, this shift in perspective has the potential to be fruitful because of the emphasis that is made upon sharing *Jesus*. So often, in our churches we succeed in sharing many things,

unfortunately just not always Jesus. We share the details and benefits of a Christian life. We share the benefits of our particular church and church programs. We share ways to lead a more meaningful and satisfying life. In contrast, this perspective challenges us to focus upon the person of Jesus and to share him and the loving reign of God. The emphasis upon sharing Jesus has the potential to bear fruit not only in those outside the church, but in those within the church as well. For such a call challenges us to pay attention to what we have actually encountered of Jesus. The call is not to pay attention to what we do not know of Jesus, the limitations and incompleteness of our knowledge. The call is to pay attention to what we do know and what we have experienced. This is an important and powerful distinction. Freed from the drive to have to achieve certain results, we can be encouraged that what we have already encountered of Jesus is enough. Such freedom cannot help but generate a hunger to know more of Jesus. We are freed to want to encounter more of Jesus not because we must, but because we may.

Second, this shift in perspective offers declining churches the potential to be fruitful because of the emphasis upon sharing Jesus for the sheer sake of it. We are not called to share Jesus because that is what good Christians should do. We are not called to share Jesus because it will potentially contribute to the renewal of the church. We are not even called to share Jesus for the purpose of bearing fruit. In short, we are not called to share Jesus because we are afraid of what might happen if we do not do this.<sup>71</sup> We are called to share of Jesus what we simply cannot help but want to share. Such an emphasis has the potential to shine a light upon, challenge, and free churches from what

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<sup>71</sup> Nouwen, McNeill, Morrison, *Compassion*, observe that Jesus' obedience has "no association with fear, but rather is the expression of his most intimate, loving relationship" (34). Therefore also, our response of obedience can be characterized by ". . . a commitment to listen with [Jesus] to God's love without fear. It is to obedience—understood as an intimate, fearless listening to God's continuing love—that we are called (38).

Whitehead refers to as the “‘awful purposefulness’ of much of Christian behaviour.”<sup>72</sup>

Whitehead laments the fact that so much of Christian behaviour is done for the purpose of accomplishing something else.<sup>73</sup> He therefore argues for the importance of engaging Christian behaviour as a kind of “play” that we engage in for the sheer delight of it.<sup>74</sup>

Moltmann agrees, and goes on to explain why it is so vital for Christians to move away from this kind of purposefulness. Moltmann, in his book *Theology and Joy*, expounds upon the joy, freedom, and play of the Christian life. Moltmann begins with the concern that too many Christians have become weighed down by the apparent demands of the Christian life,<sup>75</sup> and so makes the case that Christians need to be freed from the compulsion to act out of perceived necessity.<sup>76</sup> Moltmann’s point is that the very core of the Christian message is one of freedom from having to justify ourselves before God through our acts. He says:

A person receives himself [*sic*] from God. The beloved therefore has died to the world of law and works and to the world of sin and death too. In death there are no prerogatives; of a dead man [*sic*] nothing can be demanded. Yet he [*sic*] lives in the new world of God ‘where there is no law, no sin, no conscience, no death but utter joy, justice, peace, life, blessing and glory.’ And he [*sic*] acts out of that realm of freedom as long as he [*sic*] exists in this world of death.<sup>77</sup>

While Moltmann’s interest extends far beyond concerns of purposefulness in the declining church, his point applies and expands our understanding of the call to share

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<sup>72</sup> Whitehead, “Practical Play,” 48.

<sup>73</sup> Whitehead, “Practical Play,” 48, writing from the Catholic tradition, with insights that are no less important for Protestants, notes: “Our Christian heritage has a deep-running and powerful tradition about our actions being for something else: life on this earth is *for* heaven; sexual intercourse is *for* children; acts of charity are performed *for* the purpose of saving souls. . . Frequently Christian purposefulness has turned even the play of liturgy to other ends—whether filling Sunday coffers or saving souls [emphasis original].”

<sup>74</sup> While the specific focus of Whitehead’s article is the need to recover a sense of play in theological reflection, it is clear from his comments that he laments the way in which “the awful purposefulness” has infected many if not most of our Christian behaviours.

<sup>75</sup> Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, 82.

<sup>77</sup> Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, 66.

*Jesus for the sake of sharing Jesus.* To share Jesus for any reason other than for the sake of it cannot help but diminish the witness. It would amount to an attempt to make evident the freedom and joy of Christ while operating from a place of compulsion and fear. When, however, we share Jesus for the sake of it, the witness becomes nothing less than an enactment of the freedom found in Jesus' own ministry, and the freedom found at the heart of God's loving kingdom. It will be these kinds of acts that will have the greatest potential to bear good fruit.

Third, this shift in perspective has the potential to be fruitful because it involves surrendering to God in powerlessness even amongst acts of power. When we seek to act in power alone, people will have the opportunity to witness our acts of power. When we surrender to God in powerlessness, even in the midst of our acts of power, people will have the opportunity to see not only the church and our acts, but also God at work in the midst of our powerlessness. We must remember Frei's profound observation that in obedience to God and God's loving reign, Jesus' free surrender to powerlessness became the means of salvation for others.<sup>78</sup> Called to follow Christ, we can be assured that the way for churches to participate in God's ongoing work of salvation will be through their own obedient surrender to God in powerlessness. For this reason the declining church, even in the midst of their experience of decline, has the opportunity to participate in God's ongoing work of salvation. It is a beautiful thought. Even more beautiful is the realization that the declining church, because of its very closeness to the experience of weakness, may be better suited to participate in God's ongoing work for salvation than those churches that are currently far from the experience of weakness. For as Gorman

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<sup>78</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 104.



says, “cruciform power is power in weakness,”<sup>79</sup> not power in strength. How different a perspective from those encountered in many of the renewal materials reviewed earlier. It is unlikely that this fruit will come, however, as long as the significantly declining church pours what energy it has left into trying to save itself. It is much more likely that this fruit will come, as the declining church gives itself and its future to God.

### *Section 5: Clarifying Issues and Summary*

To this point we have been engaged in describing some of Frei’s thoughts and the application of his thoughts to situations of church decline. Before concluding this chapter it is necessary to address certain issues raised by this work. Three issues stand out in particular. First, Frei’s hermeneutical proposals must be aligned with the pastoral theological methodology employed throughout this work. Second, further explanation is needed regarding the scope of the call for declining churches focus upon Jesus and share what is known of him. To what degree, if any, does this call challenge our overall understanding of the primary functions of the church? Might this call mean that churches should forgo any efforts at working for renewal? Third, the impact such a call might have upon the future viability of declining churches needs to be considered.

#### **Frei’s Hermeneutics and Pastoral Theological Methodology**

Frei’s hermeneutical method is to first establish Jesus’ identity as enacted in the Gospel narratives, and only subsequently moving to a consideration of Jesus’ meaningfulness to us. Frei argues that while Jesus’ identity and presence (his meaningfulness to us) are utterly one, his meaningfulness to us must be based on the priority of his identity.<sup>80</sup> To determine Jesus’ meaningfulness apart from, or prior to

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<sup>79</sup> Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 397.

<sup>80</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 4, 6–7.

encountering his identity, will lead us to nothing but an account of our own need.<sup>81</sup> Frei illustrates his point by recounting one of the ways Jesus has been ascribed meaning apart from his identity in contemporary literature—Jesus as the archetypal wandering stranger representative of the fact that all of humanity is a stranger in this harsh and hostile universe.<sup>82</sup> One of the significant concerns for Frei with respect to this account is that any sense of Jesus' unique identity is lost and diffused into a mysterious presence that comes to be present within "the imagination and consciousness of human beings which is the true location of his identity and his life."<sup>83</sup> Jesus' identity becomes suffused with our own under the priority of his presence with us.

It is clear from this description that Frei's hermeneutical method seems to contradict the pastoral theological methodology employed in this work. Contrary to Frei, we began this work with a description and analysis of the multivalent situation and experience of church decline, and have allowed this analysis to lead us to pertinent theological resources. This experientially focused approach is not unique to this particular piece of pastoral theological work. It does in fact constitute one of the hallmarks of the pastoral theological perspective.<sup>84</sup> The question that must be asked is, does this apparent contradiction between Frei and the methodology employed in this work pose a difficulty?

We would contend that this does not pose a difficulty, particularly because this is a work that is founded in a pastoral theological method. Frei would not use the

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<sup>81</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 34.

<sup>82</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 29–32.

<sup>83</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 32.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Hunter, "Pastoral Theology," 42. In this article Hunter argues that the first of seven characteristics that comprise a pastoral theological perspective is seeing life "from below." The pastoral theological perspective "focuses principally on the aspects of hurt, need, conflict and failure present in every human situation. . . ."

methodology employed in this work, but this does not discount the value of his insights for the situation of decline. It is perhaps curious that a work which began by focusing on the situation of decline, has been led to a theological resource that emphasizes the need to give priority to sharing Christ in that situation. It is curious but not untenable. In appropriating Frei as we have, the value of his insights for the situation at hand have been acknowledged, without accepting that his hermeneutical methodology should be allowed to override the fundamental pastoral theological methodology used in this dissertation.

### **The Scope of the Call: Should Churches Only be Involved in Sharing Jesus?**

One question that could be asked of the proposed shift in perspective is to what degree does this amend our understanding of the overall functions of the church in terms of evangelism, edification, worship, and social concern or service.<sup>85</sup> The call for the declining church to shift its focus from decline to sharing Jesus is not meant to replace this general understanding of the overall functions of the church. It amounts to a call for the church to share Jesus within its understanding of its foundational functions.

The second, and perhaps more critical question, pertains to the impact this proposed call would have on a church's efforts to work for renewal. Does the proposed shift in perspective mean that churches should forgo any activity directed towards the renewal of the church? The answer to this question is no, but it does require some qualification. Churches are invited to continue to engage in activity that is directed towards renewal, but to do so in ways that are coherent with the call to accept their own powerlessness over the future of the church. So many declining churches engage in

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<sup>85</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1052–1059. See also Grenz, *Community of God*, 490–510, who writes of a threefold pattern: worship, edification, and outreach that is divided into evangelism and service.

activity directed towards renewal assuming that the future of the church is their responsibility. As has already been pointed out, fear will most often be the root motivator in this case. In contrast to this, churches can also engage in activity directed towards renewal in a way that acknowledges their essential powerlessness over the future of the church. When informed by the reorienting perspective proposed here, the *SWOT* analysis may indeed reveal specific actions that do align with the deeper call to share Jesus. In this way, the combination of waiting on God and acting in faith may come to be fruitful in new and unimagined ways.

### **The Viability of the Proposed Call**

As has already been noted, there is no guarantee that adopting this shift in perspective will ensure the future viability of declining churches. Such a shift in perspective may lead to the emergence of a new vision and new life among a congregation, but not necessarily. A church may adopt this perspective and continue to decline. For this reason we have said that this shift in perspective is not offered as a means to ensure the ongoing viability of declining churches. It is offered as an affirmation that even declining churches can be fruitful, by engaging in acts of power even while surrendered to God in their powerlessness.

Is such a call viable? Is it realistic to ask declining churches to put aside their efforts to bring renewal at any cost? Can churches be asked to put aside their desperate efforts to cling to the only identity that has brought them comfort and security? Can churches put aside their fear, the only thing that seems to be standing between them and certain closure? Is it realistic to ask declining churches to adopt a Christlike power-in-weakness when the church must exist not only as a spiritual organism, but also as a human organization that must function in a world of finite resources? In answer to this,

Nouwen would remind us that God's words of love cannot be made to make sense to our fearful questions. The call to love seen through the eyes of fear will always look unrealistic. Nouwen says:

Though we think of ourselves as followers of Jesus, we are often seduced by the fearful questions the world presents to us. Without fully realizing it, we become anxious, nervous, worrying people caught in the questions of survival: our own survival, the survival of our families, . . .the survival of our church. . .Once these fearful questions become the guiding questions of our lives, we tend to dismiss words spoken from the house of love as unrealistic, romantic, sentimental, pious, or just useless. When love is offered as an alternative to fear we say: "Yes, yes, that sounds beautiful, but. . ." The "but" reveals how much we live in the grip of the world, a world which calls Christians naïve and raises "realistic" questions.<sup>86</sup>

The words of love cannot be made to make sense to our questions of fear. Nouwen believes, however, that love is stronger than fear and that "we can gradually overcome our fears and let love be our guide."<sup>87</sup> What is disconcerting to recall here is that it is sometimes the very materials meant to help the church find renewal that in fact contribute to a fearful outlook. Those materials that perceive decline as something that can only be "bad," and as something that must be avoided or overcome at all cost are tainted by fear. Their very efforts to help, in many cases, serve only to lead churches deeper into the futility of fear.

### **Summary**

It has been argued that Frei's understanding of Jesus' identity as enacted in the realistic narratives of the Gospel stories can be reorienting for churches experiencing significant decline. The proposed shift in perspective derived from Frei's work has been found to be workable even for those churches facing the deepest stages of decline. It leads churches away from an oscillation between the drive to power and acquiescence to

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<sup>86</sup> Nouwen, *Lifesigns*, 7–8.

<sup>87</sup> Nouwen, *Lifesigns*, 8,10.

powerlessness that most often characterizes the experience of decline. This is beneficial since this oscillation most often leads to frustration, stagnation, and fruitfulness. It affirms that even those churches experiencing deep decline can still meaningfully engage in the ministry of sharing what is known of Jesus for the sake of it. One could go so far as to suggest that it may actually be declining churches that are better suited to participate in God's ongoing work for salvation, not in spite of, but because of their closeness to weakness.

## CHAPTER FIVE POLARITIES OF INTIMACY: FINDING GOD IN CHURCH DECLINE

Decline is a fearful and often painful experience. This is the case not only for local churches that find themselves struggling with decline, but also for denominational leaders that must watch the effects of decline persist among those churches. The seriousness of decline must not be diminished. Nevertheless, the perspective that decline holds no redemptive potential whatsoever must not be allowed to persist either. It must be affirmed, that decline need not only engender fear. This chapter will therefore assert that the reality of decline has, hidden within it, potential for a profound encounter with God. It is an encounter that moves congregations from a posture of fear to one of intimacy with God, even in the experience of decline.

Theologian Rubem Alves, in his book *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*, recounts a story that conveys, in allegorical form, the heart of this dissertation's message for the declining church. The story is of a fisherman's village that was changed by the appearance of a dead body on its shore.<sup>1</sup> At first, the body—while it was still far out at sea and not clearly identifiable—elicited excitement. The appearance of something floating out on the water brought a sense of wonder and imagination to the villagers, and enlivened the ordinary routines of their lives. When it became clear that the object was a body, however, the disappointment was palpable. Alves recounts the sentiment of villagers: "All dead men are alike because there is one thing only to do with them: they must be buried."<sup>2</sup> The women, whose task it was to prepare the body for burial, soon found, however, that not all dead men are alike. At first they worked in silence. They

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<sup>1</sup> The following is summarized from, Alves, *Poet, Warrior, Prophet*, 22–24.

<sup>2</sup> Alves, *Poet, Warrior, Prophet*, 22.

thought they knew all there was to know about dead bodies, but this one was different. They began to notice things about the body. He was very tall, much taller than any of the people from their village. He had big hands, and they began to wonder what he did with those hands. The more they noticed, the more they wondered. What was his voice like? Did he fight in wars? Did he play with children? Did he know how to awaken passion in a woman? Soon their silence was transformed into laughter. Dreams and desires “long believed to be dead,”<sup>3</sup> were brought back to life. The men of the village were affected by the dead man too. At first they were jealous of him, and his power to enliven the women. Soon though, they too began to think about “the dreams they had never had, the poems they had never written, the seas they had never seen, [and] the women they had never loved.”<sup>4</sup> In the end the body was buried, as so it must be with all dead bodies. The village, however, was never the same again.

Too often we view church decline like the village initially viewed the body. To us it is another dying church, and dying churches must eventually be buried. Too often we assume that we know everything there is to know about decline. We know the stages through which it progresses. We have identified various causes of it. We know something of the contributing factors. We know what the eventual result will be if radical action is not taken to “turn things around before it is too late.” To know all about something, however, is to cease learning and to cease growing. The village experienced the new life it did because the people began to realize that they did not know everything there was to know about this dead man—and so they began to wonder.

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<sup>3</sup> Alves, *Poet, Warrior, Prophet*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Alves, *Poet, Warrior, Prophet*, 23.



This dissertation is written in the conviction that we do not yet know everything there is to know about church decline. More precisely, this dissertation is written in the conviction that we do not yet know everything there is to know about the God who calls to us, both from beyond, and from within the experience of decline. Decline cannot help but bring disappointment and fear to our hearts when we awaken to its presence in our midst. It is most definitely not the kind of surprise we would desire, metaphorically speaking, to come floating in our direction. Perhaps, if we can dare to break the silence that is encouraged by our expertise—the expertise that tells us that we already know all there is to know about the situation of decline—then maybe, we too will be changed. We need to wonder again about church decline. We need to wonder about our fear. We need to wonder about our ambivalence. We need to wonder about the nature of our hopes. Most of all, we need to wonder about God and what it is that God is doing with us, even now, in the midst of decline. For God is surely at work even in this.

The redemptive potential within decline is discovered as we shift our perspective from decline, and the fear it engenders, to God. As has already been discussed, God can be perceived *beyond* the experience of decline, as declining churches pay attention to Jesus as the one who re-describes even our experience of decline. God can also be perceived, however, *within* the experience of decline, as we draw near to the God who draws near to us in our pain and fear. Looking to God beyond decline counters our inclination to pay decline too much attention. Similarly, looking to God within decline counters our tendency to pay decline too little attention. The redemptive potential of decline will be further explored using two polarities that will be comprised of these two shifts in perspective. Conceiving of our response to decline in terms of these polarities is crucial. This is because the paradigmatic framework provided by the polarities will

illuminate a pivotal truth—the truth that the movement back towards a focus on decline, and/or an avoidance of it, can hold redemptive potential as well. As a means of bringing this chapter, and the entire dissertation to a close, we will offer some guidance as to how the declining church can begin to live into the polarities and participate with God, even in decline. Decline is serious, but it need not be devoid of God’s gift of life and fruitfulness. For where God is, there is life.

An important introductory matter must be addressed before proceeding. It must be stated at the outset that all that will be discussed in this chapter is grounded in the belief that God’s initiative undergirds every aspect of our lived relationship and ministry with God. This belief is grounded in two streams of thought. It is grounded in, what we will refer to here, as a theology of the cross. In broad terms this stream of thought affirms the fact that “our” relationship and ministry with God is inspired, empowered, enabled and brought to efficacy not through our strength and initiative, but through God’s power and impetus at work in the midst of our utter weakness.<sup>5</sup> The belief that God’s initiative undergirds every aspect of our relationship and ministry with God is also grounded in a Trinitarian understanding of Christ’s vicarious humanity and ministry. In broad terms this stream of thought points to the fact that it is not we who minister to God, but that we who are caught up into participation with Christ in his ongoing relationship and ministry with God the Father through the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> It is not within the scope of this dissertation to thoroughly describe the nuances of these two streams of thought. We raise the issue here, however, in order to declare one of the

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Gorman, *Cruciformity*; and Knowles, *Preach Not Ourselves*—who applies the cruciform pattern of Christian discipleship to the practice of preaching—as examples of this stream of thought.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Purves, *Crucifixion of Ministry*; Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God*; and Torrance, *Worship, Community*, as examples of this stream of thought.

assumptions from which this work has been undertaken. In every way, this work assumes that it is God (Father, Son and Spirit) who inspires, empowers, enables and brings to efficacy God's work in us.

Having said this, though, this work is also undertaken from the perspective that in some mysterious way, through the activity of God, we are drawn into participation with God in God's work. God does not just impose God's work on us "from above," but works within the very human vagaries of our daily lives, experiences and the movements of our hearts. For this reason, many have sought to describe the movements of the spiritual life—initiated, empowered, enabled and made effective by God—from the human perspective. Nouwen is one who has done this. He has sought to articulate in life-giving detail the ways in which God's work interacts with our humanity. In the case of his book, *Reaching Out*, Nouwen helps us to understand that being drawn towards God involves moving from loneliness to solitude, from hostility to hospitality and from illusion to prayer.<sup>7</sup> It becomes important to be able to articulate the ways in which God's work interacts with our humanity, so that we might participate with God in what God is doing.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See also, for example, those works that speak to the importance of engagement with Christian Practices. Christian practices are properly understood as a response to God's work in the world. They are not conceived of as a means to bring about faith or growth in God, but are understood as a means of preparing us to recognize and participate in God's ongoing work in the world (Dykstra and Bass, "Practicing Our Faith," 5; Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 41). As such, these materials articulate that which is involved, from the human perspective, to engage these practices well.

<sup>8</sup> William Barry and William Connolly—writing as spiritual directors with the aim of helping people pay attention to God's work in their lives—emphasize the importance of articulating the movements of relationship with God in relational terms. They affirm this in relation to the practice of prayer: "When we talk about the relationship that is expressed and developed in prayer, we immediately encounter a problem of language. Our tendency is to become abstract. To describe people's difficulties in expressing their fear, for example, to God, we may resort to psychological language and use terms like 'affective underdevelopment,' 'identity issues,' 'inability to achieve psychic intimacy.' Or we may turn to theological categories and speak of the struggle between grace and sin. Both of these modes of explanation may accurately describe the situation, but they do not adequately represent what is for people the most important dimension of all, their concrete relationship with God. To describe this relationship we

This impetus to articulate the way in which God's work interacts with our humanity has informed the writing of this chapter. In every way, it is understood that God inspires, empowers, enables and makes effective our movement towards God in the midst of decline. The aim, however, is to articulate something of the way in which God's initiative interacts with the creatureliness of churches in situations of decline. The purpose of this chapter is to help the declining church discern the ways in which God is at work in their midst so that they might, through God's inspiration and empowerment, participate with God in that work.

***Section 1: Looking to God Who is With Us in the Midst of Church Decline***

To shift perspective from decline to God who is *beyond* decline, and who in the person of Jesus re-describes even our experience of it, is an important move. It is, however, only the first of two shifts in perspective that are needed. The second shift in perspective involves looking to God who can also be found *within* the experience of decline—as one who abides with and ministers to declining churches in the midst of their pain, limitations and vulnerability. This second shift in perspective is necessary, because as we have seen, churches demonstrate hesitancy, and sometimes even strong resistance towards engagement with the healing and life affirming tasks of mourning. It has been posited that churches resist engagement in these tasks, at least in part, because of the assumption that to do so is to “give up on God.” The fear is that to acknowledge the pain of the losses is to express doubt in the faithfulness of God. This proposed shift in perspective affirms that the opposite is true. It affirms that mourning the losses and

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need another terminology. It must be relational because it describes a relationship, religious because we are talking about the relationship with God, and concrete because we want to talk about the experience of that relationship, not the idea of it” (*Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 32).

grief involved in decline can in fact become a means of expressing faith in and drawing near to the God who meets us in our grief.

The shift to perceive God who meets with us in our pain involves two overall movements. First, churches will need to be willing to draw near to the reality of their pain. They will need to bring their pain “out of the dark,” so to speak, and into the light. It would mean looking at and acknowledging and corporately feeling the pain that comes with significant decline. Second, and at the same time, it also involves a movement towards God from within the midst of that pain. Churches would need to sit before God, look to God, listen to God, and worship God from within, and not apart from, the reality of their pain, frailty, and vulnerability. While we have separated these two movements for the sake of description, it is important to remember that they need to be held together. Churches are not called to merely draw near to the reality of their pain. Likewise, they are not called only to draw near to God. This shift in perspective calls churches to draw near to God who meets them in the very midst of their deepest struggles and distress.

### **Theological and Spiritual Foundations: The God Who Draws Near**

This second shift in perspective is founded in those materials that understand God as one who abides with us, and indeed suffers with us in our pain. God is one who meets, abides, and even suffers with us in our pain, frailty, and vulnerability. For Nouwen and his co-authors, God is a God of compassion; a God who is willing to *suffer with* those God has created and loves.<sup>9</sup> As a compassionate God, God does not just

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<sup>9</sup> Nouwen et al. understand compassion to mean, “to suffer with,” as derived from its etymology: *pati* meaning suffer, and *cum* meaning with (*Compassion*, 3).

reach down to us from on high to give us a helping hand up. Instead, God in Jesus has made a home with us in the very midst of our pain and frailty. Nouwen et al. explains:

Here we see what compassion means. It is not a bending toward the underprivileged from a privileged position; it is not a reaching out from on high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there. God's compassion is total, absolute, unconditional, without reservation. It is the compassion of the one who keeps going to the most forgotten corners of the world, and who cannot rest as long as there are still human beings with tears in their eyes.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Nouwen et al. affirms that God's acts of compassion are not incongruous with God's nature. Being compassionate is not just something God does. Being compassionate expresses the very heart of what it is to be divine. Nouwen et al. states:

Becoming a servant is not an exception to Godhood. Self-emptying and humiliation are not a step away from God's true nature. Becoming as we are and dying on a cross is not a temporary interruption of God's own divine existence. Rather, in the emptied and humbled Christ we encounter God, we see who God really is, we come to know true divinity.<sup>11</sup>

Declining churches are therefore called to draw near to a God who has already drawn near to us. God is one who has, and continues to, take on our pain, weakness, and vulnerability, and so clothes it with dignity and grace.<sup>12</sup> God is one who meets with us in the midst of our pain, and who therefore brings the promise of life, light, and redemption into the heart of our darkness and fear.

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<sup>10</sup> Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Metz also affirms this point. He says: “[Jesus] reached his destiny, stretched taut between a despising earth that had rejected him and a faceless heaven thundering God's ‘no’ to sinful humankind. Jesus paid the prince of futility. He became utterly poor. In this total renunciation, however, Jesus perfected and proclaimed in action what took place in the depths of his being: he professed and accepted our humanity, he took on and endured our lot, he stepped down from his divinity. He came to us where we really are—with all our broken dreams and lost hopes, with the meaning of existence slipping through our fingers. He came and stood with us, struggling with his whole heart to have us say ‘yes’ to our innate poverty” (*Poverty of Spirit*, 13–14).

Moltmann would agree with Nouwen et al., and beautifully traces God's nature as a servant back to the time of creation, and forward through the nation of Israel.

Moltmann says:

God already renounces his honour in the beginning at creation. Like a servant, he carries the torch before Israel into the wilderness. Like a servant he bears Israel and its sins on his back. He descends into the thornbush, the ark of the covenant and the temple. He meets men [*sic*] in those who are in straits, in the lowly and the small. . .He enters not only into the situation of the limited creature, but even into the situation of the guilty and suffering creature. His lamentation and sorrow over Israel in the exile show that God's whole existence with Israel is in suffering. . .He cannot forget Israel's suffering, for were he to do that he would have to forget 'his own rights'. . .Because his name has been bound up with Israel, Israel is redeemed when God has redeemed himself, that is, has glorified his name; and the suffering of God is the means by which Israel is redeemed. God himself is 'the ransom' for Israel.<sup>13</sup>

God's suffering and servant-love reaches its climax in the cross of Jesus. For

Moltmann, the cross of Christ is also the cross of God the Father; a cross the Father endured along with the Son so that humanity even in our pain, weakness, and frailty, brokenness and sin might experience communion with God.<sup>14</sup> He says:

Following Philippians 2, Christian theology speaks of the final and complete self-humiliation of God in man and in the person of Jesus. Here God in the person of the Son enters into the limited, finite situation of man [*sic*]. Not only does he enter into it, descend into it, but he also accepts it and embraces the whole of human existence with his being. . .He humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken, so that all the godless and the godforsaken can experience communion with him.<sup>15</sup>

Moltmann's emphasis upon communion reminds us that this is the purpose that lies at the heart of the call for declining churches to draw near to God in their pain. The call to experience more deeply the pain of decline is not a call to experience pain because

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<sup>13</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 273.

<sup>14</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 243, understands that the suffering of God the Father is different from the suffering of Jesus the Son, but despite this the cross of Christ the Son also becomes the cross of God the Father.

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 276.

experiencing pain is somehow inherently good in itself. It is, instead, a call to draw near to God who is to be found in the midst of our pain and not apart from it.

### **Drawing Near to the Pain of Church Decline**

We will now consider in some detail that which is involved as churches draw near to the reality of their pain, weakness, and frailty in decline. The idea is simple enough to understand, but more difficult to enact. It therefore requires further explanation.

The movement towards the pain of decline will be helped as churches come to acknowledge their natural tendency to resist this movement. This resistance to experiencing the reality of our own pain, is mirrored in our resistance to draw near to another in their pain. Nouwen et al. observes that compassion does not come naturally to us. It is in fact something that we resist. Compassion as an act of suffering with another “requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless.”<sup>16</sup> The thought of willingly becoming weak, vulnerable, and powerless on behalf of another is abhorrent to us. It strikes us as being unnatural, and an unhealthy and distorted response. We strive instead to act, or at least to imagine ourselves acting in strength and power in the face of another’s pain. When confronted with suffering, we do not imagine ourselves going and making our home with those who are suffering. Instead we imagine ourselves being able to solve or vanquish the cause of the suffering so as to release the sufferers from their affliction. What must be acknowledged, is that what is true of our response to the pain and vulnerability of others, is also true of our response to our own pain and vulnerability.

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<sup>16</sup> Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 4.



As much as we are repulsed by the pain and vulnerability of others, so we are repulsed by our own pain, weakness, and vulnerability. Our every inclination is to recoil from, and avoid accepting the reality of our own pain, and to strive instead to imagine ourselves as being strong and powerful and able to overcome our weakness and vulnerability. It is, in fact, our repulsion to the reality of our own pain and weakness that leads us to be repulsed by the suffering of others.<sup>17</sup> What is true of us as persons will also be true of our congregations. In order for declining churches to draw near to the reality of their pain, weakness, and vulnerability, they will need to graciously accept their very resistance to this movement. Even more, they will need to accept their very inability to overcome this resistance without God's help.

Drawing near to the pain, weakness, and vulnerability that comes with church decline also involves touching the depth and breadth of it. Zylla, in his book, *Roots of Sorrow*, identifies four dimensions of suffering. Suffering, far from being a one-dimensional experience, involves physical pain, psychological anguish, social degradation, and spiritual despondency.<sup>18</sup> While it may overstep to conceive of the experience of church decline as an experience of suffering, the identification of these four dimensions helps us to consider the breadth of pain that can be associated with significant decline. Church decline does not cause bodily harm, but the grief associated with the losses of decline can manifest in physical ways. It was noted in Chapter 3 that physical symptoms can accompany experiences of grief. Shortness of breath, a need to sigh, palpitations, headaches, other aches and pains, a lack of strength and appetite, and

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<sup>17</sup> This thought is a corollary to the theme presented in Nouwen's book *The Wounded Healer*. In it he affirms that we can become a healing presence for others as we come to accept and graciously embrace the reality of our own woundedness (See, for example, 87–91).

<sup>18</sup> Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 54–67. Zylla follows Dorothee Soelle who identifies the three dimensions of suffering as physical pain, psychological anguish, and social degradation, while adding the fourth dimension of spiritual despondency.

feelings of exhaustion are some of the physical symptoms that can accompany grief.<sup>19</sup> Experience has demonstrated the sense of physical heaviness and exhaustion that can settle on one when month after month, and year after year, the number of Sunday morning attendees continues to drop.<sup>20</sup> Psychological pain, such as sadness, despair, anger, a lack of peace, a lack of hope, and fear of a negative outcome, will often accompany the experience of decline. The pain of social loss can also be a part of the experience of decline. Declining churches can experience a loss of status and prominence both within their local communities, and within their denominational associations. The tendency for denominations to lessen or withdraw support from declining churches can leave those churches feeling abandoned.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the experience of decline can also evoke spiritual pain. As has been said earlier, decline can be accompanied with a loss of hope, a loss of confidence and trust, and a sense of despair and disillusionment as God seemingly fails to act on behalf of the church. It can be an apparent experience of God's abandonment, and possibly even a perceived experience of God's punishment.<sup>22</sup> Drawing near to the pain that comes with church decline means drawing near, as much as possible, to the various dimensions of pain that coalesce within the overall experience of significant decline.

In order to experience the pain that comes with church decline, churches will need to acknowledge the tendency that they share with all of humanity to try to suppress or manage and control the experience of pain. Moltmann, in his discussion of the general anxiety that afflicts humanity, and the freedom that we have in Christ notes that

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<sup>19</sup> Bonanno and Kaltman, "Varieties of Grief Experience," 719; Lindemann, "Symptomatology and Management," 188.

<sup>20</sup> Those who have ministered with declining churches can attest to this experience.

<sup>21</sup> Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 63, identifies three types of social suffering, of which abandonment, the experience of a withdrawal of support, is one.

<sup>22</sup> Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 63–64.

“Suppressed anxiety is not sufficient to produce freedom.”<sup>23</sup> In concert with Moltmann, we would say that suppressed pain is not sufficient to bring healing. Drawing near to the pain of church decline means becoming attuned to the ways in which we as congregations attempt to suppress it or avoid it. This effort to avoid the experience of pain can also be manifest in efforts to exert control over it, or efforts to impose our own meaning onto it. Zylla identified three common responses to suffering. We seek to avoid it, as already discussed, but we can also seek to explain it and/or seek to defend God in the midst of it.<sup>24</sup> Both of these responses, explaining and defending, can serve to lead us out of the experience of the pain itself. One of the common refrains in the face of decline offers both an explanation of decline and a defense of God: God is purifying the church, removing the dross and leaving the holy remnant.<sup>25</sup> Drawing near to the pain of church decline means becoming attuned to the ways in which we as congregations attempt to avoid experiencing the pain through explanations and defensive justifications.

In contrast to this, drawing near to the pain of church decline means feeling the pain of it. It means paying attention to the various manifestations of the pain. It means accepting that pain and its expression can be messy and raw. It involves the provision of safe opportunities for that pain to be corporately expressed, attended to, and processed corporately. Congregations that wish to draw near to the pain of church decline will give time and space to the acknowledgement and expression of that pain.

### **Drawing Near to God in the Midst of Our Pain**

The second shift in perspective does not require that churches *only* draw near to the reality of their pain. Churches are in fact called to draw near to God from within the

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<sup>23</sup> Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 23–24; 28–30.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 102.

midst of their pain. A variety of the movements involved in that call will now be described.

Accepting that the Declining Church is Approved of by God

To begin, drawing near to God in the pain of church decline involves accepting that the church is approved of, loved, and embraced by God even in the midst of decline and the distress it brings. This is important to recognize because churches can tend to assume that their distress in the midst of decline is somehow unacceptable to God. Churches can, for example, assume that their pain is the result of doubt and a lack of faith. The words of the psalmist ring in our ears: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?” (Ps. 42:5ab NRSV) This, combined with a cultural bias against expressing pain, can leave congregations thinking that they must surmount their pain and overcome it in order to be acceptable to God. To this assumption Moltmann would heartily disagree. Moltmann observed that, within medieval mysticism, suffering and a focus upon the cross of Christ was understood as “a way to the divination of man [*sic*].”<sup>26</sup> In contrast to this, Moltmann notes that Luther “sees in the cross God’s descent to the level of our sinful nature and our death, not so that man [*sic*] is divinized, but so that he is dedivinized and given new humanity in the community of the crucified Christ.”<sup>27</sup> Efforts to surmount and overcome the distress of decline in order to be more acceptable to God are akin to medieval efforts to be divinized through the way of suffering. It is essentially an effort to rise above our frail humanity, believing that this is what is pleasing to God. In response to this, Moltmann reminds us that God in Christ has been pleased to descend into the very depths of our

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<sup>26</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 213.

<sup>27</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 213.

humanity and sin. In the process, God calls us to embrace the frailness of our humanity that has already been welcomed, embraced, and made acceptable in Christ. More than this, though, Moltmann's insight helps us to see that this welcome and loving embrace applies not just to our "acceptable" pain, but also to those aspects of our pain that are rooted in doubt, a lack of trust and faith, and sin. To draw near to God in the pain of church decline involves accepting that God welcomes and lovingly embraces the declining church in all its pain, frailty, vulnerability, and even sin.

#### Four Movements Involved in Drawing Near to God in our Pain

At the heart of it, to draw near to God in our pain is to make our thoughts and feelings about decline a part of our conversation with God. Congregations are called to be as honest as they can be with themselves and with God, no matter how raw the thoughts or feelings. This is why it is so important to appreciate that God has and will continue to approve of congregations in Christ, no matter what they might come to think and feel as they work through their pain in conversation with God.<sup>28</sup> The deeper their appreciation of God's loving acceptance, the more a congregation will be able to be honest with themselves and with God regarding their pain. Even so, drawing near to God in this way will be a process that can involve a number of movements.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The poet Rainer Maria Rilke helps to describe what is meant here by "conversation with God." Writing to a young poet he encourages the poet to leave behind the grand themes of life and to concentrate instead on the everyday aspects of life. What Rilke encourages the poet to write about, we would encourage the church to converse about with God. Rilke says: "So rescue yourself from these general themes and write about what your everyday life offers you; describe your sorrows and desires, the thoughts that pass through your mind and your belief in some kind of beauty—describe all these with heartfelt, silent, humble sincerity and, when you express yourself, use the Things [*sic*] around you, the images from your dreams, and the objects you remember" (Rilke, *Letters*, 7).

<sup>29</sup> Although these movements will be offered in a way that suggests a progression, it is not meant to suggest that every church will engage each of these movements, or that they will progress through them in a linear fashion. Our aim in describing these movements in some detail is to provide a means for churches to recognize what they may already be experiencing, and for the purpose of bringing the encouragement that every movement presents an opportunity for drawing near to God.

*Drawing Near to God in the Rawness of the Distress*

Drawing near to God in the pain of decline may involve the experience of raw emotion. For a time, the pain of decline might seem overwhelming. It might threaten to overtake a church's attention altogether. Skillful pastoral leadership will be needed during this movement as with all the movements. Opportunities for the congregation to express their pain safely will need to be provided. We will speak more of this below.

Consider the nature of the conversation with God that can ensue at this point. Insight into the experience of suffering can help to shed light on the kinds of conversations that might arise. Soelle and Zylla have both observed that the experience of suffering can leave one mute. They have found that language and the meaning it brings often fails in the face of terrible affliction.<sup>30</sup> In situations such as this, people are often left in silence, or left only with the ability to sigh or groan deeply. The experience of church decline may not, on its own, constitute suffering of the kind discussed by Soelle and Zylla. Nevertheless, it may be that some churches will find it difficult to give expression to the pain of church decline when finally faced with it. It may be that the experience of decline has cut them so deeply that they are left without words.<sup>31</sup> It may be that despite the assurance of God's loving acceptance they will feel embarrassed and ashamed about the nature and extent of their feelings.<sup>32</sup> The point is that it will be important to honour even a congregation's silence or wordless words as a form of conversation with, and drawing near to, God (Rom 8:26). Having said this, it will also

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<sup>30</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 68–70; Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 72–76.

<sup>31</sup> Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 74, has noted that often our words fail in the face of despair, precipitating the need to find a new language to describe the pain.

<sup>32</sup> Zylla notes: "Among the contributing factors to the mutism of the sufferer are the awkward self-recriminations that are often accompanied by feelings of embarrassment, shame, and regret" (*Roots of Suffering*, 73).

be important to help congregations move from silence and groans and sighs, to lament.<sup>33</sup> It is vital in the face of pain that congregations find the words they need to cry out their pain before God. Soelle, Zylla, and Bilman and Migliore all affirm the importance of lament.<sup>34</sup> Movement through pain requires the honest expression of it before God. It will be important, however, not to rush a congregation to words before they are ready.<sup>35</sup> Doing this will only serve to distance them from the pain toward which they are seeking to draw.

### *Honestly Appreciating the Causes of Decline*

To draw near to God in the pain of decline will involve coming to appreciate the reasons for the pain. In addressing situations of suffering, Soelle and Zylla both contend for the importance of appreciating the causes of suffering. It is too easy, they argue, to accept the inevitability of suffering as “the will of God.” Instead, we must seek to identify the root causes of suffering and engage, in the words of Zylla, in compassionate

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<sup>33</sup> The movement from silence to lament constitutes one of three movements necessary to free the church from immobility and inaction in the face of suffering (Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 11). Lament, for Billman and Migliore, is a form of prayer that includes “expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair and protest to God” (*Rachel's Cry*, 6). Soelle understands lament as a language of crying and of pain that at the very least “says what the situation is” (*Suffering*, 70). Zylla notes that the aim of the prayer of lament is most often to seek God’s attention, and to seek help and God’s intervention in the situation. It is a form of language that emerges out of the very heart of the experience of pain and suffering, but also includes an expression of faith in God as one who will hear and respond to our pleas (*Roots of Suffering*, 76–78).

<sup>34</sup> Soelle, Zylla, and Billman and Migliore all affirm that movement through pain and suffering requires lament. Soelle says: “The first step towards overcoming suffering is, then, to find a language that leads out of the uncomprehended suffering that makes one mute, a language of lament, of crying, of pain, a language that at least says what the situation is” (*Suffering*, 70). Zylla follows Soelle, and affirms that any insinuation that suffering is to be experienced only in silence is challenged by the psalmic language that has given expression to suffering in all its dimensions (*Roots of Suffering*, 87). Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 16, note that “Without lament, hope is stillborn.” The semblance of hope that is arrived at apart from lament will not provide the support needed to stand firm in the midst of the terrible tragedies of our world.

<sup>35</sup> Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 88, notes that discernment will be required to determine, in this case, where a congregation is on the continuum between silence and lament. At times it will be most beneficial to walk with a congregation in silence. At other times it will be important to help the congregation begin to find words to give expression to their pain.

protest against all forms of suffering.<sup>36</sup> This insight, garnered from the study of suffering, sheds further light upon the process of drawing near to God in the pain of church decline. As we have seen, churches can too easily come to accept decline and the pain of it as an inevitability, and so fail to benefit from the insight that would come from an honest appreciation of the causes of decline and the pain it brings. It is important for churches to come to terms with the reasons for the pain of decline, so that these too can become a part of their conversation with God.

The pain of church decline is caused by a number of factors. Most obviously the pain is caused by the losses inherent in decline itself, but what of the causes for the decline? In our study, we have seen again and again that decline has at least in part been caused by social factors, such as demographic change and changes in societal values, over which churches have no control. We have also seen, however, that the situation of decline is exacerbated by factors over which the congregation does have control. Most commonly, we have seen a pattern of decision-making in which the needs of congregation were given priority over the call to engage in loving ministry with others. It has also been seen that pain, in situations of decline, can arise from the sometimes misguided ways in which churches respond to decline. Pain and frustration can arise when churches mistakenly take on the belief that they are wholly responsible for “fixing” the situation of decline. Pain can arise as churches take on the belief that they should not be experiencing pain, and should somehow have greater faith and trust in God in the face of decline. Pain can also arise when churches discover that God does not seem to be answering their prayers for deliverance from decline. Drawing near to God in the pain of decline involves churches paying attention, as honestly as they can, to

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<sup>36</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 17–18; Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 107, 109.



the reasons for their pain, and then making those matters a part of their conversation with God. In the process, churches may find themselves being led to: come to a greater acceptance of their powerlessness over significant decline and surrender to God those matters over which they have no control; accept forgiveness for the ways in which they have been culpable in decline; repent of (turn away from) their sometimes-misguided responses to decline.

*Drawing Near to God Who Can be Present in Absence*

Drawing near to God in the midst of the pain of decline often means drawing near to one whose expression of presence is often perceived as absence. As the people of Israel were assured by God, so the writer to the Hebrews has reminded us that God will never leave us or forsake us (Deut. 31:6; Heb. 13:5). Yet so often in the midst of pain and suffering, we find ourselves experiencing only the silence of God. We know that God finally spoke to Job out of the storm (Job 37:1-41:34), and restored his life and health (Job 42: 10-17), but how long did he endure God's silence? It is God's seeming capacity to be silent when most needed that leads us to confront our most fundamental fear; the fear that God will abandon us at the point of our deepest need. It is this fear that is expressed most poignantly by Wolterstorff: "Will I find you in the dark. . ."<sup>37</sup> As Moltmann says, it is this fear of being forsaken by God that

. . . lies behind the anxiety which goes beyond anything definable and finite and which therefore threatens our own identity so hellishly. What Christ experienced in his fear in Gethsemane is the crystallization of this measureless anxiety, which – consciously or unconsciously – lies heavy on the hearts of us all.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 69. Just above this line, Wolterstorff speaks to his fear that God's presence might be expressed in absence. He cries out: "Where are you in this darkness? I learned to spy you in the light. Here in this darkness I cannot find you. . . Or is it not your absence in which I dwell but your elusive troubling presence?"

<sup>38</sup> Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, 48–49.

To draw near to God in the pain of decline involves drawing near to the fear that God will fail to hear, or perhaps even more will choose not to respond to our pleas for help. It means drawing near to the fear that God really is not “for us,” and will not be good to us.

The way God meets us in “the dark” is often different from the way God meets us in “the light.” When in pain, and when lost in the dark, our every desire is for God to deliver us from our pain and lead us back out into the light. We look for God’s presence to be manifested in presence. Another way to say this is that, when in the darkness, we look for God to give us power and to deliver us from our weakness altogether. We do not look for God to give us power in the midst of our weakness. We look for God to give us abundance, and deliver us from scarcity altogether. We do not look for God to give us abundance in the midst of scarcity. We look for God to give us resurrection, and deliver us from death altogether. We do not look for God to bring resurrection from within the midst of death. Drawing near to God in the pain of decline means drawing near to One who does not merely manifest presence in presence, but who also manifests presence in seeming absence, and who does this most often at the times of our greatest need. Nouwen speaks to this profound and potentially terrifying truth about God:

God is ‘beyond,’ beyond our heart and mind, beyond our feelings and thoughts, beyond our expectations and desires, and beyond all the events and experiences that make up our life. Still he is in the center of all of it. Here we touch the heart of prayer since here it becomes manifest that in prayer the distinction between God’s presence and God’s absence no longer really distinguishes. In prayer, God’s presence is never separated from his absence and God’s absence is never separated from his presence. His presence is so much beyond the human experience of being together that it quite easily is perceived as absence. His absence, on the other hand, is often so deeply felt that it leads to a new sense of his presence.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 126–127.

Nouwen is offering us no glib and easy saying about God. He is leading us deeper into the mystery of God, and into the mystery that God will at times respond to our pleas for help and intervention with a kind of presence that appears to us to be utter absence.

The mystery of God's present/absence and absent/presence also leads us to draw near to the fundamental reality of our existence; the reality that we are finite, and utterly powerless before God. At first we are forced to face the reality that we are not powerful enough to amend the situation of decline in a way that would alleviate our pain. Then we are led to face an even deeper truth. We are led to confront the deep reality that we cannot make God do as we wish. We cannot make God be present to us in the way we want God to be present to us. In this way, God's seeming absence can help to reveal that we often desire God's blessings more than we desire God. So many of our prayers and even our godly actions and choices constitute covert attempts to "get" God to do what we want and to respond to us in the way that seems best to us.<sup>40</sup> As churches, we pray for renewal not so much because we wish to draw near to God, but because we want the discomfort of decline removed. We pray for effective outreach efforts not so much because we desire to help others draw near to God, but because we want more bodies filling our pews. We pray for new vision not so much because we want to see with the eyes of God, but because we want to experience the joy of being effective again. Drawing near to God who manifests presence in absence can serve to lead us

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<sup>40</sup> It is this tendency that author Larry Crabb speaks to in his book, *The Pressure's Off*. In it he suggests that much of contemporary North American Christianity has become co-opted by the tendency to seek for the blessings of God, more than God. He says: "God is the *means* of blessing, the modern Judaizers say. Implied, but never stated, is that God Himself is not the blessing we seek. It's therefore right, and actually His plan, that we use Him to get a better life. But 'using God' sounds harsh, manipulative, so modern Judaizers speak of trusting God for good things, of claiming His promises, of meeting His terms to win the blessings we want. They assume that the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, reveals Jesus Christ as the Savior from sin and the Provider of blessings, and makes known the faith we must have to know Him as Savior and the principles we must follow to experience Him as Blesser—principles like bold faith and right living" (57).

beyond our attempts to “get” God to do what we want, and lead us to draw near to the God who will meet us and respond to us in accordance with God’s good will.

*Coming to Trust God Even in Our Pain*

Drawing near to God involves coming to trust God even in the midst of the pain of decline. This response of trust can be better understood by considering our typical responses to pain. Often our initial and understandable response to pain is to want to be delivered from it. When our desires for deliverance from the pain fail to materialize, we can come to be resigned to it. What is important to appreciate is that resignation to the pain is a very different response than yielding to and trusting God in the midst of it. Being resigned to the pain involves yielding to the pain. It involves essentially giving up hope that the pain will ever be removed, and so it also involves an eventual cessation of efforts to fight against it. In contrast to this, coming to trust God in the midst of the pain involves yielding not to the pain, but yielding to God in the midst of it. In resignation, we grudgingly accept the reality of the pain. In trusting God, we practice being grateful to God for God’s goodness, even when it is not immediately apparent. It involves being grateful for what God is doing in the situation of decline, even when God does not seem to be doing what we would like God to do (i.e. deliver us from the situation of decline). It means coming to trust that God is good, whether or not God chooses to remove us from the situation of significant decline.

The account of Jesus’ anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is illustrative of this trusting response. Jesus, like us, deeply desired to be delivered from the pain that was before him. Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death (Mt 26:38; Mk 14:34). In his anguish, he prayed as his sweat was like blood falling to the ground (Lk 22:44). Moltmann finds that the words recorded in the Gospel of Mark

are more like a demand than a request: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me. . .”(Mk 14:36a)<sup>41</sup> Yet despite this deep desire to be delivered from pain, Jesus threw his trust upon the goodness of his Father and clung to the Father and the Father’s good will, even as the Father withdrew from Jesus and answered his prayer with silence. Moltmann describes both the nature of Jesus’ suffering and his response of trust:

What suffering is meant by ‘the cup’? God does not hear his Son’s prayer. He rejects it. Elsewhere the gospel tells us: ‘I and the Father are one.’ But here the Father withdraws from the Son, leaving him alone. It is the cup of separation. . . It is only in the ‘nevertheless’ which is in such total contradiction to what he desires that Christ holds fast to the fellowship with the God who as Father withdraws from him: ‘Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt.’<sup>42</sup>

Jesus’ response was not resignation to pain. It was a holding firm to the Father that he loved and that he knew to be good and faithful despite the Father’s withdrawal.

Soelle writes of this kind of trusting response to pain and suffering as well. For her as well, there is a response to suffering that moves beyond both the single-minded attempt to avoid or evade suffering at all cost, and the resigned willingness to simply endure it.<sup>43</sup> For Soelle, this trusting response has to do with loving God, and therefore also has to do with lovingly affirming the totality of our experiences, even the painful aspects of those experiences. She draws upon the experience of Jacques Lusseyran, who was blinded at the age of seven in a school accident, to develop her point.<sup>44</sup> Lusseyran, helped by his parents who treated him as a normal child albeit blind, readily comes to accept his blindness without bitterness, anger, or even fear. Though blind, he engaged life as fully as he could. Despite his blindness he was able to let himself be carried

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<sup>41</sup> Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 91.

<sup>44</sup> Summarized from Soelle, *Suffering*, 88–91.

along with a certain confidence, discovering that he only hurt himself when he feared the physical obstacles that might hurt him. He developed a capacity “to see” people through sounds and smells, and so engaged them readily. He also experienced an interior light, what he referred to as the “light in me,” even while physically afflicted with the darkness of blindness. He was able to affirm life even when imprisoned in a German concentration camp, and found himself able to share that affirmation of life with others. Soelle notes that Lusseyran speaks of God, but speaks of God more so as one who is to be loved, than as one who “gives, brings, promises, or denies us.”<sup>45</sup> His love for God enabled him to deeply affirm himself and life, even in the midst of his afflictions. More than this, for Soelle, it is his deep acceptance of reality that enabled Lusseyran to transform it. His acceptance of life enabled him to share light and life with others, even in the midst of the devastation of a concentration camp. Soelle helps us to articulate a love of God that is not “dependent on the fulfillment of certain conditions,”<sup>46</sup> in our situations. It is therefore a love that, while focused on God, also affirms with love the situations in which we find ourselves. It is not a passive resignation to these difficult situations, but is an affirmation that God and love and life can be found even in the midst of them.<sup>47</sup>

Nouwen also speaks to this kind of transformative response to pain in his book, *The Wounded Healer*. Nouwen’s thesis is that a person’s own wounds can become a means of healing for others when we feel “at home in [our] own house,” and when we

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<sup>45</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 92.

<sup>47</sup> Those who work in a hospice setting can attest to this. Residents and their family members sometimes speak of the fact that facing the reality of a life-limiting illness has enabled them to experience a deeper joy in and appreciation of life than ever before.

“create a free and fearless place for the unexpected visitor.”<sup>48</sup> Feeling at home in our own house figuratively describes the need for wounded healers to become comfortable with their own interior landscapes, and particularly with their own woundedness.

Wounded healers are those who do not just acknowledge the fact of their woundedness, but are those who have come to accept and embrace their own woundedness as a gift.

Although counterintuitive, Nouwen dares to propose such a possibility. Speaking of the wound of loneliness, he says:

But the more I think about loneliness, the more I think that the wound of loneliness is like the Grand Canyon—a deep incision in the surface of our existence which has become an inexhaustible source of beauty and self-understanding. Therefore I would like to voice loudly and clearly what might seem unpopular and maybe even disturbing: The Christian way of life does not take away our loneliness; it protects and cherishes it as a precious gift.<sup>49</sup>

Woundedness can be received as a gift when we see that it affords us the opportunity to experience the one “whose heart is greater than [ours], whose eyes see more than [ours], and whose hands can heal more than [ours].”<sup>50</sup> Receiving woundedness as a gift also involves coming to see that our very personal pain is nothing other than what is common to all humankind.<sup>51</sup> As such our very woundedness becomes

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<sup>48</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 89.

<sup>49</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 84.

<sup>50</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 38, see also 84. See also Thornton, who following Luther, affirms the mysterious relationship between suffering and knowing God. She observes: “. . .to know God in suffering is not to advocate passive suffering or to glorify suffering in any way. To do so would simply be a more damaging form of the theology of glory. The point Luther is making is that those places in human life and history where suffering is experienced have deep significance for knowing God and discovering the holy. To affirm that we know God in suffering means that God is active in the suffering of the world. God chooses to be where suffering is. God seeks to relieve suffering no necessarily through a direct and triumphant overcoming of suffering, but through the hidden transformation of suffering that can sometimes come as a surprise” (Thornton, *Broken yet Beloved*, 86). Campbell also affirms Nouwen’s insight. He asserts: “Thus the Wounded Healer gains his [*sic*] power by acknowledging his weakness and by finding God’s healing force at the moment of deepest despair. There is no shortcut to such healing, no hope without fear, no resurrection without the tomb’s deep darkness” (Campbell, *Rediscovering Pastoral Care*, 50).

<sup>51</sup> Nouwen says: “Making one’s own wounds a source of healing, therefore. . .[calls] for a constant willingness to see one’s own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all men [*sic*] share” (*Wounded Healer*, 88).

“a source of human understanding,”<sup>52</sup> and holds within it the potential to foster a loving and healing community.<sup>53</sup> As we come to receive our own woundedness as a gift, and therefore become more comfortable in our own “house,” we become better able to create a safe place of hospitality for others to explore their own woundedness as a gift.

Healing in the other is fostered, not through attempts to bring direct remedy to their wounds, but through the sharing of pain, and consequently through shared hope.

Healing and transformation comes, and community is grown through “the shared confession of our basic brokenness”<sup>54</sup> and through a shared hope in the one whose “heart is greater than ours.”<sup>55</sup>

In summary, to be a wounded healer is to love reality and to love God. Wounded healers are those who come to accept and even lovingly embrace the reality of their own woundedness. This kind of acceptance both fosters, and is made possible by a hope in and love for God who has created us and sustains us in love even in the midst of our woundedness. It is also a kind of acceptance that has the potential to contribute to the transformation of others. Nouwen, like Soelle before, helps us to see how the process of drawing near to God in our pain, far from being solely a movement inward, can also lead us outward into relationship with the wounded world. Churches too can come to be

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<sup>52</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 85.

<sup>53</sup> About the profound mystery that shared woundedness can facilitate in the growth of a healing community, Nouwen says: “. . . a shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation. When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope. Through this common search, hospitality becomes community. Hospitality becomes community as it creates a unity based on the shared confession of our basic brokenness and on a shared hope” (*Wounded Healer*, 93).

<sup>54</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 93. Nouwen says in full: “No minister can save anyone. He can only offer himself as a guide to fearful people. Yet, paradoxically it is precisely in this guidance that the first signs of hope become visible. This is so because a shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation. When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope.”

<sup>55</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 91.



wounded healers in this regard.<sup>56</sup> They can come to embrace their woundedness, as manifested in the symptoms of decline, as a kind of gift. Through this they will find themselves drawn to God who loves even the declining church, and empowered to let their own woundedness lead them into relationship with the wounded world.

Having thus outlined the movements involved in the process of drawing close to God in our pain, a few further comments are needed. First, although the various movements are presented in a linear fashion, it is to be understood that engagement with them need not, and most often will not, proceed in a linear fashion. Engagement with these movements will often involve steps forward and backward. Different movements may be engaged at the same time, and often the movements will be engaged numerous times in an ongoing fashion. Second, it must be noted that these movements should not be imposed upon a congregation. The goal is not to lead congregations through these movements as if fulfilling them in a timely fashion were the aim. The aim in describing these various movements is to help congregations pay attention to the work God is doing in their midst so that might participate in this work more fully. Third, these movements should not be engaged for the purpose of reaching a point of completion. The aim is not to move a congregation through these movements, so that they need not ever return to them. The aim is to help a congregation live into an ongoing relationship with God even in the midst of their woundedness. While we have identified decline and its symptoms

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<sup>56</sup> Campbell offers a compelling affirmation of the need for churches to become as wounded healers. He says: “. . .the body of Christ, the Wounded Healer, lives on as the community of those who try to follow him. . .It is evident from the very beginning this body has been disjointed, torn apart by internal strife, disloyal to the cause of humble love to which it was called. Often the Christian churches put on the appearance of power and success, denying, with their show of comfort and self-confidence, the bleeding despised body of their Lord. But new life can come to suffering people only when they find themselves in the company of those who, like Paul, are not ashamed to bear “the marks of Jesus branded on (their) body” (Gal. 6:17, NEB). Healing comes within a community of sufferers, because there, where weakness is freely acknowledged, the power of God’s love can enter in” (Campbell, *Rediscovering Pastoral Care*, 54).

as the wound in this case, it is not the only kind of wound that afflicts congregations. Those congregations resurrected from decline may struggle with other wounds, and still find it necessary to draw near to God in their woundedness.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that a posture of hopeful and patient “waiting” will facilitate our engagement with these movements. The posture is identified as one of waiting because engagement with these movements is ultimately a work that God does in us, rather than a work that we do for God. It is a work that God brings to fruition in us, as opposed to being a work that we can bring to fruition in ourselves. To be able to accept the pain of church decline is a work facilitated by God. To be able to honestly face and accept the causes of decline is a gift that God works in us. To come to be able to rest in God’s presence, even when it is manifested in absence, is a gift that God works in us. To be able to trust God, and love the church and others even in the midst of decline, is a gift that God works in us. As such, these movements involve a posture of waiting upon God.

Ideally this posture of waiting will be marked by patience and a sense of hopefulness. Capps defines hoping as “the perception or felt sense that what is wanted will happen. . .”<sup>58</sup> The perception of hope that best undergirds engagement with these movements is the hope that God is good and faithful, and will bring about God’s good will and purposes even in the midst of decline. As for patience, Capps understands it to mean, “that the patient one is not sitting idly by, waiting for some expected outcome to

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<sup>57</sup> We wonder if it may be necessary to outline another kind of process, that of drawing near to God in our joy. Although this deserves further consideration, we will not pursue it here. For the moment, we must limit our focus to decline, and the movements involved in drawing near to God in the midst of it.

<sup>58</sup> Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 53.

happen, but instead is self-involved in the outcome.”<sup>59</sup> In the context of this discussion, this means that waiting for God to act does not mean that the church can disengage from the process until God’s work is done. This kind of waiting remains involved with God even in the midst of waiting. At the heart of it, the movements described above have to do with being in an ongoing conversation with God about the experience of church decline. The patient church will continue to be in conversation with God, even as it waits for God to accomplish God’s work.

It must be noted that the capacity to wait, and to wait patiently and hopefully, is also a gift from God. Characterizing the posture of waiting in this way is not meant to suggest that the church ought to be able to manufacture these characteristics. These characteristics of our waiting are offered for the purpose of better helping the church to participate with God in the work that God is doing. Knowing that our waiting can be characterized by patience and hopefulness can help us to become aware of those times when it is not. There will surely be times when a church’s “waiting” will be marked more by fear than by hope, and more by passivity than by engagement. There will be times of course, when the church will struggle to wait for God at all. Even these struggles, however, can by God’s grace become a part of the church’s ongoing conversation with God.

### **The Benefits of Such a Shift in Perspective**

The proposed shift in perspective, from a focus upon decline to a focus upon the God who draws near to the church in its vulnerability and weakness, will prove to be beneficial for the declining church in at least four ways. We will attend to these now.

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<sup>59</sup> Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 148.

First, this shift in perspective will lead churches into an engagement with all four of the tasks of mourning delineated by Worden. As has been said, the call to draw near to God in the pain of decline involves the need to draw near to the depth and breadth of the pain of it, and the need to be in conversation with God about it. As such, this call rejects the perception that acknowledging the loss and pain of decline must always constitute doubt and a lack of faithfulness to God. At the same time, this shift in perspective will naturally lead churches to engage the first two of Worden's tasks: the need to both accept and process the pain arising from decline. Worden's third task of mourning, as it pertains to the situation of church decline, involves making the internal and spiritual adjustments precipitated by the losses involved with decline. It was noted, in Chapter 3, that the situation of decline will often raise questions of identity (internal adjustments) and meaning (spiritual adjustments). Who are we now as a congregation? In what can we place our hope? What meaning can be found in the experience of decline? Where is God in this? The process of drawing near to God in the pain of decline can serve to help churches engage each of these questions.<sup>60</sup> Finally, the conviction that a movement towards God in the midst of the pain of decline can lead to a greater love of God, life, and others affirms that churches can go on living in love even while still experiencing the losses associated with decline. Thus, churches will find themselves engaging Worden's fourth task, the need to move on to love in new ways even while embracing what has been lost.

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<sup>60</sup> The call to affirm God's loving acceptance of even declining churches, and the call to honestly assess the causes of decline, including those causes over which churches have no power, and those causes in which they might be culpable (such as an attachment to a particular identity that has become unhelpful), can lead churches to engage questions of identity. Likewise, the affirmation that the pain of decline can lead to a deeper experience of God who is present in absence, and even lead to a paradoxical fruitfulness through identification with the woundedness of others can serve to help churches engage questions of meaning.

Second, this shift in perspective serves to address some of the issues pertaining to decline and renewal raised earlier in this work. It encourages churches to embrace the experience of decline even while urging them to cling to God. This is important to note because even the experience of decline can become something to which churches cling as a kind of idol. Churches can paradoxically find comfort and security in the discomfort and dis-ease of decline. This shift in perspective embraces declining churches as they are. It does not ask churches to overcome the pain of their losses, or their powerlessness, ambivalence, and resignation. Instead it affirms that God is one who lovingly accepts and draws near to churches even in this. This shift in perspective affirms that God can indeed be found in the darkness. It affirms that churches do not need to overcome their doubt and disillusionment and pain in order to meet with God. Finally, it can be noted that hope is also reconceived by this shift in perspective. Hope is no longer located in renewal, but is located in God who meets with declining churches in their pain, and develops in them the capacity to trust and to love God, themselves, and others even in the midst of decline.

Third, this shift in perspective acknowledges that the Christian life is marked by a dynamic of God's power being made perfect in weakness. As such this shift in perspective repudiates an approach to renewal that emphasizes human activity in renewal to the diminishment of God's activity in it. The overall movement of drawing near to God in the pain of decline is one of drawing near to God who meets with churches in the midst of the weakness of decline. Furthermore, the dynamic that characterizes this overall movement is one that affirms a congregation's inability to effect this process itself and affirms its dependence on God to accomplish this work.

Finally, this shift in perspective takes the inward focus that is common to declining churches and deepens it to a point where it can become fruitful. Declining churches are inwardly focused. Renewal materials demand the redevelopment of an outward focus, but generally fail to offer a viable means for the development of this shift in focus. The shift in perspective offered here appreciates that declining churches cannot simply choose to become outwardly focused again. Instead, it calls declining churches to go deeper into the experience of decline while also calling them to look through that experience to God. Paradoxically, we find that that which has always been thought to be a weakness can actually become a tremendous strength and the source of a transformative love. Woundedness can, through God's grace, contribute to the growth of a deep trust in God that may not have been possible otherwise. Likewise, woundedness can, through God's grace, also contribute to the growth of compassion for the wounded world.

We come to see, once again, that fruitfulness can be found even in decline and that decline can indeed have redemptive potential.

### **The Need for Both Shifts in Perspective**

It is critical that the two shifts in perspective be conceived of together as an integrated whole. Together, these two proposed shifts in perspective affirm the theological imperative to know God both as transcendent and as immanent. Grenz and Olson affirm that Christian theology at its best seeks to balance the biblical truth that, with respect to creation, God is both transcendent and immanent.<sup>61</sup> Biblically, God is revealed as the one who is beyond creation and utterly self-sufficient. At the same time God is also revealed as the one who is present and active within the very processes of

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<sup>61</sup> Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 11.

creation and human history. An imbalance between these two biblical truths will lead to a distorted view of God. Together, these two shifts in perspective guard against such an imbalance. The first shift in perspective, discussed in Chapter 4, represents the transcendent perspective of God. It calls churches to look *beyond* the situation of decline to the person of Jesus (and by implication to God the Father and Spirit) who is the One that defines and gives meaning to all of our human experience, including the experience of church decline. Congregations are urged to relinquish their tendency to be shaped and informed only by the narratives of decline, which cannot help but lead to a focus upon loss, limitation, scarcity, weakness, and death. In contrast to this, congregations, even congregations in decline are urged to allow themselves to be shaped and informed by the narratives of Jesus, which speak ultimately of God's power expressed in weakness and God's abundant and resurrection life made manifest even in death. The second shift in perspective, represents the immanent perspective of God. This perspective calls congregations to look *through* the experience of decline to God who meets us and brings salvation to us from within human experience, including the experience of church decline. Congregations are urged to relinquish their inclination to avoid decline and an experience of its related losses and grief. Instead they are urged to accept their experience of decline in all of its depth and breadth and draw near to God who in Jesus intimately understands and lovingly embraces us in our fears and doubts, frailty, and pain.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The bringing together of these two shifts in perspective answers the concern raised in Chapter 4 regarding the apparent contradiction between Frei's methodology and the pastoral theological methodology employed in this work. We have charted a course that acknowledges the need for a transcendent perspective of God in the person of Jesus, while also acknowledging the need for perspective of God that is informed by the reality of human experience. In this we have embraced the methodology described at the outset of this work and recommended by Swinton and Mowat. The logical priority of

Together, the proposed shifts in perspective are mutually enriching. When viewed as an integrated pair we see that the process of looking to Jesus beyond the experience of decline actually serves to facilitate the process of looking to God from within the experience of decline. Being formed and shaped by the narratives of Jesus prepares churches to look for the signs of God's presence (and present absence) in the midst of the experience of decline. As one example of this, churches will encounter in the narratives of Jesus the one who did not remain aloof from our suffering, but who entered into it and who brings healing and salvation not apart from, but through our brokenness and sin. Likewise we see that the process of looking to God through the experience of decline serves to facilitate the process of looking to Jesus beyond the experience of decline. This is because the process of drawing near to God in the experience of decline cannot help but lead churches to seek for and trust in the God who is beyond and reigns even over the experience of church decline. The process of drawing near to God in the experience of decline, as described above, involves coming to yearn for the God who is also beyond our experience. It is to come to yearn for the God who is not defined by the narratives of decline, or even by our immediate wants and wishes, but who will act faithfully in accord with God's good and beautiful will.

The proposed shifts also work together to guard against distortion. Looking to Jesus beyond the experience of decline, while also looking to God through the experience of decline serves to prevent not only our experience of God, but also our experience of the woundedness of decline from being inordinately shaped by our needs, wishes, and illusions. Our understanding of God, and even our understanding of our

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theology has been retained, while the need for a contextual and embodied understanding of revelation is also embraced (Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 89).



pain and woundedness in the midst of decline can become distorted when not informed by the reality of Jesus (and by implication God the Father and Spirit). Likewise, being asked to look to God through the experience of decline, while looking beyond decline to Jesus, helps us to appreciate that our understanding of the narratives about Jesus can become distorted when not brought into conversation with the reality of our experience.

***Section 2: Two Polarities For Encountering God and Living Fruitfully in Decline***

The intent, to this point, has been to argue for the necessity of two shifts in perspective with respect to decline. Churches are called to look *beyond* decline to God who, in Jesus, re-describes our experiences, including the experience of significant church decline. Churches are also called to look *within* the experience of decline to God, who meets us in the midst of our pain and frailty. The identification and description of these two shifts in perspective has been an important first move towards helping churches live fruitfully even in the midst of decline. Another move is needed, however. This is because more still needs to be said about the way in which churches will live into these shifts in perspective. The issue is that churches will never be able to sustain a consistent forward movement away from a focus on decline (and/or the avoidance of it), towards a focus on God. Churches will naturally shift back and forth between these foci. They will sometimes focus more on the reality of decline, and sometimes focus more on God. How is this natural pattern of shifting back and forth between foci to be understood? One option is to understand any movement backwards towards a focus upon decline as undesirable and as requiring prompt correction. Such an approach would prove detrimental. In this scenario the call for churches to shift perspective from decline to God—a call meant to bring declining churches a measure of freedom from the demands of renewal materials—would quickly degrade into another

onerous demand. We would have succeeded in accomplishing nothing but exchanging the call for churches to work for significant change (espoused by the renewal materials), with a call for churches to work for a change in perspective. Another option for understanding this natural pattern of shifting back and forth between foci is available, however. It is possible, and we would say imperative, that we come to understand the two shifts in perspective in the context of two sets of cooperative polarities. In this context, even movement “backwards,” towards a focus upon decline, can be seen to contribute to the movement “forwards,” towards a renewed focus upon God.

### **Identifying the Polarities**

Living fruitfully in the midst of decline consists of living in the vacillation between two sets of poles. The first polarity pertains to that which gives shape to churches’ understandings of themselves. It has been argued that Jesus and his unsubstitutable identity ought to constitute and give shape to a church’s understanding of itself and its experience. Yet the analysis of the churches in our study has demonstrated that decline and its effects often loom large in a congregation’s understanding of itself. Brighton Avenue Baptist Church and City Centre Church, for example, have become largely focused upon the deep losses brought about by decline. Carmel Wesleyan Church has also become very aware of the limitations of decline, especially its powerlessness to effect change. Sanderson United Methodist Church was abruptly awakened to the fact that the church might soon face closure. In each of these cases, the reality of decline has become a significant aspect of the identity of these congregations. For this reason, the first polarity consists of the movement between a focus upon decline and a focus upon God as the one who re-describes our experience.

The second polarity pertains to the extent to which churches acknowledge the reality of their experience with decline. It has been argued that God is and will be present to churches even within the painful experience of decline. Yet the analysis of the churches in our study has demonstrated that those churches facing significant decline will often seek to avoid the reality and experience of decline. Gray Friends Meeting and Faith Episcopal Church both tended to dismiss the seriousness of decline. Carmel Wesleyan Church, while acknowledging the reality of decline in one respect, ignored it in another respect. Their dogged determination to try again and again to effect renewal, despite their ongoing failures, demonstrates that they did not appreciate the pervasiveness of decline. The same could be said for Sanderson United Methodist Church. They have begun to appreciate the reality of their losses and the possibility that their church might close. They have not, however, come to appreciate the extreme depth of the decline they face given the extent of the decline that is afflicting the community of Sanderson as a whole. In each of these cases, churches have tended to avoid coming to a fully orbbed appreciation of the reality and experience of decline. For this reason, the second polarity consists of the movement between an avoidance of decline and a focus upon God as the one who meets with churches in the midst of decline.

### **Fear and Love: The Grounding Realities of the Polarities**

Much has already been said about each of these poles; nevertheless, one more level of description will serve to deepen our appreciation further. In both cases the movement between these two sets of poles consists of a movement between fear and love. A focus upon the reality of decline cannot help but lead to fear. Decline is about loss, diminishment, seemingly insurmountable obstacles, powerlessness, the threat of closure, and so on. Characteristics such as these cannot help but evoke fear when they

loom large on the horizon of declining churches. Likewise, a focus upon avoiding the realities of decline is grounded in fear. Churches avoid the realities of decline because they are afraid—afraid of the possible outcome of decline and afraid of entering into the painful experience of it. Churches also avoid the realities of decline because they believe that this is what God would want them to do. Put another way, these churches avoid the realities of decline because they are afraid of being found unfaithful by God or of drawing near to their experience of doubt and disillusionment.

As much as the poles having to do with decline are based in, or lead to fear, the poles celebrating a focus on God are based in and lead to love. To look beyond decline to Jesus as the One who defines and gives meaning to our experiences is an expression of love. Barth defines Christian love as self-giving. It involves turning wholly to the other simply for the sake of the other.<sup>63</sup> More than this it also involves a giving up of oneself to the object of love. For Barth, this involves even relinquishing control of oneself to the object of love. Barth says:

For in Christian love the loving subject reaches back, as it were, behind itself to that which at the first it denies and from which it turns away, namely, itself: to give itself (for everything would lack if this final thing were lacking); to give itself away; to give up itself to the one to whom it turns for the sake of this object. To do this the loving man [*sic*] has given up control of himself to place himself under the control of the other, the object of his love.<sup>64</sup>

As the church looks beyond decline to Jesus it turns away from itself towards Jesus as the other. Such an act leads the church to give up its very self, and its preoccupation with the concerns of decline for the sake of Jesus. It also leads the church to surrender

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<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4:733, says: “In the continuation love turns wholly to another, to one who is wholly different from the loving subject. . . it does not turn to this other, the object of love in the interests of the loving subject, either in the sense that it desires the object for itself because of its value or in pursuance of some purpose, or in the sense that it attempts to perpetuate itself in its desire. Christian love turns to the other purely for the sake of the other. It does not desire it for itself. It loves it simply because it is there as this other, with all its value or lack of value.”

<sup>64</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4:733.

itself and its very real concerns about decline in the hands and loving care of God. Brady's description of self-giving love is also helpful here. He describes self-giving love as a stepping outside of ourselves and experiencing others as they really are.<sup>65</sup> For the declining church it means, in a sense, leaving the church, our concerns, our fears, our desires behind for a moment, and seeking to listen and be wholly present to the other, in this case Jesus. This expression of love for Jesus also leads to an expression of love for the neighbour. To listen and to be wholly present to Jesus is to listen and be wholly present to the One who loves the Father and loves the world so much that he gave his life in love for it.<sup>66</sup> To listen and to be wholly present to Jesus involves coming to love and to share love and to share Jesus with all those that Jesus loves.

To look through decline to God, and to draw near to the God who meets churches in the experience of decline is also an expression of love. To draw near to God in decline is an act of emptying. It is an act of figuratively disrobing before God and allowing the church to stand before God in all its impoverishment and nakedness. It is an act of offering to God the only thing the church has to offer—its creatureliness. It is therefore also an act that witnesses to God's divinity.<sup>67</sup> For as the church draws near to

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<sup>65</sup> Brady, *Christian Love*, 271.

<sup>66</sup> It is to come to know Jesus as the One who out of love, and not fear of the Father, could not help but listen and say yes to God's will for the world. Nouwen and his co-authors say it well: "Obedience is a listening in love to God, the beloved Father. In this listening there is neither a moment of distance, nor fear, nor hesitation, nor doubt, but only the unconditional, unlimited, and unrestrained love that comes from the loving God. Jesus' response to this love is likewise unconditional, unlimited, and unrestrained. We will misunderstand Jesus' going into the world of suffering and pain and his giving himself to us a servant if we perceive these actions as the heroic initiatives of a child who wants to earn the love of a parent, or as the anxious fulfillment of a command given by a parent whose will must be respected. Rather, we see in these actions a divine listening to a divine love, a loving response to a loving mission, and a free 'yes' to a free command" (*Compassion*, 35).

<sup>67</sup> Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*, 10, affirms this idea when he speaks of what is involved in becoming a human being. For Metz, we are not just created as human beings; humanness is something we grow into. Paradoxically, to become human involves not an assertion of strength, but an acceptance of poverty. Metz says: "To become human means to become 'poor,' to have nothing that one might brag about before God. To become human means to have no support and no power, save the enthusiasm and commitment of one's

God in the midst of decline it admits its need, and looks to God as its loving Creator, Sustainer, and Saviour. To attempt to avoid the experience of decline is to attempt to assert strength and to acquire and possess for the church that which we deem to be good for it. In contrast to this, drawing near to God from within decline means relinquishing our assumptions of what is best for the church. It means accepting that God loves the church simply as it is, not because of what the church can do for God, but because of what God has done for the church in Christ.<sup>68</sup> In all, it is an expression of loving trust, faith, and hope in God as the One who lovingly embraces the church even in its poverty.

This willingness on the part of the church to embrace its poverty in the light of God's love leads the church into an expression of love and compassion for others in their poverty. To accept the church's poverty is to accept what Nouwen and his co-authors refer to as displacement. For them, to be displaced is to be shifted from an ordinary or proper place. Nouwen and his co-authors observe that as humans, we face a tremendous pressure to live lives that are ordinary and proper. They observe:

We want to be ordinary and proper people who live ordinary and proper lives. There is an enormous pressure on us to do what is ordinary and proper—even the attempt to excel is ordinary and proper—and thus find the satisfaction of general acceptance. This is quite understandable since the ordinary and proper behavior that gives shape to an ordinary and proper life offers us the comforting illusion that things are under control and that everything extraordinary and improper can be kept outside the walls of our self-created fortress.<sup>69</sup>

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own heart. Becoming human involves proclaiming the poverty of the human spirit in the face of the total claims of a transcendent God.”

<sup>68</sup> It is, in the words of Metz, to express belief in God who chose to enter completely into the fullness of our human experience in Christ. Metz says: “. . . Jesus subjected himself to our plight. He immersed himself in our misery and followed our road to the end. He did not escape from the torment of our life, nobly repudiating humanity. With the full weight of his divinity he descended into the abyss of human existence, penetrating its darkest depths. He was not spared from the dark mystery of our poverty as human beings” (*Poverty of Spirit*, 12).

<sup>69</sup> Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, 61.

According to Nouwen and his co-authors, this desire to be ordinary and proper keeps us from compassion, for it is really a desire to be separate and distinct from a broken and wounded world. We resist displacement, in this case an appreciation of the church's poverty, because we do not want to be different, and want to be seen as fitting in with the ways of the world. The fundamental truth of the world, however, is that it is ultimately a place of brokenness and poverty. To accept the church's poverty is to experience a deeper union with, and compassion for our wounded world

### **Movement Within the Polarities: Conversional and Cooperative**

The movement within the two sets of polarities described in this work is understood to be both conversional and cooperative in nature. An analysis of Nouwen's use of polarities in his book, *Reaching Out*, will serve to explain what this means.

In *Reaching Out*, Nouwen posits that the spiritual life consists of the movement back and forth between three sets of poles: loneliness and solitude; hostility and hospitality; and illusion and prayer. Hernandez argues that the movement Nouwen conceives of here is conversional in nature. It is a movement from immaturity into maturity. Loneliness, hostility and illusion need to be converted into solitude, hospitality and prayer.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the fact that movement between the poles is understood to be conversional in nature means that the movement from immaturity to maturity is ultimately a gift of God.

We agree with Hernandez's analysis but only to a point. There is a sense of "conversion" in Nouwen's polarities. We would argue, however, that Nouwen also conceives of the movement between the three sets of poles as being cooperative in

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<sup>70</sup> Hernandez, *Spiritual Polarities*, 5.

nature.<sup>71</sup> We understand the term cooperative to mean that the movement towards one pole can serve to facilitate the movement towards the other pole as well. The movement towards solitude can, for example, facilitate a greater awareness and appreciation of the depth of one's loneliness. Likewise, an appreciation of one's loneliness can facilitate a greater hunger and yearning for solitude. That Nouwen conceives of his polarities in this way is made evident within the following quotation. Nouwen says:

And so, writing about the spiritual life is like making prints from negatives. Maybe it is exactly the experience of loneliness that allows us to describe the first tentative lines of solitude. Maybe it is precisely the shocking confrontation with our hostile self that gives us words to speak about hospitality as a real option, and maybe we will never find the courage to speak about prayer as a human vocation without the disturbing discovery of our own illusions. Often it is the dark forest that makes us speak about the open field. Frequently prison makes us think about freedom, hunger helps us to appreciate food, and war gives us words for peace. . . The paradox is indeed that new life is born out of the pains of the old.<sup>72</sup>

The fact that the movements are understood to be cooperative in nature is crucial. It is for this reason that our lack of maturity need not be despised, but can be embraced as that which holds the potential to foster in us a hunger and yearning for greater maturity. We would argue that the conversational and cooperative nature of Nouwen's polarities, as developed in *Reaching Out*, applies to the polarities developed here as well. The movement from decline, and an avoidance of decline to God is conversational in nature. As stated, the overall movement is from fear towards love, and this movement can only come about as a gift of God. The movement from fear to love is not something the church can manufacture or bring about within itself through determined devotion or effort. Nouwen is correct when he states that: “. . .fear engenders fear. Fear never gives

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<sup>71</sup> Thanks to Hernandez for the promotion of the term “cooperative,” in this context. It should be noted, however, that the understanding of this term espoused here is not derived from Hernandez's work, but is derived from an analysis of Nouwen's own description of the polarities and the movement between them.

<sup>72</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 19.



birth to love.”<sup>73</sup> The movement, however, is also cooperative in nature. The movement towards God and love, gifted by God, can only but serve to deepen the church’s awareness of its fearful focus on decline. Likewise, the church’s ongoing tendency to move towards a fearful focus upon decline (and the avoidance of it), can serve to facilitate the growth of a hunger and yearning for God. The movement from fear to love still remains a gift of God. Movement towards accepting the reality of fear in the midst of decline will not ensure an attendant movement towards love in an automatic or mechanical way. We cannot “make” ourselves move towards love. The awareness of our need, however, can evoke in us the desire for love and a desire for God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

We see now a further point that needs to be made. As much as the movement towards love is a gift from God, so too is an acknowledgement and acceptance of the reality of our fear in the midst of church decline. Churches can do much to avoid accepting the reality of their fear. Withdrawal from engagement with the community can be justified in numerous ways.<sup>74</sup> The drive to “produce” some kind of renewal is also often grounded in fear.<sup>75</sup> It is important to remember that even an acknowledgement and acceptance of our fear is a gift from God. In this, however, we see another way in which significant decline can hold redemptive potential. Significant decline, because of its very capacity to strip churches of their resources, to frustrate efforts to effect renewal, to persist and pervade, may indeed help to bring churches to the

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<sup>73</sup> Nouwen, *Lifesigns*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Nouwen observes that one of our typical responses to fear is to withdraw, “we close ourselves off and no longer reach out to others, with whom fruitful relationships might grow” (*Lifesigns*, 6).

<sup>75</sup> According to Nouwen, we often respond to fear with “a flight to productivity” (*Lifesigns*, 48). Products, in contrast to fruits, are something we make. They are utterly dependent on human activity (48). Fruits, on the other hand, cannot be made, and do not depend on our actions. Instead they emerge “whenever we trust and surrender ourselves to the God of love. . .” (53).

end of themselves. Significant decline may indeed serve to bring churches to the point where they cannot help but honestly confess their fear, and so begin to search for God.

### **The Depth and Accessibility of the Polarities**

There is one more facet of the polarities to which we must attend. Nouwen's understanding of the spiritual life is compelling. His conception of the spiritual life as consisting in the movement back and forth between three sets of poles inspires both great accessibility and great depth in the spiritual life.<sup>76</sup> Even the most fledgling awareness of loneliness, hostility, or illusion can serve to facilitate a hunger for solitude, hospitality, and prayer. In Nouwen's conception of the spiritual life, one does not need a deep and profound revelation of one's immaturity in order to experience growth. Yet despite this, his conception of the spiritual life cannot help but support ever-increasing depth. The more we become aware of our loneliness, for example, the more we become aware of our need for solitude. The more we come to an experience of solitude, the more we can become aware of our ongoing loneliness. The movement back and forth between the poles supports an ever-deepening engagement with them.

The same is true for the polarities developed in this work. Even a fledgling awareness of a fearful focus upon decline can facilitate a hunger for God and the freedom of love. Churches need not have a deep and profound revelation of their fearful focus upon decline, or its avoidance, in order to experience a hunger for God.

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<sup>76</sup> The accessibility and capacity for depth found in Nouwen's conception of the spiritual life are two of the characteristics that lead Zylla to argue that Nouwen's approach to pastoral theology, and in this case the spiritual life is paradigmatic in nature ("Contours of the Paradigmatic," 209–210). Paradigms, in contrast with models, are more flexible and able to absorb greater degrees of complexity. Zylla defines the paradigmatic approach as consisting of: "*flexible but settled sets of core convictions* [emphasis original] that are derived from living with ambiguity, practicing displacement, and managing complex and often competing bodies of information. Paradox and simplicity combine in a poignant description of lived reality that has the feel of permanence. Paradigms have the simplicity that a child could accept but are layered with deep, symbolic understandings and function at the ontological level" (208).

Furthermore, even a limited engagement with the polarities offered here, can facilitate an ever-deepening engagement.

Churches will continue to struggle with fear, even as they move towards love. A movement towards God will not prevent churches from subsequently moving back towards a focus upon decline or its avoidance. The importance of Nouwen's insight—the insight that is adopted here—is that this apparent movement “backwards” need not be despised. For even a church's movement back towards fear can be received as another opportunity for the church to learn and grow, and hunger yet again for God. As a result, declining churches are not expected to become something they are not, in order to respond to decline in a fruitful way. Nor are they expected to overcome their fear in some muscular way. Instead, they are accepted as they are, as churches struggling with fear in the midst of a fear-inducing situation. This fear, however, can now be understood as that which holds the potential to contribute to a church's movement back toward love.

### *Section 3: Concluding Thoughts*

We have argued that a church's perspective is crucial to a fruitful response to significant church decline. A fruitful response to significant decline will be grounded in a focus upon God. For God is the One who defines and gives meaning to our experience by drawing us beyond the experience of decline to experience-defining encounters with Jesus. God is also the One who draws us to into a more profound experience of Godself from within the experience of decline. Due to the insights into the nature of the spiritual life illuminated by Nouwen, we have incorporated these shifts in perspective into two polarities. The first polarity consists of the movement back and forth between a focus upon decline and a focus upon God who re-describes our experience of decline. The

second polarity consists of the movement back and forth between an avoidance of decline and a focus upon God's presence in the midst of decline. The movement between the both sets of poles is understood to be both conversational and cooperative. The overall aim is for churches to become more focused on God and less focused on decline and its avoidance. This overall movement, although a gift from God, will be encouraged as churches appreciate that their struggle with the fear of decline (and its avoidance) can serve to facilitate their yearning for God and the freedom of love.

The need for a shift in perspective has been demonstrated throughout. The foregoing analysis has revealed the need to move from a relatively simple and flat understanding of decline and renewal, to an increasingly complex and textured understanding of both decline and our potential responses to it—from a statistical appreciation of the ongoing reality to Protestant church decline in Canada, to a deep and lived experience with God in decline. The assumption that decline must be overcome before ministry can be meaningfully engaged has been repudiated. In fact, far from containing no redemptive potential, we have come to understand that decline can lead to a kind of fruitfulness that would not be readily available to those churches experiencing greater degrees of health and growth according to congregational life cycle theory. Instead of reproofing declining churches for their particular stories and postures with respect to decline, this analysis has demonstrated the way in which these postures can be incorporated into a potentially fruitful response to decline. Furthermore, this analysis has led us from an understanding of hope that is grounded primarily in renewal and the ongoing viability of declining churches, to an understanding of hope that is grounded in God. In the process we have moved away from a potentially idolatrous response to decline that emphasizes human activity, towards a response that embraces powerlessness

and that understands that the greatest gift a church can offer God is its dependency upon God. Overall, this analysis has moved us from a focus on decline, to a focus on the living God, both transcendent and immanent and from that experience of God to a response of love for a wounded and declining world.

### **What Should the Declining Church do?**

It is appreciated that many may find this work unsatisfying because it has not sought to answer the question of what declining churches should do in a traditional manner. It is true, we have not sought to offer methods or formulas or models. A plan of action for the significantly declining church has not been outlined. In short, this dissertation has not sought to solve the problem of decline. This is because we do not view decline as a problem to be solved, so much as a reality to be lived faithfully with God. The question, “what should we do in the face of decline?” is too often laden with fear, and because of that leads to unhelpful and fruitless suggestions. We must also recall Gustafson’s assertion that our perspectives of God and the world shape our responses in profound ways.<sup>77</sup> What we do in response to church decline will be profoundly shaped by our particular perspective of the situation. Perspective is the prior issue and must be addressed before we address the question of what must be done. We affirm once again with Nouwen that “Fear never gives birth to love.”<sup>78</sup> Fear-based solutions to the situation of significant church decline cannot lead to love for the wounded world. They can only result in fearful efforts to cling to, shore up, and make viable that which ultimately serves our need for security and comfort, thinly veiled in the guise of loving concern for God’s work in the world. Fearful efforts to solve the

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<sup>77</sup> Gustafson, *Moral Life*, 244.

<sup>78</sup> Nouwen, *Lifesigns*, 6.

problem of decline do not lead churches to God, and do not lead churches to respond in loving obedience to God's call to love the world even in the midst of decline. Instead, they lead churches to respond in obedience to their own interpretations of the situation of decline. Fearful efforts to solve the problem of decline lead us to do what *we think to be good*, and do not lead us to surrender the church to God and God's good will in the situation of decline.

### **Engaging the Polarities: Where to Start?**

How can churches begin to engage the polarities? Where do they start? The answer to this question is that they need to begin at the point that stands out to them as being most important. When reading scripture meditatively, we are often encouraged to pay attention to the word or phrase that stands out to us in some way. We are then told to enter into conversation with God about that word or phrase. The same principle applies here. Churches are encouraged to begin with that aspect of this material that most resonates and/or stands out to them. Some churches may feel the need to begin by identifying the ways in which their perspective of decline has been influenced by the unhelpful assumptions promoted by many renewal materials. Other churches may need to begin by corporately acknowledging the grief of decline. Some churches might need to start by paying attention to their fear, and the various ways it has been expressed in their response to decline so far. Other churches may want to start by reflecting on what it is that they know about Jesus that they cannot help but want to share. Yet others may need to start by admitting to themselves that they have no idea what it is that they have really experienced of Jesus. Some churches might need to begin by acknowledging their disappointment and disillusionment with God. Even the most seemingly "negative" of these responses can be brought out into the light and into conversation with God,

because in Christ there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). There is nothing of our responses to decline or of our feelings that we need hide from God. It must be remembered again and again, that the overall aim is *not* to promote a “right” response to decline, but to promote honest conversation with God about decline and its effects.

### **Engaging the Polarities: How to Begin?**

Engagement with the polarities will only begin as someone or some people in the congregation dare to speak honestly about their experience with decline. The original impetus to begin speaking honestly might come from a congregant, but eventually it will be necessary for the minister and leadership team to take the lead in this regard.<sup>79</sup> An important first step will be for ministers, and leadership teams to come to terms with the fact that it is not their job to “save” the church.<sup>80</sup> Coming to terms with this, and learning to speak honestly about decline at the level of leadership may take some time, and should not be rushed. It is recommended that church leadership teams wrestle with the reality of decline and engage the polarities first, before seeking to lead the congregation in this. Leaders must be able to lead. They do not have to have it all figured out before going to the congregation, but neither should they attempt to lead the congregation before they have done some honest wrestling themselves. At some point it will be necessary to provide the congregation with corporate opportunities to experience their grief and speak honestly about decline. Opportunities to express prayers of lament will be important. So too might opportunities to corporately express prayers of confession when the church has come to recognize their culpability in the progression of

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<sup>79</sup> We agree with Hamman when he asserts, that a congregation’s engagement with grief will best be facilitated by those leaders who themselves have learned to grieve (*Steeple’s Cry*, 24).

<sup>80</sup> Purves has observed that while it is not difficult to come to understand “the theology of the vicarious humanity and ministry of Christ,” it is quite another matter to practice ministry in a way that is consistent with the assertion that the church is Christ’s ministry and not ours (*Crucifixion of Ministry*, 11,14–15).

decline. Churches may also wish to engage in processes of discernment, as they seek together for God's leading. Most of all, it will be important to provide opportunities for the congregation to engage in honest and safe conversation about decline and their experience of it. Both Hamman and Stein emphasize the importance of conversation for congregational mourning and healing in situations of decline. Hamman understands conversation as the work of mourning and encourages leaders to provide intentional opportunities for congregants to remember and so to mourn.<sup>81</sup> Stein found that the congregation's compulsion to recreate the past was lessened, and healing was facilitated when he provided the congregation with opportunities in which the "unsayable, even the unthinkable could be said."<sup>82</sup> Effective leadership will be key throughout. The congregation will have to be helped to approach these potentially difficult and painful encounters safely and respectfully.

### **What About Prayer?**

In reality all that has been proposed here is about prayer. This proposal, in many respects, is about making the experience of decline, our assumptions about decline, our fears about decline, and so on, a part of the church's conversation with God. More than merely being a part of the process, this proposal asserts that the process ought to be understood as prayer. To this end, this dissertation has sought to describe in some depth the experience of decline for the purpose of deepening our prayer or conversation with God. Prayers of petition for God's help will be one aspect of this conversation, but only one. Through this analysis we have sought to offer the declining church permission to think the unthinkable and say the unsayable even to God.

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<sup>81</sup> Hamman devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of conversation as mourning (*Steeple's Cry*, 73–107).

<sup>82</sup> Stein, "Letting Go," 214.



## Facilitating Engagement With the Polarities

Without a doubt the proposal made here is challenging. The temptation to try to solve the situation of decline and assuage the fear of decline is tremendous. It would appear, based on the churches in our study, that the proposed response to decline is not one that churches will be inclined to live into without help and guidance. Therefore we will bring this study to a close by offering two suggestions as to how churches may be helped to live fruitfully in the midst of decline through engagement with the proposed polarities. These suggestions will not be fully developed here. They will be introduced in a preliminary manner as a way of identifying two possible directions for the further development of this proposal.

### Preaching Jesus

To begin, it will be imperative for those preaching to declining churches to focus on preaching Jesus (and by implication God the Father and God the Spirit), and preaching scripture as that which re-describes and re-interprets the human experience, including the experience of church decline. Here we affirm the direction charted by Charles Campbell in his book *Preaching Jesus*, when he contends that “. . .preaching properly begins with the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth and moves from there to the church in and for the world. The story of Jesus, not the particulars of human experience, is the fundamental reality and starting point.”<sup>83</sup> Such a contention, based on the work of Frei, would require further nuance, particularly when adopted for use within a pastoral theological framework that values insights that can be gained from personal experience. Nevertheless, we agree that Campbell’s point is important. Such an emphasis will be needed to help churches draw near to God in Jesus beyond the experience of decline.

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<sup>83</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 193.

Campbell's contention leads him to speak against two tendencies in preaching that he deems to be misguided—the tendency to use universal human issues and personal experience as the interpretive lens for scripture.<sup>84</sup> Campbell is concerned to guard against any use of scripture that wholly subsumes the revelation of Jesus into human experience.

Experience has also revealed, that it is necessary to guard against another misguided use of scripture. Preachers can sometimes tend to use scripture more for the purpose of challenging their congregations to become more engaged with the presumed tasks of the Christian faith, than for the purpose of leading their congregation to God. This argument must be carefully nuanced. Certainly any encounter with God ought to lead to a response of obedience in faith.<sup>85</sup> Too often, preachers emphasize the response without first helping their congregants to encounter God. Encountering God must be the focus. As the Gospels reveal, responses of faith (and lack of faith) followed naturally upon the heels of every person's encounter with Christ. Admittedly, preachers cannot make congregants encounter God. Any encounter with God is a gift from God facilitated by the work of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing the preacher can do to cooperate with God's work in the congregation. In every case the call is for the preacher to help lead the congregation to an encounter with God in the text of scripture. This aim will be facilitated as the preacher encounters God in scripture him- or herself. It is the preacher who has encountered God in scripture, and who has found her or his own experience redescribed and re-interpreted by scripture that will best be able to cooperate with the Spirit in the Spirit's work of facilitating

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<sup>84</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 196–197.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson, *Glory of Preaching*, 59.

encounters with God within the church. Such preaching requires preachers who do not merely provide a message about the passage, but who invite the congregation into the text and into an encounter with the Living God revealed in the text.<sup>86</sup> Such preaching must be engaged in a way that is congruent with the ways of Christ. In the words of Campbell, preaching in the way of Christ involves appreciating that “. . .the very *act* of preaching itself is a performance of scripture, an embodiment of God’s reign after the pattern of Jesus.”<sup>87</sup> For Campbell, this involves embodying the pattern of power and powerlessness embodied in Christ. For Knowles, this means preaching in a cruciform manner. Preaching in this manner involves fully embracing our creaturely limitations and utter dependence on God “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor. 4:7 NRSV).<sup>88</sup>

We can only but touch on the issue of preaching here. We affirm, however, that churches wishing to engage the polarities and move from a focus on decline to a focus on God, will require the support of preachers who are willing to encounter God in scripture, and who are willing to invite their congregations into such encounters as well.

#### Congregational Spiritual Direction

Engagement with the polarities will also require the support of an approach to church leadership that is informed, at least in part, by the practice of spiritual direction. Spiritual direction is the practice of walking with others for the purpose of helping them discern God’s presence and movements in their lives. Spiritual directors often work with individuals or small groups for the purpose of facilitating insight within individuals at an intra- and interpersonal level. There are those, however, who have come to

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<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *Glory of Preaching*, 58–59.

<sup>87</sup> Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 216.

<sup>88</sup> Knowles, *Preach Not Ourselves*, 258.

appreciate the influence that spiritual direction can have over communal structures as well.

John Mostyn came to appreciate that the spiritual direction of individuals can be facilitated with a view not only to the person's intra- and interpersonal relationships, but also with a view to the "social wholes" of which they are a part.<sup>89</sup> Traditionally, those practicing spiritual direction view the individual as the primary locus of the work of the Holy Spirit. They focus on facilitating transformation within the individual, and assume that changed individuals will contribute to a transformed world.<sup>90</sup> Through a number of personal and professional experiences, however, Mostyn came to understand that this field of vision was too narrow. He recognized the need to pay attention not only to the work of God's Spirit in the person's intra- and interpersonal relationships, but also to the work of God's Spirit within the social wholes of which they were a part.<sup>91</sup> As a result, Mostyn devoted his Doctor of Ministry dissertation to the development of a training program for spiritual directors that would help them attend to the movements of God in a directee's social relationships as well as in their intra- and interpersonal relationships. He has concluded on the basis of this study that small changes, "doses of hope," can

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<sup>89</sup> Mostyn, "Reforming Spirit," 21, defines "social wholes" as: "a formal or informal set of values, purposes, customs, habits, rules, regulations, and policies that are the institutions in our land."

<sup>90</sup> Mostyn, "Reforming Spirit," 13–14.

<sup>91</sup> Mostyn, "Reforming Spirit," 37. Mostyn records one of his fellow spiritual director's account of this transformational understanding of the practice of spiritual direction: "using the triadic model for perceiving human experience [intrapersonal, interpersonal, and public] does provide a more suitable lense [*sic*] for expanding the range of the director's attention to include the societal dimension. For it is not a matter then of imposing the societal dimension or of manipulating the directee's experience, and in so doing, moving out of the established contemplative stance appropriate to the director. Rather, the screen is widened and the directee is consistently perceived as a person simultaneously engaged in intense intrapersonal activity and consciousness, ongoing interpersonal relationship, and living out of his/her life within a set of established and defining structures and institutions in the societal arena" (Ellie Shea as quoted in Mostyn, "Reforming Spirit," 39).

occur in the directee's social relationships when these are attended to as well as their intra- and interpersonal relationships.<sup>92</sup>

Sandra Lommasson has come to attend to the communal in an even more direct way than Mostyn. Lommasson, a spiritual director with an 850-member Presbyterian church in California, speaks to the need to tend "the communal soul or spirit" of a congregation.<sup>93</sup> She draws upon the work of Walter Wink to assert that institutions, in this case churches, manifest unique and distinct spiritualities that need tending just as much as personal spiritualities.<sup>94</sup> Directing the communal spirit of a congregation involves paying attention to every aspect of its communal life. Both the content and form of a congregation's work and activities must be attended to, as church members will be shaped by not only what the church does, but also by the way in which the church does what it does.<sup>95</sup> Directing the communal spirit of a congregation also involves "directing the group spirit" of the church. In this case spiritual direction involves listening for and paying attention to the communal spirit of a congregation, and

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<sup>92</sup> Mostyn, "Reforming Spirit," 291, says: "[The author] would further conclude that the encounter when focused on seeing and exploring the connection between prayer and the social contributes to the transformation of the wholes and the deepening of prayer." Mostyn goes on to say: "When directors give themselves over to this form of spiritual direction, small changes occur in the prayer and social lives of the people so directed. Hope is then released into the world in very small doses. These small human doses of hope do not evoke massive resistance to change. Rather, they are pastoral and invite people to change. They are simply accepted for what they are, doses of hope" (292).

<sup>93</sup> Lommasson, "Tending the Communal Soul," 135.

<sup>94</sup> Lommasson, "Tending the Communal Soul," 136, 138. She cites Wink as saying: "In the Biblical view [the Powers] are both visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly, spiritual and institutional. The Powers possess an outer, physical manifestation (buildings, portfolios, personnel, trucks, fax machines) and an inner spirituality, or corporate culture, or collective personality. . . . The spiritual aspect of the Powers is not simply a 'personification' of institutional qualities that would exist whether they were personified or not. On the contrary, the spirituality of an institution exists as a real aspect of the institution even when it is not perceived as such. Institutions have an actual spiritual ethos, and we neglect this aspect of institutional life to our peril" (Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 3, 6, as cited in Lommasson, "Tending the Communal Soul," 136).

<sup>95</sup> Lommasson, "Tending the Communal Soul," 141.

listening for and paying attention to the movement of God in relation to this communal spirit.<sup>96</sup>

Both Mostyn and Lommasson alert us to the fact that it is possible to influence a corporate body through the practice of spiritual direction. More than this, though, they alert us to the fact that there is a kind of leadership that can be offered within communal settings that is grounded in practices of discernment and hospitality, and not merely grounded in practices of rational and pragmatic problem-solving. Further study would need to be conducted to delineate the ways in which this practice might be employed within situations of church decline. Engagement with the polarities certainly lends itself to a leadership style based in discernment and hospitality. Churches will require ongoing help to discern where they are in relation to the polarities, and to discern God's activity in their midst. The practice of hospitality will also be needed, as church leaders will need to provide opportunities for congregations to safely explore their experience with decline. This does not necessarily mean, however, that a more rational and possibly even pragmatic form of leadership will not also be needed. Consideration would need to be given to how these two differing approaches to leadership might contradict, and possibly even complement one another. Consideration would also need to be given as to who might function as spiritual director within a congregation. Lommasson suggests that it

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<sup>96</sup> Lommasson, "Tending the Communal Soul," 145. Lommasson's work with individuals from within and without her congregation gave her an opportunity to notice the commonalities that emerged amongst those within her congregation. She noticed: ". . . distinct patterns of movement in the [Davis Community Church] group that seemed somehow synchronous, and that were not evident in the same way in other directees. . . The themes of the emergent story included a deep longing to be seen and heard, and a terror of it; a hunger to belong somewhere and a sense of incapability in finding and forming authentic community; experiences of profound early abuse and courage enough to reach out for connection anyway; a spiritual hunger and the sense that it was bottomless and would never be filled; a terror of judgment; a wound of trust such that each experience of connection with God or another would bring dread soon after the initial relief; and an emerging desire to discover whether one really had gifts to contribute to the building of God's realm in the world" (144–145).

would be difficult for a lead pastor to fulfill this role given the potential conflict that could arise between a congregation's expectations of pastoral leadership and the nature of spiritual direction.<sup>97</sup> Without a doubt, the proposal offered here requires a congregation's ability to carefully listen to God and to its corporate experience of decline. Lommasson's description of the qualities required of a spiritual director, when working within a communal setting, are prescient when considered in relation to the proposal made here for living fruitfully in the midst of church decline:

The focus of the director is primarily toward the in-breaking awareness of the holy, so this person must have the capacity to name such movements as they arise and to invite the group to linger and to go deeper. The ability to be a nonanxious presence is essential and includes the capacity for self-relinquishment. The willingness to offer one's own perceptions in humility is crucial, as is sensitivity to the dying that signals conversion in a group. A director must be love-based rather than fear-based, and must value "truth-speaking in love" as an agent of health and freedom for the community. S/he is capable of directness when needed, and helps the group know where it is in the process. Most of all, while the director's focus is toward the yearning of God, s/he knows at depth that the choreography belongs to the Spirit and that outcomes cannot be scripted.<sup>98</sup>

#### Congregational Practices for Supporting Engagement with the Polarities

Engagement with at least three congregational practices will support churches as they live with the polarities and the shift in perspective they offer. They are the practices of lament, confession, and waiting. According to Craig Dykstra, practices are,

. . . those cooperative human activities through which we, as individuals and as communities, grow and develop in moral character and substance. . . They are ways of doing things together in which and through which human life is given direction, meaning, and significance, and through which our very capacities to do good things well are increased.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Lommasson, "Tending the Communal Soul," 142.

<sup>98</sup> Lommasson, "Tending the Communal Soul," 142–143.

<sup>99</sup> Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 69–70.

Numerous Christian practices, sometimes also referred to as Christian disciplines, have emerged from within the Christian tradition.<sup>100</sup> While other of the practices may also support churches as they engage with the polarities, these three are certainly necessary.

It is important to understand the nature of practices in order to engage them in a beneficial way. Practices are to be understood as a way of life for the Christian and Christian congregation. As such practices are not something congregations should do once in a while. Instead they are to be understood as “the constituent parts of a larger Christian way of life. . .”<sup>101</sup> For this reason it will be important for congregations to practice lament, confession and waiting, not only as a response to decline, but as an ongoing expression of the Christian way of life. In addition to this, practices are to be engaged for their own sake and not for the purpose of accomplishing a secondary goal. Drawing once again upon Palmer’s distinction between instrumental and expressive action, practices, properly understood, are best undertaken expressively as opposed to instrumentally. As Diana Butler Bass says: “Christians engage these actions for their own sake—because they are good and worthy and beautiful—not because they are instruments to some other end (like increasing membership or marketing the congregation).”<sup>102</sup> The practices of lament, confession and waiting have been introduced here as a way of responding to decline and living into the polarities. Nevertheless, they ought to be engaged for their own sake, because they are understood to be good and worthy and beautiful in and of themselves. Finally, it is vital for congregations to appreciate the relationship between belief and practices. Engagement

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<sup>100</sup> Dykstra, has identified 14 practices that include: worship, prayer, recounting and interpreting the Christian story, confession, giving generously of one’s means, resisting evil, and working for justice amongst others (*Growing in the Life of Faith*, 42–43). See also, Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*; and Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 156–192, for descriptions of key Christian disciplines.

<sup>101</sup> Bass, *Practicing Congregation*, 65.

<sup>102</sup> Bass, *Practicing Congregation*, 65.



with the practices ought to grow out of a congregation's belief, and therefore also become a means of giving expression to and embodying that belief.<sup>103</sup> Ideally then the practices of lament, confession and waiting will not be practiced in a perfunctory way, but will "necessarily involve reflection, imagination, tension, attention, and intentionality."<sup>104</sup> Dykstra adds to this point by reminding us that:

The practices and disciplines are means of grace, not tasks to accomplish or instructions to follow in order to grow in the life of faith. . . Instead, these practices and disciplines are gifts to the community, by means of which God may use the community to establish and sustain all people in the new life given in the Spirit.<sup>105</sup>

Practices are properly understood as a gift of God for Christians and the Christian congregation. They are a means of preparing us to recognize and participate in God's ongoing work in the world—God's work both within and beyond the declining congregation.

### *Practicing the Prayer of Lament*

The prayer of lament holds together two seemingly contradictory responses to God. On the one hand it is a prayer that gives expression to "complaint, anger, grief, despair and protest to God."<sup>106</sup> It is a means of expressing dismay and complaint about God's seeming refusal to fulfill God's promises in the midst of painful situations and experiences of suffering. Biblically, expressions of lament are often bold and sometimes disturbing and do not flinch from the passionate expression of raw emotion.<sup>107</sup> On the other hand, and at the same time the prayer of lament is an expression of faith, trust and

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<sup>103</sup> Bass, *Practicing Congregation*, 65.

<sup>104</sup> Bass, *Practicing Congregation*, 65.

<sup>105</sup> Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 45–46.

<sup>106</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 6.

<sup>107</sup> Billman and Migliore refer to psalm 35, and the psalmist's cry of "How long, O LORD, will you look on?" (vs. 17), and the violent images of Psalms 109 and 137 as examples of such raw and passionate emotion (*Rachel's Cry*, 27, 29).

hope in God.<sup>108</sup> Properly understood, we lament *because of* our faith, trust, and hope in God. We have expected a faithful and good God to bring us help in time of need, and therefore have a need to express our anger and dismay when God appears not to have responded as promised. To lament then is to give expression to our suffering and pain in all its fullness, complexity and rawness.<sup>109</sup> It is to honestly “say what the situation is,”<sup>110</sup> while also acknowledging the depth of our hope and trust. Both are needed and contribute to the other. It is our hope, faith and trust in the light of suffering that gives rise to the need for lament. Likewise, it is the depth of our pain and suffering that gives rise to the need for hope, faith and trust.

In the context of church decline it will be important for congregations to be able to give expression to prayers of lament in a corporate setting. It will be the pastor’s role to help the congregation give honest expression to the depth and complexity of their lament. All of the losses associated with decline will potentially need to be lamented. Churches may also need to lament the causes of decline. This will be particularly true of those causes that are external to the congregation and not under their direct control, such as demographic and cultural change. Most certainly churches will need to lament any experience of God’s seeming lack of response to their sincere prayers and efforts to work for renewal. Billman and Migliore offer a few suggestions as to how the prayer lament can be added to a congregation’s worship.<sup>111</sup> Pastors can offer teaching about lament through their preaching. Elements of lament, such as the inclusion of lament psalms, can be included along with psalms of praise in worship services. Special

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<sup>108</sup> Billman and Migliore, 30.

<sup>109</sup> Zylla, *Roots of Suffering*, 87.

<sup>110</sup> Soelle, *Suffering*, 70.

<sup>111</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 134.

services or parts of services focused upon lament can also be offered. In each case it will be important to hold the expression of honest and uncensored complaint in tension with expressions of trust and ongoing petitions for God's help.<sup>112</sup>

### *Practicing the Prayer of Confession*

The prayer of confession consists of three primary responses to God. First confession consists of an openness to be examined by God.<sup>113</sup> This openness involves a desire for the truth of God that sets us free from the deceitfulness of our hearts (Jn 8:32; Jer. 17:9). This kind of openness is a gift of God. Since our hearts are deceitful, it is often necessary to acknowledge our desire to hide from God's truth, and to ask for the willingness to receive the gift of God's conviction. The concluding prayer of Psalm 139 is one example of a prayer that can help congregations give expression to their desire to be examined by God: "Search [us], O God, and know [our] heart[s]; test [us] and know [our] thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in [us], and lead [us] in the way everlasting" (vs. 23–24 NIV). Second, the prayer of confession consists of the conviction that we have sinned and are unable to remedy our sin, or earn God's approval by trying to turn from our sin in our own strength. Confession involves not only becoming aware of our sin, but of also coming to accept that we are unable to overcome our sin and regain God's approval by what we do. This is important to note, because we can be tempted to try to overcome our sin simply by trying to do better the next time. To confess our sin is to acknowledge along with Paul: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . For I have the desire to do what

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<sup>112</sup> Billman and Migliore suggest that it is always important set the practice of lament within the larger context of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They assert that it is important to ensure that: "The wounds that have been suffered are not absolutized and thereby allowed to have the final say about one's identity and one's future" (*Rachel's Cry*, 133).

<sup>113</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 132.

is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:15, 18b–19 NIV). Third, confession consists of accepting that in spite of our sin and our inability to turn from our sin in our own strength, God in Christ has forgiven us. We cannot save ourselves from our propensity to sin, but Christ has (Rom 7:24b–25a). We cannot cease from sin and do the good we know we should do through an act of our will alone, but Christ at work in us can save us, and enable us to walk in repentance of our sin. Therefore confession involves not only asking for God’s forgiveness in Christ, but also asking for the grace and willingness to walk in repentance of our sin. In this we can pray along with David: “Create in [us] a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within [us]. Do not cast [us] away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from [us]. Restore to [us] the joy of your salvation, and sustain in [us] a willing spirit” (Ps. 51:10–12 NRSV).

As with lament, it will be important in the context of church decline for congregations to give expression to prayers of confession in a corporate setting. The minister may include prayers of confession pertaining to church decline in Sunday morning worship services, or it may be desirable to develop special services focused specifically upon confession. It is important to note, however, that prayers of confession tend to facilitate greater healing when we acknowledge concrete sins as opposed to generalized ones.<sup>114</sup> The minister and leadership team can offer leadership in this respect, by seeking God’s gift of conviction on behalf of themselves and the congregation. The nature of a church’s sin will potentially vary from congregation to congregation, but some instances of sin can be offered by way of example. Congregations may need to confess the ways in which they have been culpable in

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<sup>114</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 132.

exacerbating church decline by the choices they have made or failed to make. They may need to confess, for example, that they have become more concerned about satisfying their own needs for comfort and security above any other consideration. Related to this they may also need to confess that they have become more concerned about the survival of the church, than they have been concerned about loving God and loving their neighbour. These common tendencies can be grounded in a deeper tendency towards idolatry—a tendency to seek comfort and security in things of this world, rather than in God. This too may need to be confessed. Congregations may need to confess their fear, and their difficulty trusting God in the midst of decline. They may also need to confess their lack of knowledge of Jesus. Congregations may discover that they have not yet experienced anything of Jesus that they cannot help but want to share. Furthermore, congregations may discover that they have not been willing to share with others that which they have experienced of Jesus. These are only a few examples of some of the instances of sin that a declining congregation may need to confess. It is vital, however, that congregations be open to God's leading in this. It is not simply the act of confession that facilitates God's work of healing among a congregation, but the willingness to listen to God and confess that of which God convicts us.

### *The Practice of Waiting*

The practice of waiting consists of two primary responses to God. To begin with, it involves yearning for God's good to be accomplished in our midst. To yearn for God's good means that we must have a sense that God has promised and desires to bring about good for us. To wait involves waiting for *something*, and trusting that God desires to bring that something about. Nouwen expresses this well when he says:

People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. . . We can really wait only if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more.<sup>115</sup>

To yearn for God's good also involves having a sense that we cannot accomplish for ourselves that for which we yearn. To wait is to humbly accept our limitations, and to accept that there are some things that we cannot do for ourselves. In addition to this the practice of waiting also involves accepting that God will act to accomplish good in the time and way that God determines to be best. While waiting involves having a sense that God has promised to bring about good for us, waiting also involves relinquishing our wishes and expectations as to how that good ought to be manifested. Too often we can cling to our expectations of what ought to happen, and so fail to pay attention to and receive the good that God is already accomplishing in our midst.<sup>116</sup> In situations of church decline, the waiting congregation yearns for God to accomplish God's good in its midst, even while relinquishing its expectations of how that good should be manifested. Specific wishes for increased numbers, for increased programs, and for a return to the congregation's former glory may have to be relinquished in favour of becoming open to the good that God desires to accomplish in that situation.

Congregations will need guidance to help them engage in the practice of waiting. Leadership practiced as a kind of spiritual direction will be important here. Declining congregations will need help to discern God's word of promise for them, and they will

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<sup>115</sup> Nouwen, *Path of Waiting*, 13.

<sup>116</sup> Of this Nouwen says: "Much of our waiting is filled with wishes. . . For this reason a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair. . . I have found it very important in my own life to let go of my wishes and start hoping. It was only when I was willing to let go of wishes that something really new, something beyond my own expectations, could happen to me" (*Path of Waiting*, 18–19).

need to be reminded that waiting for God's good is a fruitful practice. They will also need help to become aware of those times when their fear is threatening to overtake them and drive them into unfruitful action or paralysis. Pastors can help to facilitate a hunger and appreciation of waiting through their teaching and preaching.

In addition to this, congregations will need help to appreciate that waiting is not to be equated with inactivity. According to Nouwen we are to wait actively not passively. To wait actively means, "to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it."<sup>117</sup> Congregations can do at least a few things to help them be present to God while they wait. First, they can tend to those matters and decisions that are within their purview. Declining congregations may not be able to effect renewal and fruitfulness by their actions alone, but there are matters to which they can continue to attend. Churches that wait actively will continue to worship, will continue to fellowship, will continue to teach and serve as they can. They will also continue to attend to those management issues that they can attend to, such as paying their bills and so on. Secondly, churches can engage the practices of lament and confession as they wait. To lament God's seeming absence, even while yearning for God's good, is a means of staying present to the moment. To corporately confess congregational sin and culpability in decline, (including our fear and drive to be in control), while yearning for the fulfillment of God's gracious promises even in spite of our sin, is a means of staying present to the moment. The practice of gratitude is also important. Gratitude involves giving thanks for the gifts of God that we can already see, and also for the gifts of God that we cannot yet see. Declining churches can be thankful for the financial provision that they do have, for the congregants they do

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<sup>117</sup> Nouwen, *Path of Waiting*, 15.

have, for the programs that still exist, for the gift of worship and so on. They can also be thankful, however, for the promises that God is already accomplishing in their midst even though they cannot yet see the fruit of them. Being grateful helps us to remain present to the moment, and facilitates in us an openness to the work that God is already doing.

### *Summary*

In closing, it is important to re-emphasize two final points regarding the practices of lament, confession and waiting. First, while these practices have been discussed in the context of church decline, they must not be limited to this context. Properly understood, engagement with these practices ought to extend beyond the context of decline. While these practices pertain well to the situation of decline, it would be beneficial for churches to engage them not only as a response to decline and as a means to live with the polarities, but also as beneficial practices in their own right. Second, we must always remember, along with Dykstra, that these practices are not to be simply thought of as tasks to be accomplished or as instructions to be followed. They are offered as a means of drawing us into a deeper relationship with God, and are meant to help even declining congregations to participate in God's ongoing work in their midst.

### **Conclusion**

The proposal offered here for living fruitfully in the midst of church decline is challenging, to say the least. It is clear that this proposal is dramatically different from those that are typically offered to the declining church. It is also expected that many churches will not wish to engage their fear of and experience with decline. Such engagement will be difficult and potentially painful. It will also require a yearning for the living God. This too, will be challenging, for the living God is one who demands the



right to re-interpret our experience in accordance with God's perspective. God is also the One who demands the right to act for our good and in accordance with God's will, and not in accordance with our wishes in the midst of decline. More than this, it is quite possible that the proposal offered here will not necessarily lead to church renewal when understood in terms of increased numbers and revitalized programs. In fact, it is quite likely that in some and maybe many cases, the proffered proposal will precipitate a faster decline and quicker death in those churches struggling with significant decline. Given all this, one might wonder about the viability of this proposal. It is here that the crux of the matter is found. This proposal has not been offered on the merits of its potential results. Instead it has been made on the basis of the heart of the Christian faith which calls churches to come to know the God: who laid the foundation of the earth and determined its measurements; who binds the chains of the Pleiades and looses the cords of Orion; and who made the Behemoth to be a creature that eats grass and yet whose limbs are like bars of iron (Job 38:4-5; 31-32; 40:15,18). This proposal has been made on the basis of the living God who calls churches to trust in the God who in Christ has brought, and who continues to bring, meaning, life, power, abundance, and fruitfulness from chaos, death, weakness, scarcity, and barrenness. Finally, it can be said that this proposal has been made on the basis of the living God who calls congregations to make their home in the One who also makes his home in them (John 15:4), who brings forth the fruit, and who continually says to us: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (Jn. 14:27 NIV).

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